

My War Memories

By Denis Bartlett

I was six when the war started and we lived at the upper end of Snakes Lane about two hundred yards from the fire station. The air raid siren from the fire station seemed to go very frequently, but most of the air raids were over London. One of the first things that I remembered was the Anderson Air Raid shelter being delivered and being put up by my father, with my help of course. A large pit had to be dug in the garden, and then all the steel corrugated panels bolted together around the pit, and the corrugated curved roof panels on top followed by all the earth packed on top and around the sides of the shelter, leaving the front entrance to get in. When there was an air raid on, my father would call me into the garden and we could stand on top of the air raid shelter and watch the German planes over London dropping their bombs. It was very impressive at night with the search lights lighting up the night sky and the German planes and with our Ack-Ack guns firing at them. During the daytime, you could clearly see the bombs leaving the German planes and our fighter planes, the Spitfires, chasing and shooting down many a German plane. Sometimes you could see what they would call 'Dog Fights' going on with our fighter planes and the Germans, and of course it is known that our RAF boys had had an excellent record against them. One time on a night air raid, Dad pointed out to me a parachute with what looked like a black blob on the end floating down in the distance. There was a big explosion, and I later learnt it had fallen behind the Wilfred Lawson Hotel up on the High Road. My father was called up into the army sometime after this, but did not go abroad to fight as he did not pass the required medical, so remained in the UK all the time. Mother and I would sleep under the stairs on an old mattress, which was our only safest place when air raids were on, and a lot warmer than going outside. The normal drill was we would go to bed, and if an air raid siren went we came downstairs until it was over and go back upstairs. At one time, the air raids were continued every night for quite a while, a whole month I believe which was called 'The Blitz' of London, so we just went to bed every night under the stairs. The trouble with the Anderson Shelter or our shelter was it had only had an earth or clay floor, so

it could be damp or be waterlogged, so not very inviting at the best of times. But if done well I think they could sleep up to six if bunk beds were installed. I went to the Woodford Green Junior School until we were transferred to the 'Woodford County High School for Girls' for about a year in mixed classes. The Junior School was being used as a backup Hospital emergency centre. It was when I was back at the Woodford Junior School that an air raid started during lessons, and we were all ushered into a safe part of the building. It was not long before we could hear bombs being dropped. Then this extremely loud screaming noise was heard, getting louder and louder, and I remember feeling quite frightened, as I thought it was going to hit the school. But there was this huge thump to the ground and explosion, but we were all OK. We were all sent home from school, and when I reached the fire station I could see that the bomb had hit the Congregational Church and all the houses had been badly damaged in Broomfield Road. I reached home to find my mother in the kitchen doing some washing, with some of the windows blown out or broken, but she was OK. It was after the second bomb that hit the back gardens of Snakes Lane behind the old church, that our house had sustained more damage, so that my mother and I went to live in Bournemouth with my grandparents. We returned at the end of the war when I was twelve and I started to go to St Barnabas Secondary Modern school. My friend Gordon and family lived in the grounds of the White House on the High Road, Woodford Green and they had 13 bombs dropped in and around the grounds. Gordon's house was of wooden construction and on one air raid a piece of shrapnel went through the wooden wall just above pillow height of Gordon's bed. Fortunately, the bed was empty. It was said that the then Lord Haw-Haw who used to broadcast from Germany had knowledge of the White House and why so many bombs were dropped there. Down the driveway was a lovely big oak tree and a landmine landed in the top canopy of it and completely destroyed it.