

WW2 People's War

An archive of World War Two memories - written by the public, gathered by the BBC

'Blitz Kid' by Ernie Smith

Contributed by [Ernie Smith](#) on 22 February 2004

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This is my story...a boy growing up in an unreal world of bombs, fire, fear, excitement and death.

I was born in Malta in 1930, of mixed race parents. My father, a British rating in the Royal Navy and my mother a refugee from war torn Turkey met in the 20's. They married and brought up their family in Malta until the outbreak of the war.

In 1939 when war at the outbreak of war, my father, serving in the Mediterranean fleet was drafted back to the U.K. He arranged for my mother, two teenage sisters, my 7-year-old younger brother and myself to be shipped to the U.K. on the SS Mauritania in November 1939. This was the family's first experience of the U.K

Apart from my father, none of the family could speak English, as Maltese was our mother tongue.

On arrival in Southampton, we were met by my father and taken to a tiny terraced house in Gosport Hampshire, across the water from Portsmouth.

Shortly after, my father put to sea again spending most of the war years on Atlantic convoys, and we settled down, quickly adjusting to a new language and a new life in our adopted country, which was just coming to terms with rationing, and shortages of consumer goods.

My mother obtained a job in a government run restaurant called the 'British Restaurant' set up to feed the women in the local munitions factory and other war workers.

My two teenage sisters were very much occupied with their own life of boyfriends, pictures of 1940's film stars and makeup, whilst I was left in sole charge of my younger brother. After a few months in our new school, we very quickly mastered the English language, and I made many friends.

In the first year of the war, my school was 'Bombed out' and so I spent most of my time playing in the streets of Gosport with my new found English friends and my younger brother tagging along.

We spent most of our time climbing in bomb craters, searching for shrapnel, and picking up Anti Personnel Bombs (Butterfly Bombs) from the roads, that were dropped in clusters after

a heavy German raid. Incredibly we didn't blow our hands off in the process. We would 'swap' bits of shrapnel for incendiary bombs with other kids roaming the streets.

If an air raid occurred during the day we would watch the bombs drop and race to the scene of the explosion to see the bodies being carried out of the rubble by the, Police, ambulance or the Auxiliary Fire Service. To this day, I can still smell the acrid smell of high explosives in the air.

In the winter of 1940, the block of terraced houses we lived in received a direct hit, and our little house was completely demolished.

It was very easy to rent houses, as many of the occupants had moved away to the country and so we rented a furnished house in Avenue Road and were provided with clothes from local charities.

But for me life went on, always striving to get into the middle of excitement and danger, although I didn't recognize it as such at the time. I remember quite vividly on one occasion, during an air raid hearing an almighty bang a few streets away — I dragged my brother along to the scene and saw a huge crater with a large unexploded bomb half buried in the centre. I wasn't wise enough to understand the potential danger, and we were actually playing in the bomb crater before an A.R.P. Warden arrived on the scene and chased us away

Looking back on incidents like these it's difficult to understand the stupidity and wilfulness of our actions, but it must be said that we were in no way bad, in the sense that we would not consider stealing or looting, we were just totally hooked on the excitement of the times.

And so we continued our death defying street games. I wore a balaclava that was frozen to my mouth by the cold air caused by my breath and a thin, sleeveless fairisle pullover that afforded no protection from the bitterly cold winds of that freezing winter.

My mother decided that we should hold our own ration books and be responsible for our own meagre rations, which meant that there were days when we didn't eat properly and I believe we became undernourished, I certainly was underweight for my ten years.

Then came that memorable day of March 10th 1941. It had been a day of constant Air Raids over Portsmouth and Gosport with no let up. After a while people began to ignore the warning, and went about their business without even bothering to go to the air raid shelters.

On that fateful evening my mother took my brother and I to the Ritz cinema to see a Jack Benny film. At about 9pm Air raid warning signs were flashed onto the screen and the cinema was evacuated. We started walking home and heard the German aircraft dropping their bombs on Gosport. Shortly after, a stick of incendiary bombs scored a direct hit on the Ritz cinema completely gutting the building.

That building remained a bombed out shell for over 20 years after the ending of the war, and I could never pass it without thinking a few hours earlier and we would have perished in the bombing.

On returning home that evening, we were told by our father (who was home on leave), to go straight to the shelter at the bottom of our garden, as another air raid was under way. He had made a flask of soup for our supper, which we took with us. We had been sleeping in the shelter for several months so we knew the routine well. My father remained outside our shelter on fire watching duties.

In addition to our own family we also had a 9-year-old boy called Kenny staying in the shelter. He was part of 'our gang' and spent a lot of time with our family. His mother and sister lived a little way down the road and his father was at sea.

Our next door neighbour was an old lady living on her own, my father tried to get her to go into her shelter but she refused, saying if she was going to die, it would be in her own bed. Our other neighbours were a family of Mum, Dad and three children. Their ten-year-old son was another of my special friends.

Just after midnight 4 landmines straddled the road one landing directly outside our house No. 68. The noise of the explosions was deafening and the whole street of houses were demolished in an instant. We could hear the sounds of people screaming and crying and the terrible noise of the bomb blasts and the wind whistling. Thick palls of smoke hung over the whole devastated area and fires broke out in some of the bombed out houses.

Our shelter had sustained some blast damage, but thankfully we all survived.

The old lady next door burnt to death, and our other neighbours the family of 5 died instantly in their shelter, which had crushed inwards, just a few yards away in the next garden.

My father was blown over the back wall and knocked unconscious. We carried him back to the shelter, he was bleeding from his ears, his shirt had been torn off his back and his skin was blackened and peppered with tiny bits of debris, and he was in severe shock.

We decided to help Dad to HMS St. Vincent Sick bay; a naval barracks situated 3 miles away, so that his wounds could be attended to.

As we left the shelter, I saw the utter devastation of what once was the thriving community of Avenue Road. I saw the twisted corrugated iron metal of our neighbour's shelter, not knowing at that stage that the whole family lay dead in the mangled wreckage.

As we walked down the road we passed my friend Kenny's house or what was left of it. My father spoke to some firemen on the scene, and he was told that all of the family had died instantly. We took Kenny with us to HMS St. Vincent Sick Bay.

On the way there, we had to cross a railway bridge and incendiary bombs were falling all about us, and actually falling on the bridge, and so we sheltered under the bridge until the bomber passed overhead. On arrival at the Sick bay, my father's wounds were dressed and the whole family slept on the floor that night.

The following morning we said goodbye to Dad who had to report back to the Royal Navy barracks at Portsmouth. Later that day, the family and my friend Kenny were put on a coach and transported to Hambledon a small country village some 25 miles out of Portsmouth as evacuees.

On arrival we were taken to the village hall and given an area near the stage to bed down on. There were a large number of families staying at the village hall, and there we stayed for the next few days being fed by the local Women's Volunteer service.

During this time Kenny's father was contacted and granted compassionate leave to visit his son. It was decided that Kenny should remain with my family until such times as arrangements could be made with his Dad's relatives; in fact Kenny stayed with us for over a year.

After our stay at the village hall, we were taken to the Earl of Hambledon's estate and billeted in the servants quarters and ate our food in the kitchen. The butler was not happy at having kids running around his domain and eating in his kitchen, so no doubt he was pleased that we were re-billeted on to more permanent accommodation shortly afterwards. My mother and sisters were housed in the village and my brother, Kenny and I were placed in a cottage with a farm labourers and his wife who had no children of their own.

Our new host was a lovely man with a great country sense of humour who enjoyed his beer and 'baccy' and had a fund of stories about the folklore of the countryside. His wife however was a real nagging tyrant who made his life a misery.

And so he would take us boys off to the woods just to keep out of her way. He was a very skilled poacher and no fish or fowl was safe on the Earls estate, he plundered at will. He passed many of his skills on to us boys, teaching us to lay snares and traps and steeped in country lore we poached at will escaping the clutches of the estate gamekeeper. I took to country life like a duck to water!

I would see my mother and sisters from time to time, but it was apparent that they were getting bored with country life, and certainly my mother was missing Gosport and her friends. And so it was decided that we would all return home, to be temporarily housed with friends until permanent accommodation could be found. And so we returned, us boys went to a new school, and the war years passed, the bombings continued and the casualty list rose higher and higher.

In January 1945 my mother opened a 'Café' a mile away from the D. Day embarkation point at Hardway in Gosport. To call it a café was stretching the imagination, as it was a small front room with a couple of battered tables and a few chairs. In the tiny kitchen every surface was covered with Spam and Corned beef sandwiches. The tinned meat was a donation from the passing soldiers and came in huge tins with 'W.D Issue' printed on the side with large arrows! On the gas stove stood a huge metal teapot constantly stewing and sweetened with condensed milk.

Hardway, was massed with landing barges, queuing up to embark the soldiers, lorries tanks and guns to the D Day landings. The convoy of lorries and tanks filled to overflowing with soldiers stretched from Fareham to Hardway in Gosport, a distance of 7 miles, stacked up waiting their turn for embarkation.

As the lorries and tanks patiently waited their turn to embark on the landing barges, they stopped or crawled past 'Ma's Café'. It was a slow, never-ending procession, crawling a few yards at a time, and very often stationary for hours on end. There will be thousands of soldiers who will remember the mug of tea, rock cake and Spam sandwich they bought from the Maltese lady at 'Ma's Café'. This was the last purchase they made in England before embarkation and for many who didn't survive the journey, their last ever.

For me this was an exciting time, going along the line of lorries and tanks taking their orders and returning with the food, sometimes running full speed down the street because the convoy had moved forward, to deliver it or retrieving the empty mugs.

During the night the soldiers in the vehicles that happened to be stationary outside the café were invited in to get their heads down in the warm. I remember sleeping bodies over every available space in our little house.

We also collected the soldier's final letters to home. My mother would post off hundreds of these, and the soldiers would empty their pockets of all their spare change to pay for the postage on the letters and to give to us kids, as a thank you to Mum for looking after them in their final hours on British soil.

And they moved on, singing their war songs, and cracking jokes. I didn't know then but all these years later I realize how excited but apprehensive they must have been for what the future held for them.

Finally the queues of lorries petered out, leaving behind the odd Military police vehicle, making their final checks and taking care of the disabled vehicles and their crews.

And so I watched them all depart — and weeks later, I watched them return ...but not all of them and as they disembarked from their landing barges I noticed a difference, no war songs, no jokes, just bone weary men, faces lined with pain and fatigue, thankful that they had made the return journey.

And there were the ambulances, a crocodile line waiting to take away the stretched wounded. Hundreds and hundreds of them, however badly wounded, they were the lucky ones as they had returned to their homeland.

And I also saw the dead covered in their waterproof groundsheets and laid side by side in temporary tents erected behind the pub on the waterfront. A canvas mortuary holding the remains of all those bright young men with their jokes and war songs.

And then days later as I sat on my usual bit of wall on the waters edge, I stared with disbelief to see old men and young boys in strange grey uniforms disembarking from the landing barges. They were the first group of German Prisoner of War landing in this country. So this was the 'enemy'... boys in oversized overcoats! and worn out shoes, and grey old men that seemed years older than my father, shuffling along the road. This then was the face of the dreaded 'Hun', the bogeyman that we had all been so terrified of.

As they shuffled past my mother's café, she tried to hand them a piece of cake or a sandwich, but the British soldiers guarding them warned her off.

Perhaps fraternization was an infectious disease, is that why they called it German measles? My young mind was very confused.

Later however I did get an opportunity to 'fraternize' with the German prisoners of war. They were incarcerated in the Naval Barracks, HMS St. Vincent for the last few weeks of the war. They were allowed to roam the grounds and sports field, and we would talk to them through the perimeter fence, in broken English and sign language.

They would ask us to buy them one or two Woodbine cigarettes, offering money or cap badges and collar insignias. These items were very sought after, and equally as valuable to us as currency.

And so the war drew to a close in Europe and all we had to look forward to was — peace time discipline — and school, boring normality was looming, but before that the V.E. Day street party....but that banquet is another story!

Ernie Smith

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