

WW2 People's War

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A Childhood in Gosport and Portsmouth: Part two [by Antony Norris](#)

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People in story: Antony Yorke Norris and family

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Pill Boxes, Way Signs, Air Sea Rescue and Other Things

With the threat of a German invasion of the United Kingdom, concrete pill boxes of substantial form and with openings for small arms use were constructed in some positions in Gosport. I recall two of them, one on the eastern side of the A32 by Fort Brockhurst and the other overlooking Portsmouth Harbour at the bottom of Ham Lane as it then was. The latter was a place to play around later in and after the War years; I believe it still exists. In order to avoid giving any assistance to the enemy in the event of his landing, way signs were removed locally.

I recall that a unit of Air Sea Rescue launches, manned by the RAF, operated from a deep water jetty at Hardway. The roar of their engines was very loud and one often was aware, at long range, when each vessel was starting her engines.

Emergency Water Supply Tanks were constructed in many parts of Gosport to support firefighting. The letters 'EWS' with an arrow to indicate the whereabouts of the nearest tank, were painted on walls of houses or alleyways in the vicinity. There was a huge system of tanks on spare ground outside the southern entrance to New Elson School on Rydal Road. Access was meant to be severely curtailed but many children found their way to this deep water. In time, this particular tank system became a good place to catch newts!

Anti-Aircraft (A/A) Defence

There were three features concerning A/A defence which I recall in the area in which I lived. On the Fareham Road (A32) approaching the area of Holbrook, about 350 yds northwards from the Brockhurst junction, was a large calibre A/A gun battery manned by the Army, which engaged enemy aircraft with loud effect. Sometime during the middle years of the war and berthed between buoys at the top end of Portsmouth Harbour was the Free French battleship 'Courbet'. My father who kept his duty on a watch-keeping basis in the RNAD Priddys Hard told me that during air raids her A/A armament always came into rapid action and he used to identify her gunfire opening up when he was with us in the shelter at home. We were always able to identify the gunfire of the Holbert battery and that of the 'Courbet' because both were no more than a mile away. From early times, many barrage balloons were raised up in the sky in attempt to dissuade attacks by pilots in low flying aircraft. There was a balloon station on the corner of San Diego Road and Welch Road about 1/2 mile southwards from where we lived ; I think that it was manned by personnel

of the RAF. Initially these balloons had soft skins but later some appeared to have stiff skins. The sight of a barrage balloon being set on fire by lightning was spectacular although, fortunately, infrequent.

Precautions

Early in the War, my mother brought home rolls of black material from which she made blackout curtains which always had to be in place during the night time. The local Air Raid Warden, Mr Hobbs, routinely went around his beat inspecting the effectiveness of these arrangements. He could be heard calling out "Switch out that light, No XXX" or he would knock the front door to tell the resident that the blackout arrangements were in some way imperfect. Later in the war, smoke generators were installed in the corners of some gardens; these generated thick, acrid smoke to act as a smoke screen in moderately calm conditions. One of these generators was set up in the front garden of my home. To protect against flying glass, windows had sticky tape stretched across them. Anti-gas respirators were tested fairly regularly using tear gas at testing stations.

Food & Clothing

Except what could be produced by individuals (rabbits, chickens, ducks, eggs, fruit and vegetables), food was strictly rationed although I think it was not until later in the war that bread was rationed. Most people grew food in their gardens and some, like my father, had allotments, the slogan being 'Dig for Victory'. My father kept chickens and I looked after the rabbits. I remember my rabbits being stolen when the soldiers were on the street before D-day; who took the animals remained unknown. The rationing system involved a Ration Book to be stamped for each individual as items on ration were bought. My Saturday morning errands included getting food for the family from the 'Co-op' at the Broadway, fetching the rations at 'Muttons', a little shop on St Thomas's Road, for a lodger who came from the North to work in the RNAD Priddy's Hard, and meat from 'Withers' also on St Thomas's Road. One name which I remember from the Government was the Minister for Food, Lord Woolton. Regularly on the Home Service of the BBC not long after 8 am, there was a programme which might have been called 'In the/ Your Kitchen' during which a recipe was read out slowly so that the best might be made of the limited food available. Clothing was available on production of coupons in the Clothing Book.

Family Life

My family was a close one. We spent long periods together on dark evenings, less so in the summer months, playing games such as ludo, 'snakes and ladders', cards, usually 'snap' and 'patience'; jig-saw puzzles were always popular. The wireless, particularly the BBC Home Service was a source of news and entertainment; we listened to it a lot and my father often spoke about the significance of what was reported especially at sea and relating the events to his experience in the First World War. We were always ready to go to the air-raid shelter when the sirens sounded. About the age of eight, I was allowed to join the Cub Pack of the 4th Gosport Scouts Group, which met on Monday evenings at the Boyne Hall in Reeds Place near the Crossways on Forton Road. It was totally a wooden building and when the sirens sounded, we were evacuated at the rush to the nearest public air raid shelter. I think that it

was about May 1945 that the Royal Marine Cadet Corps was re-instituted. My father took me along to Royal Marines, Eastney to join the Corps; I was in 'C' Troop.

Emotions, Reflections and Conclusions

As a child, I detected the worry of my parents at the outset of the War. In the early years I was frightened by the bombing, the noise and the destruction and death but as the War progressed such things became common place and my impression now is that such things, horrible as they were, were taken in our stride. On one or two occasions when bombs exploded close to home, I recall asking my parents in the air raid shelter if it was our house which had been hit; it had not.

On reflection down through the years since WW2, I have remained enormously impressed and grateful for the examples of thought, courtesy, respect and helpfulness for others by almost all people in the community and for the lessons of stoicism and good humour of so many grown-ups in the face of so much adversity. These lovely people were often near us as children to help us and without any silliness, where necessary : strangers, servicemen, the police, bus conductors, shop keepers, et seq. Funny people were a God-send especially on the BBC programme "Worker's Playtime" from 12.30 to 1 o'clock each week day. My father used to cry with laughter with the humour of some comics.

When it existed, dislike of the Germans for what they were doing was not commonly expressed but such feelings intensified and outrage came to the surface when their atrocities were reported especially concerning U-boat attacks involving heavy loss of life, when in 1944, SE England was subject to attacks by V1s and V2s at a time when the Allies were well on their way to beating the 'Huns', and by what was found in concentration camps in 1945. When Air Chief Marshall Harris directed Bomber Command in the huge raids against Germany in the second half of the War, I frequently heard talk of revenge : "They started it and now we're giving them some of their own medicine", "Don't feel sorry for them, remember what they did to us during the Blitz", "It serves them right", et seq.

For myself, sadly, my dislike of Germany and Germans was initiated and fostered by the terror and inhumanity which they wrought during those awful years. I have done my best through my life to ignore such feelings but such action has not been easy. However, such dislike was not made any better during my Naval career when I was involved with numbers of graceless Germans socially, as working hands under training in the Submarine Service in the late 1950s and when I had charge of some German officers as their instructor at the Canadian Forces Command & Staff College in Toronto, 1978-81. Even then, 35 years after the end of the War in Europe, I found anti-British feelings among several German officers which indicated that they resented the British for "what had been done to Germany and my parents" as one student of mine from the Federal German Navy said to me in 1980. His father having been a major in the SS who had been suspected of war crimes, was arrested and investigated by the British in Flensburg in 1945, was tried and convicted for those crimes and imprisoned for eight years ! In 1981, an officer of the Federal German Air Force, who was accountable to me for a particular and important function of which he knew and understood in plenty of time, which he had not fulfilled and for which I had to be involved

with appropriate reproach, commented to me 'If things had gone differently in 1945, you would not be speaking to me like this!' I was not an appropriate person to whom to make such an indelicate observation as he discovered. Nor can I forget the continuation of evidence of the inhumanity and cruelty demonstrated by some Germans to other Germans which I saw during military visits to Berlin and West Germany in 1969, 1978 and 1985 exemplified by the repulsive conduct of the German Democratic Republic on its side of the Berlin Wall and the Internal German Frontier.

The ill-judged and inelegant behaviour of many Germans which I have witnessed during my travels, Ecuador, Norway, Antarctica, Turkey, Australia, Jamaica and so on, over recent decades and as recent as June of this year, has produced in me disfavour for them. It seems to me that it is the custom these days and has been so for many years to attempt to distinguish between those Germans who were Nazis and those who were not and to put the blame for waging WW2 on the former. Such a claim flies in the face of the evidence of masses of cine film and many photographs of legions of Germans throughout their country whose enthusiasm for the regime was so clear.

The facts are plainly that the Allies won both World Wars but not the peace which is supposed to have followed. It has seemed to me that it was not long before the Germans as a nation commenced once again in both instances their bullying in Europe latterly using the cloak of the aspirations and concerns of the French within the framework of the European Community.

The monstrous damage and harm done to one family of my wife's relations and in the long term to several of our friends by the inhumanity and cruelty of the Japanese has made a deep impression on my life once the full story was available after the War and particularly in Australia. I have had to work very hard to be in any way pleasant when I come across the Japanese.

My conclusions relating to the events which I experienced and witnessed as a youngster during WW2 and, subsequently through my life in the Royal Navy, involve a strong aversion to those who seek to wage illegal war, less so for those who seek the just war. The aim of war is a better peace. I have wondered if the leaders of nations considering war recognise that definition of the aim. Who would be foolish enough to claim that WW1 or WW2 produced a better peace? The apparent failure of politicians to understand the implications of that concept and its fulfilment has much to do with the present problems of the so-called 'Coalition' in Iraq.

War, constitutional and otherwise, is the most degrading and abject of activities of a human community, necessary as it can be on rare occasions for reasons of defence of vital national interests. To wage war without appropriate calculation of those interests and consideration of the morality of the consequences, is, as the Nurnberg Trials demonstrated, a crime against humanity involving privation, unhappiness, destruction and death such as I experienced and witnessed in Gosport and Portsmouth through WW2.

For myself and my shipmates later on, if we had to fight for the United Kingdom then I trusted that the politicians and their senior Service officers understood clearly, fully, the aim underpinning the hostilities, its implications and the probable consequences. On several occasions, when the chips were down, that trust appeared dishonoured.

Sometimes, sadly, during the period of my time in the Royal Navy, I heard sailors and marines returning from action, hint the view that "The politicians messed up and we've had to go into battle to sort out the mess". The events leading to WW2, the Vietnam War, the 'Cod Wars' with Iceland, the 1982 Falklands Campaign and the events in the Balkans in the 1990s among other hostilities, demonstrate arguably the unfortunate judgements of many political leaders to their international problems. Millions of people have suffered as a consequence.

For those misguided enough to regard human nature as something akin to a treasure, it is facile to preach forgiveness and forgetting ; forgiveness might be possible for some and is a strictly personal decision, no matter what others might say. To forget the depth of cruelty which the Germans, the Japanese and to some extent, the Italians inflicted on others during WW2 is reprehensible and denies to the cost of all humanity, an essential and today, a relevant lesson of history in the conduct of human affairs.

My father died early in 1953 following a long and distressing illness occasioned originally by being a part of the Armed Forces of the UK resisting the circumstances of two terrible World Wars engineered courtesy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Hitler, the Nazi party and the people of Germany. I think that our own politicians bore some responsibility for those conflicts, too. My mother is still alive, her widowed life blighted by the experience of those wars and five decades of struggle and loneliness. Not only have I, as her elder son, experienced that discomfort with her but I experienced as a young lad the terror of all-out war at a time when the innocence of youth should have enjoyed an environment of peace and stability.

Those children on that pavement in Portsmouth in August, 1940 like millions of other peoples whose burial sites and white headstones are to be found across countless cemeteries of the world, had their lives, the opportunities for happiness and the promise which such lives had in store, taken from them through the misuse of power and awful brutality. The memory of what happened to those children on Buckingham Street still continues to haunt me.

The constitutional and institutional wickedness and depravity of thought, concept, intent and fulfilment of and by the Germans and the Japanese in the lead-up to and during WW2, taken together, form an indelible, significant, albeit most valuable episode of my life but a tragic episode with its long lasting effects which I and many others could have done without! I have always wished particularly that the Germans, Japanese and some Italians have learnt that their ways of conducting their relations in the international environment of the first half of the C20th were neither the way to behave as human beings nor in any way constructive in the affairs of nations. Even now, my observations over a period of nearly sixty years since 1945, 35 of them in the Profession of Arms, of life around this world while

taking a retrospective view of those terrible events of the six years of WW2, suggest that many of those people, formerly of the Axis Powers and their descendants may not, perhaps have not, appreciated the full implications of that lesson!

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