

FLYING BOMBS LONDON 1944

Quite soon after the Allied Armies invaded France in June 1944, which was designated "D Day", the Nazi's began launching V weapons against Britain. These "Flying Bombs" were first dropped on London but soon after that they were targeted against other areas across the South of England.

The first V bomb fell on the Capital about the middle of June. These missiles were soon christened "Doodle Bugs" by the population and during that summer by far the largest number of them was falling all over London. They caused tremendous damage and claimed many deaths and injuries.

By late summer the United Kingdom Government called for help from the provinces. They requested volunteers from the working forces of building firms to move to London and assist in the clearing up repairing of the many homes and businesses damaged, and making them habitable again. Each building firm's bosses were encouraged to employ extra able bodied persons who were willing to move to the Capital for this purpose. Building operatives from all over the country rallied to this call.

Several building firms in Bath answered the call including the business that I was employed at. The firm that I was employed at was "G. Burden and Son" of Larkhall Bath. Our boss was the son of Alderman George Burden; he was Les Burden. He was a fine employer. Two other firms were merged with ours, "Blackmores" of Twerton, Bath and "Sperrings" of Radstock.

One Friday in September we left for the Capital not knowing what we were in for. There were three of us employed in the firm at the time: Norman, Tony and myself and we were all 15 years of age. We had not been banned from this venture and we were keen to go. I had begged my parents to let me go and in the end they consented.

So Norman, Tony and I were off. Several Bath firms had already left for London. Our firm enlarged with extra men, travelled to the Capital by train taking their own luggage, but our lorry was loaded up with the various kit including ladders and other gear that we required. I was chosen to accompany the driver to deliver all the plant to our designated working area.

The journey up to London was good but it became more exciting to me when we were actually going through the city and seeing places and buildings that I had only heard or read about. It was very sad and sobering though to witness the awful damage that had occurred from the earlier blitz and the more recent destruction to the buildings from the beginning of the V weapon incidents.

We finally arrived at the area in which we were to work. It was "Murray Grove" in Shoreditch. The driver was returning to Bath and leaving the firm. "My orders are to drop you off at your hostel," he said "then it's back home for me." He must have known his way around London, we didn't get lost or held up in traffic. "Where are we heading for?" I asked, and he replied that we were heading for what he described as the posh part of the city. I soon noticed that the streets were wider and busy with people and large stores also busy with shoppers. Suddenly he pulled up outside of a large hotel. "This is it," he said and I read the large letters over the entrance doors, 'The Royal Palace Hotel' we were in 'Kensington High Street.'

It didn't mean much to me then but, I now know that it was one of the top hotels in London and at some period in the thirties, Sydney Lipton's Orchestra had played in the ball room there. Of course the building or the locality did not mean much to me then. The hotel had suffered some damage from the earlier blitzes. There wasn't any glass in the windows just the normal black material in the bottom sashes and opaque material in the upper sashes. The entrance hall was crowded with men of all ages.

Our driver found out where our particular firms were billeted, from the person at the reception desk. He was informed that they were on the third floor in such and such number rooms. So I was soon among my workmates. "Have you eaten yet?" they enquired but of course we hadn't. "Ok, there are some sandwiches and tea on the ground floor" they told us. The lorry driver declined the offer saying, "I'm leaving and heading back to Bath. Cheerio, best of luck," and with that he was gone. Many rooms had been converted into dormitories, each one sleeping about six to eight people. The best thing of all was that our particular room was situated at the front of the hostel overlooking Kensington High Street and we three lads were together. Norman, Tony and I (the Three Musketeers), we soon familiarized ourselves with the routine that we were to keep to during our time in London.

Each morning it was up, get shaved and dressed, then down to the dining room for breakfast and a mug of tea. If required there was a packed lunch of various sandwiches. Then returning to our billet at the end of the working day and after getting washed and changed there was a cooked meal supplied. Each meal cost one shilling and they were very good. We ate the meals in what was in pre-war, the hotel ballroom.

At a guess, I would estimate that the total number of men billeted there was about six to seven hundred, so you can imagine how busy it all was at mealtimes. Each meal was paid for by ticket, and we bought these tickets by the reel and used as required. We were not required to start work until Monday. This suited us because we had the whole weekend to get used to our surroundings and also to roam around the locality. Naturally, with the three of us wandering around the borough, we soon discovered the local 'Odeon' cinema just along the High street. Of course we often went to the cinema as they featured newly released films weeks before they were shown in the provinces such as Bath.

Every six weeks we were issued with a train travelling warrant to spend the weekend at home. We finished work on the Friday and on Saturday morning made our way to Paddington Station for the journey to Bath, and returning to London on the Sunday evening. Most of us used to walk to Paddington with our suitcases, it wasn't all that far from the hostel, through Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park. Most of the men used their travelling warrants to go home but we three 'young-uns' did not always go home. A free weekend in London was much more exciting and I am quite sure our parents understood that.

Our work at Shoreditch set the pattern of all our Blitz work. Patching up the roofs of damaged property, making the houses weather proof and making good the windows sashes and all the doors. We also repaired the ceilings with plasterboard which were later skimmed with plaster. In making their houses fit for habitation again, I never faltered in my admiration of these citizens who took all this destruction with such courage.

In December of 1944 we all returned to our homes for Christmas, a whole week off. The winter of 44-45 was quite severe, lots of snow and ice. To get us to work each day we were allocated a former 'Green Line Bus' and driver, who was a Londoner. He stayed with us each day in order to drive us to incidents that we were sometimes called to. It wasn't a very comfortable vehicle to ride in because all the seating had been removed

and replaced with a metal mesh. We assumed that the single deck bus had been used for transporting injured persons during earlier raids on the Capital.

Obviously the residents of the area in Shoreditch that we assisted in re-housing got to know us very well. They were very grateful and we made many friends. On arriving at work, we sometimes enjoyed a bacon buttie and a cuppa at the local café before starting on the repairs. The cold and snow still continued through January but we discovered that there was a British restaurant locally and we used this 'Shepherdess British Restaurant' regularly for a hot lunch, costing one shilling and six pence, (what a bargain!).

There were a few instances of us being called away to areas where an 'incident' had occurred. When a Flying Bomb had fallen with devastating results, it was referred to as an 'incident'. By the time we had arrived on these sites rescue teams and medical personnel plus Police and Fire services had been very busy. Our job was to assist the unfortunate people involved by clearing the debris and repairing roofs with tarpaulins and also fixing damaged windows and doors. My admiration for the stoicism of these ordinary citizens of London never wavered.

It must have been sometime in February of 1945 that our bus picked us up from our billet as usual and drove us to our area of work at 'Hoxton'. To our horror we were met by a terrible sight. Overnight a V. bomb had struck 'Murray Grove' our work site. Many people had tragically been killed and wounded, no doubt including many residents we had befriended during our time of working there. The bomb had destroyed much of the repair work that we had carried out.

Most of our kit and plant had survived however, so we gathered it together and we were then transferred to another area. Our new location was 'Forest Gate' East London. Before settling in however, we attended an incident in another area, (but I can not recall exactly where). It was at a busy road junction, in an area with lots of shops which had all been busy at the moment of impact. Many people shopping had been killed, and goods from the shops were strewn all over the place. We were informed that while the rescue and fire services plus Police had been carrying out their terrible tasks another bomb had dropped almost into the same crater of the previous V. weapon. Many of the rescuers had been killed. It was a really dreadful occurrence.

Another particular incident happened one afternoon which was especially tragic. We were alerted to go to 'Dalston' where a V.2 missile had struck a school just about the time the pupils were leaving for home. Many of the junior school children were at school library selecting and changing their books. The library building had taken a direct hit. The scene was not pleasant. Many casualties were scattered over the whole area. Terrible! These things happened, but one cannot easily forget, nor should one I think!

It was about the spring of 1945 that we started working at Forest Gate. We were employed in a lovely suburban area, (again I can not recall the actual location), and our main work was at a long avenue of many houses. We took over a damaged shop in the main street as our workshop. The work involved the same kind of thing we had carried out in Hoxton. Such as repair of ceilings and by this time we were actually replacing the window sashes with glass. The glass was unpolished (not clear), and was known as O.Q.R glass. We replaced the glass several times owing to blast from occasional bombs. In the shop we set up a couple of glass cutting benches. Large sheets of glass were delivered to us from a glass factory in Stratford, East London. From these large sheets of glass we cut the required sizes of panes needed for glazing window sashes. The front doors in the houses of the avenue required shaped glass and I recall going down to the Stratford glaziers with the templates and then re-glazing many doors.

We met and befriended many of the local residents. One family of friends we became involved with ran a café. Again my memory fails me and I can not recall their names. They were a lovely family of father, mother and three daughters, all teenagers from about 14 years of age and upwards and we three lads got along with them quite well.

They turned out to be a party loving family and during the time we were employed in that area we attended about three parties. They were arranged for Saturday nights, so we went to work on the Saturday wearing our decent clothes under our boiler suits. Then after work that day we washed and brushed up then stayed for the party. The party ended quite late so we kipped down in our shop and was ready for work when our firm arrived on the Sunday morning.

Returning to our hostel one afternoon after working at Forest Gate, we had finished early because it was evident that a heavy fog was developing. We had not experienced London fog up to this time, we had been very lucky. It was not very pleasant and it added over two hours to our journey back. Our driver was excellent and certainly knew his way around the capital. When we eventually arrived 'home', the staff had a nice hot meal prepared for us. So all was well, but we didn't want to experience smog again.

Around about March 1945, an official from the Ministry of Works or some such body came to interview us. He had come to see the three of us lads and he informed us that as we were under seventeen years of age, we must cut down the number of hours we were working. With double time on Sundays we were exceeding the legal number of hours per week. The remedy he said was for us to have one day off each week. "Can we choose which day to leave out?" we asked. "Yes, I see no reason to object to that" he replied.

So having decided on Monday being our day off we were free to visit and enjoy anywhere in London on that day. We certainly did exactly that! The weather was improving that spring so we sometimes went boating on the Serpentine, visited Madame Tussauds and several museums and of course enjoyed seeing the latest films in the West End. It was a very pleasant time and our usual haunts such as, Notting Hill and Edgware Road, plus the market at Shepherds Bush saw less of us. We wandered all over London visiting places which tourists of today come to see.

The allied armies were now advancing steadily across Europe and driving the German forces further and further away from the English Channel, so the terrible V. weapons became less and less frequent, thank goodness. Everyone became aware that the European war was nearing its end. Even the people who were still sleeping on the underground railway platforms began staying in their own homes overnight. We noticed the dwindling numbers of the sleeping people we had to step over on the way home in the late evenings.

At last the war was over in Europe. Prime Minister Churchill declared May 8th 'Victory in Europe' day, and a general holiday. Most of the workers at our hostel, being married men with families opted to go home to Bath for a few days. They were issued with their travel warrants and disappeared.

The three of us decided that there would be more to see by staying on in London and joining in the celebrations, and so it proved. None of us regretted that decision. We walked into the West End that morning bought some flags and mingled with the thousands of deliriously happy crowds. Wandering and singing through Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and down to Buckingham Palace, waving our flags and climbing onto the statues. It was an unforgettable occasion.

This went on for about 24 hours and like many thousands of other people we didn't seem to care. Eventually we staggered back to our hostel and flopped down on our beds and slept for hours.

After about three days the building gangs returned and we all got back to normal work. Soon after that the man from the Ministry visited us again. This time he informed the three of us that we were too young to be engaged on the war repairs scheme. 'Unbelievable!' That was our reaction to this news. After working in the Capital under wartime conditions and being exposed to V.1 and V.2 weapons that the Nazis had thrown at us, now it was peace time we were being sent home unwanted!

So back to our homes in Bath we went and that was where we were when the war against Japan ended. V.J day was on August 1945 and as our firm was continuing to work in London, we three were split up among the local builders. I was on loan to a small building operative with one employee until autumn of 1945 when my parent firm returned to Bath after over a year on Blitz work in London.