

LAKENHEATH, A SUFFOLK VILLAGE IN WAR TIME.

I was ten years old when war broke out on 3rd September 1939 and I can still remember listening to the wireless with my parents and brother and sister and hearing Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, announcing in solemn tones "We are now at war with Germany". I can remember, too, the look of utter dismay and sadness on my parents' faces as they had both experienced the First World War, my father having served in the Royal Field Artillery. Being too old for call-up in the coming conflict, he was appointed Head ARP Warden for the village and his first job was to oversee the distribution of gas masks to every adult and child in the village. The ARP or Air Raid Precautions had been set up by the Government in 1937, as part of the Civil defence, in order to protect the civilian population, as far as possible, from the effects of aerial bombing by the Germans, and one of the greatest fears was the possibility of poison gas attack, a weapon which had been used by both sides in WWI in the trenches on the Western Front.

Adult gas masks were made of black rubber with a mica window for seeing through (plastic had not been invented), with a snout-like filter for breathing and adjustable straps at the back for fitting over the head. I recall that they were quite claustrophobic and the visor soon misted up with condensation. Children up to the age of seven had a gas mask with two "goggle-like" eye pieces, were made of red and blue rubber, and became known as "Mickey Mouse" gas masks. For the babies, parents were issued with a sort of all-over rubber bag with an eye-piece and filter into which they were supposed to put the infant, but I can't imagine many parents being too keen to use it. Each gas mask came with a cardboard box with string attached so that you could carry it over your shoulder, and I believe that it was a legal requirement in the early years of the war that you had to carry your gas mask with you whenever you were away from home.

The Government at the time was convinced that air raids would start almost immediately after war had been declared and insisted that the whole country should be "blackened out" at night to ensure that no light would be visible to German bombers. It was the job of the Air Raid Wardens to ensure that no house or business premises showed a light after dark, hence Warden Hodges's catchphrase in Dad's Army, "put that light out"! My Mother purchased a large quantity of heavy black-out material, to be made into curtains, from Plumpton's Department store in Bury St Edmunds, and our next-door neighbour, Mr Hammond, who was a Master Carpenter, made us some heavy wooden shutters to put up on the outside of all the downstairs windows at night.

The RAF established an aerodrome (as they were then called) at Mildenhall in 1930, which became a heavy bomber base in the war, and in 1938 another was opened at Feltwell. RAF Lakenheath was established in 1940, originally as a decoy airfield to divert German bombers from attacking Mildenhall, and in 1941 it was up-graded to a heavy bomber station with a squadron of Stirling bombers. These were the first four-engine bombers produced in the war and were later succeeded by the Halifax and Lancaster aircraft. With the Army establishing a battle training ground at Stanford, just north of Thetford, Servicemen were constantly passing through the village and, to provide them with facilities for a break from their duties, the Church Army opened a canteen in the field between the Bell Hotel and the General Store (whose name I have forgotten) on the west side of the High

Street, not far from the Tap public house. Members of the WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) helped in the day to day running of the canteen and, during the school holidays, I used to go with my mother, who was a member of the WVS, to help make sandwiches and with the washing up. The Service provided similar help in the canteen at the Women's Land Army Hostel which had been built at the northern end of the High Street, just before it becomes Station Road and close to the Half Moon public house. These volunteers were rewarded with an invitation to attend the occasional shows put on by ENSA, (The Entertainments National Service Association, set up in 1939 by Leslie Henson), to entertain the Land Army Girls.

Fearful of the destruction that would be caused by bombing raids, the Government decided to evacuate children from the big cities to relatively safer areas in the country, and in 1940 a party of Evacuees from East London arrived in Lakenheath, and the WVS was responsible for finding accommodation for them with families who had spare rooms. It must have been a terrible shock for the young children, some of whom had their mothers with them, to find themselves in a totally different environment to the one they were used to and it wasn't long before they all returned to London to take their chances in the coming Blitz.

In the early years of the war there were two "military" installations in the village, the first of which was a searchlight station in the field opposite the far end of the council houses on the Eriswell Road. It was manned by members of the ATS (the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the female soldiers of the army) and was presumably part of the defences for Mildenhall bomber base, although it wasn't there for very long. The second was an observation tower built for the Royal Observer Corps in the conifer plantation on the high ground at the top of Broom Road which, at that time, was more of a sandy track from where the bungalows then ended a short way up the road. The ROC was part of the Civil Defence organisation, together with the ARP and Auxiliary Fire Service, and it was manned by civilian volunteers whose job was to identify, track and report all aircraft movements over the country. A friend of the family was one of these volunteers and I was fortunate to be allowed to visit the post on one occasion. Access to the post was by a very long and somewhat scary ladder but the view from the top was worth the effort as the observation platform was at the same height as the treetops. To the west you could see over the Fens, almost as far as Ely, and to the east, over the Breckland, the Thetford War Memorial on its isolated spot at the side of the A11 between Thetford and Elvedon, was clearly visible.

At that time there were two large chalk pits in the area, one at Maids Cross by the road down to Wangford, and the other at Undley, close to a derelict windmill. The one at Maids Cross was used by the RAF for fire drills in the event of a crash landing by one of the Stirling bombers, which sometimes happened. The one at Undley had become a large spring-fed pond where we used to swim in the summer and, on several occasions we saw RAF aircrew practising bale-out procedures in their rubber life-saving rafts in the event of a crash landing at sea.

With the collapse of France in 1940, a German invasion became a very real possibility and, in order to confuse the invading troops, all place names and means of identification were removed. Railway station names were taken down, all signposts at road junctions removed, and even the plaque over the entrance to the Peace Memorial Hall was cemented over to obliterate the name Lakenheath. Night-time rail travel must have been confusing if you were not familiar with the line, and the porter calling out "Shippea Hill" in a broad Suffolk accent would not have been of much help!

During the 1930s the "Farming Depression" had been at its worst but, fortuitously, the war came to the rescue, as it soon became vital that the Country grew as much of its own food as possible. Farmland that had been considered unsuitable for cultivation was brought into use and cereal crops became the main priority. My father's farm down at Burnt Fen had originally been a fruit farm but the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries paid him and the neighbouring farms owned by Chivers and Hartleys, the well-known jam makers, to "grub out" the old and unproductive trees to increase the arable acreage. The "Min and Ag of Fish", as it became known, had an office in a house opposite Mrs Morley's shop, near the Post Office and its officers largely controlled what the farmers could and could not grow. Nearly everybody in the village had a garden in which to grow vegetables, (encouraged by the "Dig for Victory" posters which appeared everywhere), and many kept chickens. People were also encouraged to keep a pig, if they had the space, and were helped with a ration of pig feed provided by the Min of Ag which was supplemented by pig swill from their kitchens. There was an apocryphal story of how some householders were able to hoodwink the Ministry officials when the time came to slaughter the animal. In return for the feed ration, the Min of Ag claimed half the carcase which would normally have been split lengthwise. However some devious people halved their carcasses cross-wise, giving the head and shoulders to the Ministry officials and keeping the rear end for themselves which, as we all know, has the choicest cuts.

Food rationing was introduced in January 1940 with bacon, butter and sugar being the first foodstuffs to be rationed, but it was not long before most other basic foods joined the list, including sweets. Mr Moore, who owned the Butcher's shop just along the High Street from our house, was most meticulous in the way he gave out the meat ration, meat being rationed by price rather than weight as with all other commodities. The effects of food rationing were not nearly as hard for those who lived in the country, compared with urban dwellers. Most people grew their own vegetables, many kept chickens and ducks, (my father had a small flock of geese on the farm), there was plenty of game to be caught or shot including rabbits, hares, pigeons, pheasants, partridges and the occasional wild duck out on the Fens. A lot of bartering went on, eggs being exchanged for fruit, a pheasant for some butter and so on.

Farm work was vital to the war effort and was classified as a "reserved occupation", which meant that farm workers could not be called up for military service, although many volunteered. Many of them joined the Home Guard, including our farm foreman, John Turrington, and I can remember watching the Lakenheath detachment parading on the road in front of the British Legion Hut on Sunday mornings. I believe that at one time the Commanding Officer was Sir Charlton Briscoe, who lived at Lakenheath Hall. My brother was called up in 1940 and joined the Royal Norfolk Regiment. On gaining a commission he was posted to the 6th Battalion, Royal Norfolks, which was part of the ill-fated 18th (East Anglian) Division sent to counter the Japanese invasion of the Malayan Peninsula in 1941. When Singapore surrendered in February 1942 he, with thousands of other POWs, was sent to work on the infamous "Death Railway" in Burma for the next three and a half years. Fortunately he survived and returned home in October 1945 weighing just under 7 stone!

There was an Italian prisoner of war camp at Thetford and the inmates were sent to work on local farms, mainly to help with the harvest. They wore a chocolate coloured battledress uniform with a large yellow circle sewn on the back for easy identification, and my father had a group of them at Bedford Farm and he found them to be good workers. One Christmas they presented him with a bottle of bright yellow liqueur with a crystallized cross inside the bottle rather like a "ship in a

bottle". A first sip certainly made his eyes water and one wonders where they got it from... was there an illegal still in the camp? In 1945 my mother was approached by a welfare organisation, possibly the Salvation Army, to see if we would host two German POWs for a Sunday dinner. Although the war in Europe had ended, it took time to re-patriate the POWs of all nations, and I imagine it was thought that this sort of fraternisation might prove beneficial to post-war relations. Two very polite and charming young German airmen duly came to lunch and they fortunately spoke good English as our ability to speak German was nil!

Today we are encouraged to re-cycle everything that we can but this is not a new idea. During the war there was a desperate shortage of many essential materials and the public at large was urged to collect what was then known as "salvage", mainly paper, rags and metal. The salvage collection point in the village was an empty building at the entrance to the Co-op yard, which at that time was situated opposite the pond where Mill Road meets the High Street. (The pond was filled in early in the war and became a car park). Volunteers organised by the WVS sorted the salvage which was then sent off to be processed into materials to help the war effort. Metal was in very short supply and I seem to remember that the railings around the War Memorial disappeared early on in the war.

There was not much in the way of entertainment during the war, but there were seven pubs in the village, or eight if you counted the Station Hotel three miles north of the village on the Feltwell road. From south to north they were The Fox in Back Street, The Plough at the bottom of Mill Road, the Bell Hotel and The Brewer's Tap on the west side of the High Street, the Bull almost opposite the Post Office, The Half Moon at the northern end of the village almost where station road begins and The High Bridge, a mile out on the road to Burnt Fen where it crosses the Lode. I imagine that in earlier times this was a popular inn for the boatmen who worked on the waterways connecting the River Lark with the Ouse. The British Legion had a bar as well as a billiard table, the latter being very popular with my father who was a fairly skilled player. We could "go to the flicks" (as the saying went at the time) at the newly built Comet cinema in Mildenhall or the Avenue in Brandon, both of which involved a five mile bicycle ride each way. Once in a while a film was shown in the Peace Memorial Hall but it was not a particularly sophisticated evening as the reel had to be changed frequently, the seats were extremely uncomfortable unless you took your own cushion, and after the first hour those sitting at the back had trouble seeing the screen because of the clouds of cigarette and pipe smoke! Once in a while there was a Saturday night dance in the Hall with a live five-piece band consisting of a piano, saxophone, trumpet, double bass and drums and they could certainly make the place "rock" when they were in full flow. The evening often ended with a fight between the British and American servicemen who were vying for the chance to take the girls home, who were far fewer in number than the men. As the Police House was only a few minutes away in Back Street, our local "Bobby" could nip through Mr Hammond's yard and, with the aid of a Jeep-load of American Military Police, (known as the Snowdrops because of their white helmets), the situation was soon under control. I seem to remember there was at least one GI Bride from the village, who my mother knew, who lived in one of the cottages close to the War Memorial.

It was in either late 1943 or early 1944 that a large troop review was held on the newly built RAF aerodrome adjacent to the road between Barton Mills and Brandon. King George VI took the salute and the village was swamped with military traffic for what seemed like days.

On a bright sunny Sunday in September 1944 the peace of the village was shattered by the sound of hundreds of planes, many of them towing gliders, flying east towards the coast. Unbeknown to us this was the start of one of the biggest airborne operations of the war when the British 1st Airborne Division and the Polish Parachute Brigade were dropped on Arnhem, in north Holland in an attempt to capture the road bridge over the river Rhine. It was hoped that, if successful, this operation might shorten the war by six months but, as we sadly know, it failed, largely to faulty intelligence about the strength of the German forces in the area.

I was away from the village when the war ended so I don't know what sort of celebrations were held on VE Day on 8th May 1945 but I imagine they reflected the national feelings of relief. When the war in the Far East finally ended in August 1945, we celebrated VJ Day while on holiday in Sheringham and, in the Autumn, servicemen were finally able to return to their homes and civilian life once more.