

Partridge Green at War

There were a number of major incidents in and around the village. News of a plane that had crashed or crash-landed was always of consuming interest and many would cycle to West Grinstead, Southwater, Henfield, etc. to see a plane on the ground and, hopefully, to be allowed near enough to collect a piece of the aircraft. Perspex from the cockpit hoods and windscreens was a popular collector's item because we could make things from it. Bombs could be heard to drop at night from time to time and the craters in the fields had to be visited the next day with us knowledgeable kids pontificating about whether it was a 50lb. or a 100lb. bomb. Soldiers on manoeuvres in and around the village also caused us great excitement and if we could identify where mortar smoke bombs landed we would get out there as soon as we could to dig up the shell case to keep as a souvenir.

It was in July 1941 when the first structural damage was caused. A Junkers 88 had been tailed by a night fighter from Tangmere and they were hoping to attack it once it was out over the Channel. They feared of losing it, however, and I remember hearing the cannon fire that shot it down. This was followed by engine noise which grew louder and louder and it crashed in the field to the south of Lock Lane, opposite Copyhold. It had no bombs on board but the fuel tanks exploded on impact and the group of houses near what was then the Blacksmith's shop suffered quite a lot of damage. Nobody was injured, other than the plane's crew (I still have the newspaper cuttings of the event). Mrs. Rosemary Sayers and Michael Spooner are probably the only Partridge Green residents who were living in the damaged area at the time.

This event changed our whole way of life from then on. We had always slept through the nights regardless of air raids but now we started getting up. I was, surprisingly, allowed to join my Father and other men pacing up and down in the road (for what purpose I've no idea) while my Mother sat indoors close to the cupboard under the stairs. In the country we had no Anderson shelter in the garden nor a Morrison shelter indoors. The latter was an iron table which served as a dining table and under which many used to sleep at night in the towns. They were, I believe, very effective if ceilings were brought down or a building partly collapsed but, of course, quite useless against a direct hit. It is difficult to believe but from Partridge Green we could frequently see a glow in the sky far to the North which we took to be the fires of London. We used to think we could recognise different plane engine noises and the words of comfort were "It's all right, it's one of ours". We could also hear anti-aircraft fire from the South Coast defences.

These defences were considerable. Whether or not the beaches were mined I do not know but we all believed they were. Along much of the coast metal structures, like scaffolding, were erected at the water line to make it difficult for small boats to land. We never went to the beach during the war; in fact, one had to give a reason to visit a coastal town and every time we visited my Aunt in Hove we were questioned at Hove Station by a policeman. We all had to carry identify cards, of course; my number was ENFM.22.5. The letters denoted the area, our family was number 22 and I was number 5 in the family having 2 elder brothers. What value these cards were I do not know because they were only made of ordinary brown cardboard and must have been the easiest things in the world to forge.

Slogans - we lived with them throughout the war and afterwards for as long as food rationing continued. "Careless talk costs lives": "Eat less bread, eat potatoes instead"; "Wings for Victory"; "Lady Churchill's Aid to Russia Fund". Also the pressure to help the war effort by putting every available pound into National Savings. Stamps could be bought for 6d. (about 2½p) and would then be converted into a 15 shilling (75p) certificate which would become worth £1 after something like 7 years - about 3% compound, I think. There was a sort of moral pressure on children to support this scheme.

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