

## 8 SAD DAYS

Suddenly the war was brought home to us. I was upstairs reading a comic when the warning went. As I couldn't hear any aircraft I stopped where I was. Suddenly I heard the whistle of bombs coming down. I dived under the table and there was this explosion. All the windows rattled. The bombs had exploded near the bus stop at Thong Lane just after two girls had got off the bus. They were both killed outright. They were two girls we had grown up and gone to school with and we knew their families. The girls were Gwen Williams from the bungalows across the road and Vera Studd from the Lower Higham Road. They had been to a dance in town and just left our cousin Irene. What a shock it was for everyone. Gwen's brother Bill was serving with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in the Western Desert in Africa.

The war news is not too good. The Italian Army invaded Greece but the Greek Army was driving them back. They were no match for the Germans so the Germans came to their aid and drove the Greeks back. The Greeks asked Britain for aid, so we sent part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army from Africa. It wasn't strong enough and the German and Italians drove them back in retreat. They had to evacuate the army to island of Crete.

The German Airborne troops invade Crete and the outnumbered British and Greek troops had to evacuate Crete. It is another Dunkirk. The Navy lost a lot of ships but most of the army escaped to Egypt.

Everybody was fed up with the bad news, but the RAF struck back and gave the Germans a taste of their own medicine. 200 RAF bombers bombed the German town of Kiel and did a lot of damage GOOD.

There were a lot of new babies in and around Castle Lane, (it must be something in the water causing it). Lenny Briggs mother had boy Victor. Mrs Smith next door had a boy Alan, and one of Mums friends Mrs Throw had a boy Alan. Mr & Mrs Smith took over the Crown at Shorn and her sister in-law Mrs McKee moved in next door. She had a baby girl called Pat. She had just lost her husband who was in the merchant navy. Nearly all the men of military age have been called up, Lens dad and Mr Throw have been called up into the Army.

The air raids seemed to have eased off a bit. Not many daylight raids as there was and there was talk of reopening the Gordon School after the summer holidays, if the air raids kept as they were,

We found out why the air raids slackened off. The German Army had invaded Russia, and needed all the aircraft. At last we had an ally to help us fight the Germans.

I wanted a pair of long trousers as I was now 13 years old and still wearing short trousers. Off we go to Goodwins shop in Manor Road. 'Yes I have enough clothing coupons.' 'What type would you like Sir?' 'A pair of grey flannel trousers please.' 'You'll be lucky. All we have are corduroy at the moment. Grey, light green or navy blue, dark brown.' I chose grey. I could have had a grey suite but I couldn't afford one. Any way I didn't have enough clothing coupons. The trousers were on the large size never mind I would soon grow into them. I thought I was King Dick in my first pair of long trousers.

Pat or Bubbles was going on ok. She was being spoilt rotten (and she still is). Everyone picking her up when she cries, someone always taking her out in her pram. The house revolved round her but that's what it was all about. That was what we were fighting a war for.

There were troops everywhere. They were building camps all over the place. We were still restricted to where we could travel to. There was a control post at the Crown at Shorne. You were allowed into Chatham but you had to leave before 10.30 PM. We weren't allowed to go up Thong Lane near the Airfield.. They cut turf on the marshes and used it to extend the runway of the Airfield. They erected a pole on the marsh with a light on top so that the aircraft could find the airfield better in the fog. I was out on the marshes in the fog getting the cows in one evening when I was challenged by an army patrol. They wanted to know what I was doing and who I was. It was a good job I had my identity card.

It would be Christmas in a few weeks and it was getting cold so I didn't go out a lot,

It was now December and everyone was wondering what sort of Christmas it was going to be with everything in short supply and the air raids getting heavy again. I didn't see a lot of Peter. He was always at

work or out with his mates. I wonder what sort of mates, male or female? Jean didn't go out a lot. She was always spoiling Bubbles. Dad was always on duty or working on the farm.

There was a special news bulletin on the radio. The Japanese had attacked the American Fleet at Pearl Harbour. They have sunk or damaged a lot of their battleships. The Japanese also attacked the British bases of Hong Kong and Singapore. The news was not very good. There were a lot of Army Regiments from Kent and the south of England serving in the Far East. The Royal West Kents and the Buffs were in India. Royal Sussex, the East Surrey and the Queens were in Singapore. The Middlesex Regiment in Hong Kong. Hong Kong surrendered on Christmas Day.

The night before Christmas Dad said to me 'Come on Bob we are going to have pork for Christmas dinner. Bring the oil lamp.' He picked up a 14 lb. hammer and a sharp knife and out into the dark cold night we went to do our dirty deed. We went into the barn where there was this pig. He gave the pig some food and as the pig started to eat the food he slipped a rope over the back legs of the pig and hoisted it off the ground. Before the pig could squeal he hit it on the back of the head with the hammer and knocked it out. 'Quick Bob the bucket.' Then he cut the pig's throat and all the blood ran into the bucket. He then gutted the pig and cut it up into pieces large enough to fit into the oven.

Another Christmas had come and we were still together. I wondered what the new year would bring. Let's hope that 1942 would be a better year for everyone. I was looking forward to the 28<sup>th</sup> April my birthday. I'd be 14 and old enough to leave school. I had no idea what I wanted to do when I left. I'd just have to wait and see what work was available.

There were more bombs dropped on Gravesend near the Gordon School and a baby was killed. The baby's brother was in my class at school. He and the rest of his family were rescued from the rubble of the house uninjured. What could I say to him?

Bubbles was starting to walk and getting into mischief. One day she was in her high chair being fed when someone knocked on the door. They wanted eggs. Mum shouted 'Bob fetch six eggs will you please.' I left Pat to get the eggs, took them to the front door and started talking to the lad when there was such a scream. We rushed into the kitchen and couldn't see Pat. She had wriggled her way down under the feeding tray on the chair and was trapped by her head. What a panic! Mum was crying, Pat was screaming. The lad held Pat while I rushed out and got a saw to cut her loose. Panic over. Five minutes later she was all over the place as if nothing had happened.

'Bob nip round to Stuart Bakers on your bike with this message.' 'OK Dad.' Off I went on my bike. I got to Lower Higham Road, head down flying along when I hit a pot hole in the road. The front wheel came out of the frame of the bike, I went over the handle bars and hit the road with my head. I must have passed out. When I came to all I could see was stars and this woman in a car. She asked me if I was all right. I said yes, fixed my bike and delivered the message. I got on my bike to come home and fell off. They sat me in his lorry and brought me home. I went to bed and never told anyone. When they came to wake me they thought I was drunk. Next day I was as right as rain.

One Saturday morning I decided to go Northfleet to the Odeon Cinema. The only way to get there was on my bike it should only take about 20 minutes. I was to meet up with one of the lads from the village at the Lion Garage. When I arrived there he couldn't come. So I carried on to Northfleet and met some of my friends from school. The cinema was closed for repair to bomb damage. Just as we were deciding what to do the air raid warning sounded so we set off towards Gravesend as fast as we could on our bikes. Just before we came down the hill before the Leather Bottle pub, the Germans planes were bombing the docks across the river and the factory on the river side. They must have hit a dye shed where they dyed the sails for the barges red. We rode through the cloud of red dye. As we approached the Wardens and First Aid Post at the Leather Bottle they pulled us into the shelter and wanted to know where we were hit. When we wiped it off we found it was red dye not blood! I wasn't allowed to go that far on my own again until I started work

At last the great day had arrived. I was 14 years old and I could leave school. I had no qualifications. There was no O or A levels or School Leaving Certificates in those days. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I tried to get a job on the tugs but you had to be 16. In the end I went and got a job at J. B. Priestleys on the riverside repairing ships. One of the first jobs I had to do was rivet boy. I had to heat the rivets in a forge and pass them to the riveter to hammer into the joints of the metal sheets and what a noisy job that was.

There were a lot of women working there as welders. One of the girls was married to a soldier who had been wounded at Dunkirk. She was about eight months pregnant so they gave her a light job. All she had to do was to pass the hot rivet in a bucket to the riveter. She was passing the rivet in the bucket when she caught the edge of the bucket and tipped it towards her. The red hot rivet went straight down the front of her boiler suit. She screamed and passed out. We ran over to her, opened the front of her boiler suit and found two holes where the hot rivet had entered the top of boiler suit, came out at the crutch and not touched her. She came round ok but she went into labour. It was a good job there were other women there to look after her,

The Ambulance arrived and took her to hospital. She was alright. We had a collection for her and raised £15 for her and the baby. She and her husband brought the baby into work to show us and it was nick named Rivets. The husband trained as a welder and got a job with Priestley. My wages were only 10 shillings a week.

There was a commando raid on the French port of Dieppe by British and Canadian commandos. It wasn't a success and we lost a lot of men killed, wounded or missing.

Dad and Mum made friends with two sailors and their wives. The sailors had been injured and scalded when their ship, a destroyer, was sunk at the Battle of Narvik in 1940. They were renting a bungalow just over the back from us in Chalk Road. They were always in our house. Dad liked them because they were stokers the same as he used to be and Mum liked the wives.

One evening Mum was giving Pat a wash down in the sink. The warning went as she was drying her. Suddenly we heard the whistle of bombs falling. I grabbed Mum and Pat, threw them to the floor and threw myself on top of them. There was this big explosion quite near. We were all ok. When we dashed out side to see what had happened we saw all this dust in the air towards Chalk Road. When I got there the ARP and the rescue teams were there and there wasn't anything I or anyone could do. It was a direct hit on their bungalow and they were all killed outright. What a shock that was.

Peter was 16 so he joined the Home Guard. He was out training or on patrol two or three nights a week and at weekends, or he was out dancing with all his mates, male and female, and making the best of things.

Everything was in very short supply but life had to go on and you had to make the best use of the things you had. The girls couldn't get silk stockings so to make their legs look brown they dyed them with gravy powder. This was alright until it started to rain. Make up was very hard to get hold of so they made face powder out of flour and cocoa powder but they always looked their best.

When anyone got married the wedding cake would be made of cardboard. Inside would be a sponge cake. You couldn't get any currants or sultanas. Milk, flour and sugar and eggs were in very short supply.

Materials and silk for wedding dresses were unobtainable. Silk was used for making parachutes and they were very hard to get hold of. The RAF pilots had to account for theirs. If you could get hold of one that a German pilots had used or one of the big ones that had been on a parachute mine you were made. But silk wedding dress or not the girls always looked nice on their great day.

You couldn't get hold of new bicycles. So we got hold of old rusty damaged cycle frames and wheels, took them apart, straightened the frame and wheels, cleaned them up and made bikes out of the parts. But you couldn't get any tyres or inner tubes. What we did was to stuff the outer cover with hay and it worked. We stripped the old motor cycle down and sold the parts and made ourselves a few bob.

One of the cows was going to have a calf so Dad decided to stop up all night to see that everything went off alright. I decided to stop up with him and what a night that was. I finished up helping to pull the baby calf out. Everything went ok. It was the first time that I had seen or done thing like it in my life. I learnt a lot about nature that night.

Good war news at last General Montgomery's 8<sup>th</sup> army had won a battle at El Alamein in Egypt, and Rommel and his German Africa Corp were in full retreat

Another Christmas was approaching. Dad had reared some turkeys for Christmas and to stop them from being stolen we kept them in a shed up near the barn. There were over fifty of them. We locked Gyp the dog in the shed and Scamp in a kennel near the barn. All went well until two days before Christmas. He went to

open the shed to feed the turkeys and they had all been stolen. He called the police and they told him there was a black market gang going round stealing turkeys. To get past the dogs they brought a bitch that was on heat to keep the dogs quiet. So that was another let down. We never found out for certain who stole the turkeys. We had a good idea but we couldn't prove anything.

It was another new year 1943. I decided to look for a better paid job. You can't do much on ten shillings a week. When I told the foreman they offered me twelve shillings and six pence a week. I told them what to do with it.

One of the lads I went to school worked for the Co op Dairy. He said he could get me a job in the dairy. The wages were one pound seven shillings a week and extra if you work on Sundays. So I became a milkman. I loaded and unloaded the lorries. One of the lorries was a 1934 Dennis with a gate change gear box. I got on well with the driver and his girl friend, Norman and Doris. We used to have to deliver a load of milk to Rainham, Maidstone and army camps in that area. Most of the army camps were out in the wilds hardly any traffic about. I was his mate, Doris used to come along for the ride. Anyway he asked if I would like to have a go at driving the lorry, it was the first time I had a go at driving a vehicle.

If any of the girls who delivered the milk's husbands or boyfriends were home on leave I would go and help them on their rounds so they could finish early. I couldn't get a round of my own. The more milk they sold the more money they made. One Saturday I was helping out one of the oldest milkman in the dairy. He had a horse and cart. He said if the air raid warning sounds grab hold of the horses head or he will be off back to his stable. All went well until we came to the Leather Bottle pub at Northfleet when suddenly a ship on the river sounded its fog horn. The horse took off, milk bottles fell off the cart and we could do nothing. Anyway he got jammed in a hedge and we managed to calm him down.

There were quite a lot of girls working there bottling the milk. I used to help them and I made friends with a few. Most of them were going out with service men so I stood no chance of a date. I was 15 at this time. One of the married girls said 'never mind I have a young sister your age I'll tell that you are looking for a date.' I had seen her sister when she had met her after work, she didn't seem to want anything to do with me. She was shy.

I had to start work at 6am six days a week and nearly every Sunday they wanted you to work overtime. All I wanted to do in my spare time was sleep. I still helped around the farm. Dad had had done a deal with Stuart Brown for the cows, but he had more pigs.

Raymond Crouch had got called up for the army. He came and said goodbye. Fred Jury went to working for Stuart Brown in his place. We would all go out on marshes and help with the hay making. If the air raid warning sounded we would keep a look out for any planes and take cover if we saw any in case they strafed us (shot at us). We had a lot of fun with all the girls helping us making the hay stacks.

After the hay making was finished we would go and start picking the fruit in the orchard. One evening I was up a ladder picking pears when I heard girls shouting give us some pears. I looked round but couldn't see anyone. I lent over to get a better view when the ladder slipped and I fell off into a bunch of stinging nettles. I didn't injure myself. When I got up there were these girls. I gave them some apples and pears, chatted them up and tried to make a date. I asked their names. They were Cathy, Ivy and Babs. They said that they had to go home before it got late and the air raids started. I offered to see them safely home but they ran off laughing.

Down by the river they had built a slipway. They were starting to build landing barges and large floating drums it was all very secret. They also enlarged the Hospital for Seaman on the river bank near the Ship and Lobster pub.

I was getting fed up working at the Co-Op Dairy, up at 5am six days a week. It was all bed and work. The pay was ok so I decided to look for something else. Jake, who was working at a bakery, had managed to get a job as a cook on one of Gamecocks tugs. I think it was called the Water Cock. He said that he would see if there were any more jobs available. The pay was very good, £3 10shillings and all your food. I was out of luck. I was delivering milk to Everrards barge yard and was talking to the foreman. He told me that the best way to get a job on their tugs or barges was to work in the barge yard until a vacancy turned up. I started work in the yard at Greenhithe near Dartford. I was working there when they took all the sailing barges off the river as too many were getting shot up by German aircraft (they returned later in the war).

The next thing was that the Navy was taking over the tugs on the river and you had to be over 16 to work on them. Then they closed the barge yard down so I was out of a job. I wanted to join the Merchant Navy but Mum was against it. She said if I wanted to go to sea I should go to a Sea school but they only wanted stewards. There was a waiting list for seamen so I went on the waiting list. In the mean time I worked on the farm.

More sad news. Raymond Crouch had been killed training for the Second Front. Everyone was upset, he was such a nice lad,

Jean had been directed to another job by the Ministry of Labour. She was sent to Edmonton in London working on assembling army vehicles and making them waterproof. The Army was getting ready for the invasion of France. Every unmarried woman over 18 could be directed into the forces or they could be sent anywhere in the country on war work.

There was news on the wireless of Commando Raids on the French Coast. Thousand Bomber Raids by the RAF on German towns and cities, Berlin and Hamburg. GOOD they were getting a taste of their own medicine. The American Air Force were bombing them by day. Carry on the good work Lads.

The German Luftwaffe Blitz carried on. Bombing London Docks and attacking the Airfield in Thong Lane. There were more troops stationed in Gravesend and Commandos billeted in Chalk Road. There were invasion barges moored up in the river and mobile anti air craft guns and barrage balloons all over the marshes. They opened a naval hospital near the Prom. They must be planning something big.

I got a job at the British Uralite making fireproof linings for bomb casing for fire bombs. Peter is working in Tilbury Docks repairing damaged ships.

I started going out with my mates. We decided to go dancing at the Co-Op Dance Hall. When we got there they wouldn't let us in as you had to be over sixteen. So we went to the Prom to The Park Dance Hall. We managed to get in. It was packed with soldiers from the barracks and sailors from the ships in the river. We met some girls from Chalk and girls and lads we went to school with. I can't dance a step but I had a go. The air raid warning sounded but no one took any notice. It was a false alarm. I was enjoying myself chatting up all the girls when a fight started between the soldiers and sailors. The police arrived and we decided to leave. As we were leaving we met some of the lads that were working on the tugs. They were going for a drink in the pub called 'The Gravesend Pilot'. They asked us to go with them. It was the first time I had ever been in a pub for a drink. They bought me a pint of Black and Tan that is a bottle of Guinness and half pint of mild beer. Nine pence a pint. Then we got a round of drinks in. Afterwards we all walked home half drunk.

Then it was Christmas. Everything was in short supply but we made the best of things. We had a party for Bubbles. Jean came home for the holiday and brought a Canadian soldier to stay. Everyone had a good time.

It was another new year, 1944. I hoped the war would end soon. Everyone was getting weary and the weather was cold. Coal was rationed, beer in short supply. There were hardly any young men over 18 out of uniform. There were troops all over the place. On the river there were all sorts of strange thing appearing. Every ship had a barrage balloons flying from the stern. There were landing ships moored all down the river. There were Typhoons fighter planes landing and taking off and going on sweeps over France all day long. There were rows of army lorries and ambulances and other armoured vehicle parked on the Prom and on the verges of the roads. Something big was in the wind.

News was been released about a battle fought in Burma and of extraordinary heroism of the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion The Royal West Kent Regiment.in defending the small town of Kohima for 16 days between April 5<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. It was hailed as one of the greatest rearguard actions in the history of warfare.

500 men all wearing the famous white horse cap badge held out against a furious assault by an entire Japanese division, which needed possession of the Kohima pass and entry through to the Assam Plains and into India.

The Kentish Men refused to submit. Attacked ceaselessly day and night often with furious hand to hand fighting with rifle butt and bayonet and peppered with grenades they held their ground before the second British Division were flown into relieve them

By this time over 200 men had died and many more were sick and wounded. Their ammunition was almost spent. Lance Corporal John Harman had been recommended for a posthumous Victoria Cross.

There is a monument there today and the inscription on it reads

WHEN YOU GO HOME  
TELL THEM OF US  
THAT FOR ALL YOUR TOMORROWS  
WE GAVE OUR TODAY