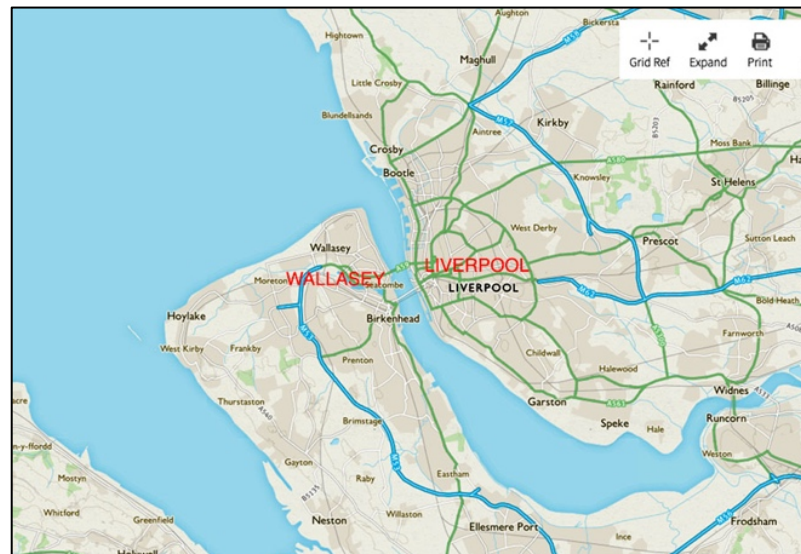


My Personal History of Wartime Britain

Inspired by reading Donald Forney's unique Personal History of Pearl Harbor

Terry Ronald

I had not known of Don's story until I received his written personal history report and pictures. As it happens, it has a special impact on me, for I had a parallel experience in about the same time frame when I was a youngster during the war in Britain. I'd not thought much about it in the many intervening years, but seeing his description has caused me to write about my own personal memories of being in a place that was a prime target of military action. I was too young to have a detailed recall of the period, but I suppose that nevertheless, many experiences of being there at such a time of conflict become imprinted in the memory. Some of what I describe in this narrative is the result of my own recall and the fireside reminiscing of my family, some comes from historical records.



I was born and raised in the town of Wallasey, situated about half way up the west coast of Britain. In the context of this story, its main significance is that it lies on the river Mersey, at the point where this major river enters the Irish Sea. The coast of Wallasey faces the waterfront of the city of Liverpool, directly across the river. The Mersey is quite wide, even at that point perhaps a mile or more. In my later years attending the University of Liverpool, I can say I took the ferry across the Mersey every day until I eventually moved to live in Liverpool itself.

Growing up, our home was situated about a mile from the waterfront and close to the shipping docks that existed on both sides of the river. In that period, Liverpool was noted for its extensive shipbuilding facilities, and also it was, and still is, a major gateway for ships and product shipping to the world, especially the US. At the time of the war, there were about eleven miles of docks along the Liverpool waterfront, together with an almost equal number on the Wallasey side, and it was the headquarters for the battle of the Atlantic.

Once the war started—in the fall of 1939 for Britain—it became clear that the docks and associated railway yards and infrastructure would probably be a prime target for German bombers. Though Liverpool is on the west coast, and it was a much further reach for German aircraft than cities such as London in the south, it was not impossible that bombers could reach that far. I was very young at the outbreak of war, and I can barely remember it starting, but by the time the Germans started routinely bombing Liverpool in 1942, I was five years old. Despite my young age at the time, I guess the impact of war has remained quite clear in my memory, given the turmoil of just trying to cope with daily life in that era.



For the first nine months after war was declared, there was no enemy action of any significance, but the country started preparations for its defense. Bomb shelters were built. Emergency water tanks for fire-fighting were installed. Volunteers were trained to fight fires. Searchlights and barrage balloons were distributed around the towns and cities. The population was educated about the need to have blackout conditions and to make sure windows were taped to minimize

glass damage in the event of bombing. Women were trained to take over industrial jobs in place of the men who went into the military services. First-aid centers were established. In addition, active defenses in the form of anti-aircraft guns were placed in key locations, and fighters were based at surrounding air fields.



It was in that first year of the war that—like many other kids—I was evacuated to a safer area away from the danger. In my case, I ended up living with a farm family in a village called Dolgellau in the countryside of North Wales, where there was little likelihood of the war reaching there. I remember being put on a train, with lots of other kids, having our regulation gas masks on straps around our necks, carrying a bag of our belongings, with a label attached to the button of our coat to identify us and indicate where we were to be taken. The memory of that time in Wales—on a farm that had lots of cows and sheep—has stayed with me as a fun period with friendly stand-in parents. I didn't know it at the time, but I had the luxury of fresh eggs, bacon, butter and milk. In the rest of the country, rationing had come about, because of the inability to import goods into the country and the need to provide supplies to the expanded military. I've always wished in later years that I could have gone back to visit the farm, but it never came about.

After a few weeks in Wales, my mother decided I should come back home to her, in part because there had not been any significant enemy action at that point, and in part because she was the only family member left at home, other than my grandmother. My father was away working on passenger liners that had been converted into supply ships that crossed the Atlantic. My two uncles were in the navy. One of them was stationed on a minesweeper that travelled with convoys to Russia through the north Atlantic; the other was on an aircraft carrier that ended up mainly in the Pacific war. One of my aunts had enlisted in the army and was stationed in the south of England, driving military ambulances; another aunt worked in the shipyards, operating a

crane; the remaining one worked in an ammunition factory. My mother was basically the only one not in a formal organization, though she worked with the local home guard auxiliary, driving vehicles. Her need to have me near her outweighed concerns of safety, but her decision was bolstered by the prevalent general feeling that war action was not really reaching our part of the country. As soon became apparent, this complacency was totally replaced by grim reality.



The first bombing actually didn't come about until August 1940. The very first attacks included a group of seven high explosives that fell on Wallasey, causing 32 casualties and the kind of damage shown above. Throughout that August there was sporadic bombing, but in September until late November, there were almost continuous raids. Although the targets were the docks, much of the destruction occurred to buildings and homes outside the main target areas. While almost all the enemy action consisted of bombing, there was at least one known strafing attack. We were out of the range of enemy fighters, but in October a solitary German bomber swooped in on a bus carrying a number of women factory workers home. Hearing the rattle of machine gun bullets, the driver accelerated and swerved to the opposite side of the road. A passenger recalled hearing the sound of bullets spattering the roof. The bus reached a nearby shelter and the occupants ran for safety as the plane turned around to come back.



It turned out that this initial period of bombing, bad though it was, was merely the prelude to a much more intense bombing campaign that started on the night of 1 May 1941 and continued for many months. Nightly attacks usually involved hundreds of bombers arriving in waves and dropping their weapons over a period of hours at a time. That first evening in May, Wallasey was again the recipient of the first bomb dropped. After that, bombing became an almost daily occurrence. Two significant and newer tactics on the part of the enemy in that period started to create much greater concern. One was the use of incendiary bombs, intended to start widespread fires; the other was the dropping of large land mines that floated down on parachutes. The latter were particularly hazardous, in part because of their great size, but in part because if they did not detonate on impact, they had a clockwork mechanism set to a time delay that would cause it to detonate at some indeterminate time later. The one above landed not too far from our home. It was said that if you were close enough to one of them and you could hear a ticking sound, you should run like hell away from it!

Once a night of destruction was over, the day following would be filled with armies of personnel continuing to put out fires, clearing debris, pulling out survivors or taking the dead for burial, refilling water tanks, clearing a path for rescue vehicles, taking the wounded to the hospitals that were still undamaged, providing food using mobile canteens, and doing whatever could be done to prepare for the next night's onslaught. One unfortunate side-effect of the anti-aircraft fire was that what goes up must inevitably come down, and there was occasional damage discovered that resulted from falling ordnance that exploded on the ground.



I can't say I was afraid through all of this—at least, in my recollection—but I can remember what it was like to live in those times. Like many other families, we had an Anderson bomb shelter built in our back yard, like the one above left. Named after Sir John Anderson, the man

responsible for preparing Britain to withstand German air raids, it was constructed of sheets of corrugated metal that formed a small chamber that could hold up to six people. It was covered with a layer of soil for added impact resistance. We could go there for protection from the side effects of potential bomb damage—flying shrapnel and other objects. In addition to these small shelters, there were larger, structurally stronger communal street shelters like the one above right, each capable of holding as many as fifty people. They had benches along each wall to sit on or sleep on while waiting for the bombing be over. These were widely used during the bombing raids, and they became more like community gathering places, with singing, card playing and other kinds of entertainment that could while away the hours spent hoping nothing would fall nearby.

Anyone who lived through those times, even us kids, could never in later life forget the air raid sirens. When a raid was predicted in the area, the sirens would start up with their undulating wailing sound that echoed across the town. Those wails are forever associated with bad news. The more welcome sound was the all-clear sirens; they had a constant sound to distinguish them from the up and down volume of the warning kind. During the raids, the sound of bombs exploding could be heard, usually in the distance—a sound I remember—but sometimes a bomb would land nearby with a huge explosion that made it evident that major local damage could be expected. I have to say that even today, I still have a bit of a chill when I hear a siren tested. The all-clear would be the signal to go out from the shelters to see what damage had happened during the raid. For some reason, almost all of the raids took place at night, so it was usually in the morning daylight that the extent of the damage would be visible.

Though most of the bombs were aimed at the dock areas and rail yards, sometimes a stray bomb would land elsewhere. One of these in fact dropped so close to our home that the ensuing structural damage meant we had to relocate to a different home in the town. As I said earlier, I don't recall being afraid, but I was young and so perhaps not truly appreciating what was happening. Like other kids, I would go out in the mornings to look for shrapnel—the jagged fragments of casings left over from exploded bombs. In this respect, I was like Don Forney, who did the same thing after Pearl harbor. Who knows—it's possible that we might have been collecting the same things at the same time on different sides of the globe! More than that, I like to think it's why I ended up being a metallurgist in later life.

One special memory of those years was the we're-all-in-this-together, help-each-other sense of common bonding that was characteristic of those times of incredible stress. Neighbors and strangers would help one another, especially those who were displaced by bomb damage and were trying to recover belongings from the remains of their home. My late aunt Winifred always told the tale of emerging from a shelter one morning after a raid to see a piano sitting upright in the midst of a pile of bricks that had been a home. Sitting at the piano was a gentleman playing it, who called out “good morning,” as though it was the most natural thing in the world to be doing, even when there was still smoke in the air from the fires of the night. My mother often told the story of the car she was using being damaged by flying debris. She was more distressed by the loss of a fur coat that was in the car than about the car itself!



Another recollection of those times was standing in the doorway of our home one evening watching searchlight beams in the sky, waving around trying to illuminate any low flying aircraft. Also, barrage balloons were a common site. These grey, elephant-looking hydrogen-filled monsters floated high up on the ends of steel cables and were scattered around the town, preventing aircraft from flying at low levels. A common and incessant sound came from the anti-aircraft guns that were in use during the raids. Records show that many enemy bombers were shot down by RAF fighters or ground gunfire, at least one crashing in Wallasey. A defense tactic used in an attempt to minimize damage was to light fires in the countryside outside the Liverpool area. These attracted bomb drops that would otherwise have landed on Merseyside.





On the worst night of all, on 3 May 1941, an armada of over 300 German planes pounded the city and surrounding areas. Fighter aircraft and the anti-aircraft barrage destroyed 16 enemy planes, but the destruction on the ground during the hours of 10:30pm to 5am left a charred waste of bricks and debris. In Liverpool, hundreds of buildings were damaged or destroyed, including shops, businesses, homes, blocks of apartments, cinemas, theatres, schools, hospitals, churches, pubs and many public buildings. The city center was essentially flattened, including time-honored landmark museums, libraries and government buildings. Ships anchored at the docks and in the river were bombed and sunk. An ammunition-loaded vessel in one of the docks was hit by a stray hydrogen-filled barrage balloon that then caught fire and caused the ship to blow up, creating the largest single explosion of the war, destroying a whole dockside and its buildings, despite the efforts to put out the fire. The explosion threw heavy metal plates for more than two miles, one of which killed a couple driving their car. One of the well-known Mersey ferries was sunk. As one writer has noted, the list of famous buildings destroyed read like a visitor's guide to Liverpool.



The records show that Liverpool was the second most bombed city in the country after London. The numbers are stark: 3875 killed in the whole Liverpool area, including 355 in Wallasey. In just a single week in 1941, at the height of the attacks, 800 airplanes dropped 2000 bombs and started 1200 fires; 90,000 houses were damaged or destroyed. Recognizing the dire situation, Winston Churchill visited during this period to acknowledge the sacrifices made by the population and to rally the residents and troops. He's pictured above in Wallasey.



For the remaining three years of the war, and for a long time afterwards, there were reminders of the events of that period in the form of damaged buildings that had yet to be rebuilt. I used to play with friends in the grounds of one of them across the street from my stepfather's service station. It contained the shell of a large old mansion called Darley Dene that was taken over by the army at the outbreak of war. A direct hit on it in 1941 caused the deaths of seventeen soldiers. As she would relate afterwards, my mother was on hand to give help with the surviving soldiers and responders, providing tea and sandwiches.



These days, except for marks on older buildings here and there that are the enduring scars of the devastation, one would not know that anything untoward had happened. Liverpool has been rebuilt extensively, as have other cities, but as a memorial in the center of town, St. Luke's Church has been left as it was after it was damaged by an incendiary device carried by a parachute. It has just its outer walls standing, and is maintained that way to this day with the open interior turned into a garden of remembrance.

As one of the many social side effects of the war, it took years to regain access to many of the products in life that had been considered normal before it started. The rationing of food and many other goods that was introduced in 1940 didn't end completely until 1954. Among the rationed items were bacon, butter, sugar, tea, jam, cheese, eggs, milk, canned fruit, cereals, meat and gasoline. It was only in 1953 that sugar rationing ended. This was of a particular delight to me because until then our ration books allowed us only a quarter pound of sweets (candies) a week. My first exposure to bananas, oranges and pineapples came well after the war, when imports finally started to arrive again. Ice cream was a novel delicacy that I'd been told about but had never tasted.



So that's my story that makes me relate so much to Don Forney's description. He was at the very center of the event that catalyzed America's involvement in the world conflict, and clearly that is a truly remarkable, unique experience. My account is just one of thousands of similar ones that could be told of a country that was under siege for a long period of time, but I nevertheless feel an affinity with the similarities of his and my boyhood experiences. Somewhere inside all of us, however, no matter how young we were at the time, remain the long-term memories—even though they are not necessarily photographically sharp—of an indelible, formative period of our lives.