

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: BEGINNINGS OF WAR

At the conclusion of the First World War, the allies only signed an Armistice with Germany. This is a temporary suspension of hostilities by mutual agreement. Hardly a victory for either side. At the end of the Second World war, Germany ‘Surrendered’ therefore, in fact, totally capitulated. Allowing the Allies to achieve a much ,more satisfactory result compared to the ending of the First World War. It is my view that is why Churchill was so insistent on securing Victory with no Armistice. Also, that is why the high ranking German military officers tried to assassinate Hitler, in order to arrange another armistice with the Allies. After the success of the allied invasion by Overlord after D Day and the rapid advance towards the borders of Germany, they realized that the war was lost for them and they did not want the act of invasion into Germany to occur and an absolute ‘Surrender’. Thus, avoiding embarrassment of their country being conquered and occupied by foreign forces and loss of their national and military pride. In my opinion, it was nothing to do with ending the war to save further blood shed and killing. For sure they had been party to the greatest, wickedest, heinous mass atrocities of war against human kind with resultant killing of innocent men, women and children; including the most prevalent tortures and mayhems the world has ever known. Constantly and consistently they had been obsessed with conquering and subjugating humanity that they considered inferior to themselves.

After the fairly mild winters and dry-fair summers of the 1930s; 1940-41 and 1941-42 winters came in like lions. The coldest, snowiest winters occurred and froze the whole of Northern Europe including Britain. This was one of the conditions that held up the Second World War.

I was able to take advantage of the snow with a flat bottomed Swiss toboggan I acquired from somewhere and spent many happy hours by day and even in the moonlight, tobogganing down the hill in front of West Dean House. When the war was going on, I had a complete run and use of the Park no one stopped me or hindered my use of it. Noone came to stay at the main house and thus ban my freedom of use; although there was a skeleton indoors staff.

Evacuees were sent to the country, to escape the expected bombing of London and some were billeted with villagers and attended our local school but most of them soon went home because no war events occurred.

There were reports of sea borne battles and German attacks on Scandinavian countries but nothing much happened in Britain, until the summer of 1940, which proved to be warm and sunny, allowing clear skies for The Battle of Britain and all its ensuing aircraft confrontations.

There were several village organizations; the Parish Council, which consisted of the Vicar, the Headmaster of the Church of England School and several of the wealthy and influential personages of the village. They saw to it that the condition of public places and roads was reported on to the right authorities; discussed any matter affecting the community and organized village fetes and self-grown produce competitions. Also, they were prominent in matters of the church and particularly the dressing up of the interior of the church with produce at Harvest Festival time. The produce was given to local charities afterwards. In effect they were an extension of the overall population control of the British populace and their behavior.

Another branch of rural organization in the village was the Women's Institute; part of a nationwide group, consisting mostly of wives and single ladies, usually free from the ties of making a home or even perhaps a living. They raised funds by raffles and the sale of produce donated to them. Their funds were often called upon for charitable purposes, such as helping poor people, when notified to them.

The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) also came into being as a result of the Air Raid Precaution Act January the First 1938. (The British Government really were preparing for war two years before it started). The ladies were trained in medical and other public assistance works, relative to war time emergency services. They were allowed to wear distinctive uniforms if they themselves bought them. Otherwise they just wore lapel badges.

The Second World War saw a big advance in radio communications; compared to the relatively new and primitive applications in the First World War. Voice transmissions, Morse code signaling and radio-teleprinter (telex), had become advanced to a point of very sophisticated general use in the military and of course, civilian arenas.

People in general owned radio receivers and could listen to entertainment and politicians speeches; such as: Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain saying in late August 1939: upon returning from a trip to meet Hitler in Germany: "I hold this piece of paper in my hand, signed by Mr. Hitler himself" saying: "I do not intend to invade Poland". Then, from The Cabinet Room he broadcast and admitted: "His long struggle for peace had failed". Hitler's army did invade Poland. So, Prime Minister Chamberlain broadcast further on September the 3rd. 1939: "this

morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed to the German Government a final note stating that, unless we heard from them by 11 o' clock that they were prepared to withdraw at once from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. It is now 11-15 a.m. I have to tell you that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany. Then he said: "You cannot imagine what a bitter blow it is for me that my long struggle to win peace has failed. Yet, I cannot believe that there was anything more or anything different that I could have done and that it would have been more successful". Once again Britain was at war with Germany and another northern-world-hemisphere conflagration with immense loss of human lives commenced. It was an immense sacrifice for Britain to enter this war and I sometimes wonder still if they should have done so.

Second World War events were now rapidly unfolding; PM Chamberlain became a weak Prime Minister in the next few months. The Coalition National British Government was formed May 10, 1940 and Winston Churchill was elected Prime Minister. From then on the populace could hear on the radio his wonderful and stirring speeches. I was one of them who sat close to our His Master's Voice radio set, with the depiction of a Jack Russell terrier dog, to take in his every word. IE: "We shall fight on the beaches and in the fields, we shall fight in the houses and in the streets; we shall never surrender". "I would say to the House (House of Parliament), as I have said to those who have joined this Government; I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. You ask, what is our policy? I will say it is to wage war by land, sea and air, with all our might, with all our strength God can give us; that is our policy". "You ask what is our aim; I can answer in one word: Victory, Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however hard and long the road may be; for without victory there is no survival". After The Battle of Britain: "Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed to so few by so many". Then there was the daily reported progress and happenings of the war. I listened daily to the 6 p.m. BBC Evening News. It always commenced with six 'peeps' of sound and then the deep intoned first bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: "Boom, boom, boom-daah or paraphrased: dit, dit, dit-dah: the Morse Code sound for the letter 'V'. 'V' for victory. Beethoven the German composer and a victory slogan directed at Hitler and Germany. Pretty soon Churchill adopted his characteristic "V" for Victory sign with his fingers. Of course, in the British sense, the reversed hand sign meant something quite different, rude and crude.

‘Lord Haw-Haw’ had a radio channel, broadcasting from Germany. He was the British ‘Traitor’ who went over to the German side and broadcast verbal propaganda tirades, directed toward the British population and their allies. I remember feeling incensed and patriotically antagonistic whenever I listened to him.

By the middle of June 1940, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), after being forced to retreat, to some extent because the French army capitulated, was surrounded at Dunkirk, a port on the North East coast of France. Hundreds of little motor boats, pleasure boats and fishing boats from ports all along the English coast of the English Channel; together with ships of The Royal Navy and Coastguard Service; repeatedly sailed across the treacherous waters and suffered the strafing of German aircraft’s machine guns and bombings; rescuing most of the British military personnel but leaving behind all their armaments and equipment. Large numbers of British aircraft and airmen were also lost, in holding back the German planes and army, to give the British army time to escape. Regrettably, a substantial part of Britain’s fighter plane force was depleted in this effort, most of them Hurricanes. The air battles that then took place were the forerunner of many more in the Battle of Britain.

Spitfires were used for the first time in small numbers at Dunkirk and more so in the Battle of Britain during the summer of 1940. Germany possessed more planes at the beginning of 1940 and easily overcame all opposition in France but over Britain, Field Marshall Hermann Goering, the head of the Luftwaffe during The Battle of Britain, totally underestimated the skill and determination of the British fighter pilots and the efficiency of their fighter planes, particularly the Spitfire. The Germans nearly always lost more planes than the British in confrontations. Contributions of other factors noted elsewhere, such as the breaking of the Enigma code, Radar (RDF) and the speed and maneuverability of the British fighter planes all helped.

In June 1940 Benito Mussolini, Il Duce, declared war on France and Britain and invaded Greece; looking for easy conquests, on the side of Germany.

Actually, during the 1939 to 1940 winter very little of a war nature was noticeable to us in Britain. It was a “lull before the storm”. Sometime during the late summer of 1940 we began to hear and read reports about German bombing raids on London, there was a really bad ‘Fire Storm’ raid on Coventry and nearer to us on Portsmouth; plus some other city centres. Very few strategic targets were reported being attacked. They were trying to drain the morale of the British

people. One day my Mother went to the local town of Chichester for shopping, the air raid sirens sounded the alarm and she sheltered in the bomb reinforced Assembly Rooms. Bombs did then fall on the nearby 'Shambles' residential area, including St. Martin's Street and some town houses were destroyed and people were killed and injured. The almost nightly bombing of British cities went on until the middle of 1941; the heaviest hit by far being London. Hitler's bombing concentration was mainly on non strategic targets, chiefly on the civilian population but the strong will of the people was never broken.

At the farm we nightly heard the drone of German bombers passing overhead on their way to London and some circling around near us to attack the main British Navy dockyard at Portsmouth. This was heavily protected with Bofors (Ack Ack) anti aircraft guns and phalanxes of Pom Pom guns hidden in the Southdown Hills around us. Often at night searchlights would latch on to an enemy aircraft, making it shine like a polished piece of silver metal. The plane would dodge and weave to escape the lights but by then other searchlights locked on to the plane from different locations and angles and a great barrage of explosions would then erupt from anti aircraft guns, with flashes near the intruding aircraft. I remember the high pitched dying whine of the aircraft engines if they were lucky enough to hit and bring the plane down.

Even though we were about fifteen miles in a direct line from Portsmouth; German bomber planes circled around near us to attack from the rear of Portsmouth: we could hear the bombardment it was suffering and the reply of the anti aircraft guns. Their explosive flashes lit up the night sky every night for hours on end. Many nights I sat up in a tree house I had built in a plum tree next to our house; which I called my OP (Operation's Post) and watched these events.

Portsmouth and other British cities, had additional protection and defenses from something called 'Barrage Balloons'; these were small silver coloured blimps, tethered with a steel wire and designed to slice the enemy aircraft if it collided with the wire. Sometimes a loose Barrage Balloon on the South West prevailing-winds would fly over the farm, hopefully, detached by an enemy aircraft flying into it. Eventually, a British fighter plane would be dispatched to shoot it down over open country. The loose and dangling steel wire tether was extremely dangerous to people and property.

German words used in war started to creep into the English dialogue and vocabulary. IE: blitz, blitzkrieg, (large bombing attacks) schrapnel (pieces of metal from exploded munitions), achtung Schpitfeur (look out Spitfire fighter plane).

The Vickers Armstrong Super Marine Spitfire designed by Reginald Mitchell, was undoubtedly the most successful and indeed superior fighter plane of the first part of the Second World War. It had extraordinary success against the German fighter planes. The British Hawker Hurricane was a slower and less agile plane. It was, of course, older in concept and design than the Spitfire; more on a par with its contemporary the Fokker Wolf. The Messerschmitt ME 109 was almost equal to the Spitfire but not as fast.

The Spitfire model used in the Battle of Britain had superbly designed armament. Four Browning .303 calibre machine guns were mounted in each wing; these were aligned at angles in such a way that the bullets came together at precisely a 250 yard point ahead. Firing at 1200 bullets a minute; no aircraft attacked could survive such a concentrated onslaught, when accurately administered. It was said that some of the best British fighter pilots were sons of farmers and aristocrats, who were used to handling and firing shot guns, when the principal of 'point and shoot' at moving game such as pheasant, partridge and grouse was necessary. Pilots were often distinguished in aerial combat because of these innate skills. The British fighter plane Ace, Group Captain Douglas Bader was one of these extraordinary pilots; he was stationed at nearby Tangmere aerodrome for Spitfires. His fame was more extraordinary because he had two prosthetic legs; gained from an accident before the war; anyway, he passed all qualifications and became a wartime pilot, engaging the enemy during the Battle of Britain. Later in the war he was shot down over the European Continent, captured and imprisoned by the Germans. Interestingly, both of his prosthetic legs were damaged in the crash and a message was sent back to Britain via The Red Cross and Switzerland requesting new false legs. These were subsequently parachuted in to his internment camp in Germany and arrived safely, an amazing charitable event carried out between the warring parties. Tangmere was part of the 11 Group fighter Command, which extended all over the South East of England.