

## **Amy Coburn wartime (WW2) memories**

It was the 14th of May, 1940. Mother, Father and I were anxiously listening to the wireless as we had learned that an important announcement was to be made that evening. The voice of the Home Secretary, Mr Anthony Eden, came over the air-waves announcing that a Local Defence Volunteer Force was to be formed and that those who wished to volunteer should report immediately to their local police station. Almost before he had finished speaking my father rose from his chair and prepared to leave for the local police station not far from our home in Marford, Wheathampstead, a village in rural Hertfordshire. When he returned a little later Mother and I knew that he was just a little disappointed that he was not the first to report, as a man who lived nearer the police station had been first to arrive to volunteer his services.

Within a few days Father had an arm-band with L.D.V. printed on it and, if memory serves me correctly, a rifle, which Mother flatly refused to have in the house. The rifle was safely kept out of sight in the coal barn next to the back door of our home.

By July 1940 the L.D.V had been renamed the Home Guard. Father now had a uniform bearing one stripe, a service gas-mask and a tin hat. Father had served in the 1914/1918 War in the Royal Artillery, indeed his kit-bag was still around with his number 68586, 209 Siege Battery stencilled upon it. His puttees tucked into the rafters of the garden shed had proved to be a snug nesting site for a robin. The 'last' war was, in 1940, a very recent memory to those who had served in it. After all it was only a mere 20 years since Father had been decommissioned having served in the occupation in Egypt after hostilities ceased.

Parades, exercises and arms instruction soon became a part of life. The headquarters of the Home Guard in Wheathampstead were in the stables at the rectory — long since demolished for new houses. Various 'posts' — 'look-outs' — were established around the village perimeter and I helped Father in the construction of one on the corner of Dyke Lane opposite the Nelson public house at, as then we knew it, Old Marford. Together Father and I dragged a large sheet of tin, once part of a shed, across two fields and a road, to form the roof of the dugout; later this was covered with turf. It was to this 'post' that Father had to go when the air-raid warning siren sounded. The air-raid warning caused a problem. Should Father take his uniform, rifle etc., with him when he went to work each morning?

I should perhaps explain the nature of Father's work. He was the manager of the sewage works which were some distance across fields from our home in Necton Road.

This problem was solved during that summer of 1940 when the Battle of Britain was being fought in the skies over our country. The long school holiday meant I was at home for several weeks, also when we were at school it was only for half a day as the evacuees who had come to our village from London shared our school, St. Helen's, not, may I add, a very satisfactory arrangement for any of us.

So it was that during those weeks a thirteen-year-old girl was called to do her bit towards the war effort. If I was at home when the air-raid warning sounded I grabbed uniform, rifle, the bandolier of 60 rounds of ammunition, and ran as quickly as I could to meet Father halfway across a field. He would have his gas mask and tin hat with him. I had been shown how to carry the rifle, carefully balanced, with the ammo over my shoulder. Father donned the

uniform over his overalls, took up his rifle and hastened to his 'post' — usually by the time I reached home again the All Clear was sounding!

Because Father had no assistant he showed me how, in case of emergency and he was unable to return to the 'works', to stop the engine, a 121/2 HP Crossly in the pump house, turn off the filter beds and open sluices when necessary. This was in the days before health and safety was even thought necessary, but as far as I was concerned it was merely what everyone was doing — getting on with what was necessary to do at such a time. And after all it was rather nice being considered responsible enough to be entrusted with this duty.

During the nights of these months there were many air raid alerts, it was decided that the best option was to sleep downstairs. A feather bed was put under the dining room table each evening for the sake of comfort. The nights when Father was on Home Guard duty Mother and I were on our own. When Father returned in the early hours of the morning after being on duty he slept in the summer house in the garden to save disturbing us. There were many nights when we watched as searchlights swept the sky, and at times we heard the distant sound of anti-aircraft fire, and the crump of a distant bomb. We heard too the distinctive drone of enemy planes as they passed overhead on their way to the Midlands. The morning paper would tell of a city 'somewhere in the Midlands' that had suffered casualties and damage.

Father enjoyed being in the Home Guard. Apart from the night-time duty rosters, there were parades, some to church on a Sunday, or special occasions like Wings for Victory Week, Salute the Soldier Week. These events were run to encourage people to buy Saving the Certificates for the War Effort; also there was the camaraderie of 'army life' once again. Three stripes now graced Father's arm, one up from being a corporal in the R.A., later he was promoted to platoon sergeant wearing a badge over the three stripes. Mother polished his badges and made sure that he was well 'turned out' when going on parade. We heard of a hair-raising moment in the H.Q. when someone accidentally fired a rifle which luckily was pointed at the ceiling at the time, even so no doubt a few hearts stood still. There were laughable moments when on manoeuvres; various members of the Company ended up in a dung heap in a farmyard when trying to outwit the 'enemy' — Home Guards from the next village. We knew, although it was a 'secret', of hoards of Molotov cocktails hidden in boxes in strategic places around the village behind walls and hedges ready to use to attack any German should they be unwise enough to set foot on our soil.

We were fortunate in that not many bombs fell in the village itself, although two did fall in the churchyard of St. Helen's Church. One had the strange effect of sending a quantity of liquid chalk over the churchyard wall into Church Street, spraying the roadway white. The other fell on the north side of the church just behind the graves of my grandparents, moving their gravestones several inches and bringing down the cross on one. This bomb, not far from the vestry door of the church, disturbed the remains of several graves, among them that of my great-great-grandparents. The day following, Father and another villager filled in the crater making all respectable and reverent again. The north window of Lamer aisle, the north transept in the church was badly damaged; what a pity as this was a very pleasant stained glass window that has never been replaced.

A few incendiaries fell around the village, their remains becoming trophies, which boys brought to school together with pieces of a plane that had crashed. Later, towards the end of

the war there was a night when a strange plane was heard to 'cut out' followed by an explosion. It was a while before we knew that this was one of the flying bombs — 'Doodlebugs' — that had fallen in a field not far from Amwell. Later we learned that it was one of the first to arrive on our shores.

Mother and I were in Luton one afternoon there was a raid. We were in Woolworth's store at the time. Mother refused to go down in the shelter, so we sat with members of staff and other customers on the floor under a counter. We heard the sound of bombs, the wail of fire-engines and ambulances and waited anxiously for the 'All Clear' to sound. Later that afternoon when we wanted to return home, we were told when we reached Luton LNER railway station that there had been damage to the railway track and that the Vauxhall factory had been the target. We waited some time with would-be passengers and were eventually taken by bus to Harpenden Station where a train was waiting for us to complete our journey back to Wheathampstead. By this time it was late evening and we knew without doubt that by now Father would be quite concerned for our safety as he knew that we had intended to go to Luton that afternoon. It was no surprise therefore to find him waiting at the station. He was not a little relieved that his wife and daughter had returned unharmed.

During the war we did not have any evacuees billeted on us, instead we had a gentleman, who was a 'messenger' with the Eastern Command who had taken over one of the larger houses in the village, Garden House. There were also a number of soldiers and ATS girls stationed in the village. Mr Whysall, an ex-serviceman, with a waxed moustache and very upright bearing, every inch an ex-soldier, was with us for some time. He never mentioned anything about his work, and we knew better than to ask — after all everyone knew 'Careless Talk Costs Lives.'

Father continued to serve in the Home Guard until the time came for the 'Stand Down' order to be given. There was a parade in London to which we all went when we watched the King take the salute from the men who had served their country by being in the Home Guard. I believe this took place in Park Lane.

Father kept his uniform, which is now at the Museum of St. Albans, complete with badges. He received, as did all those who served in the Home Guard, a citation of thanks from a grateful country. The men who volunteered for the Home Guard did so in full knowledge of what the war was all about, for many had served in 1914/18. They were ready to die for King and country, for their homes and families and for the right to be free from tyranny.

Several group photographs exist of these men proudly wearing their uniforms. These photographs record for all time men who were ready to face the enemy if they had dared to invade our shores.

Nothing written about wartime would be complete without a mention of rationing. Perhaps as a family we were more fortunate than some. Father grew vegetables, which he sold, so there was always plenty for his own table. He kept poultry as well; eggs had to be sent to the packing station, otherwise there was no poultry food allowance. This did not mean that we had an unlimited supply of eggs — no way — the eggs that came to our table were usually over- or under-sized ones, cracked or else not suitable for sending to the packing station for which they had to be wiped clean or there would be a deduction in the price paid. Father could have made a 'bit on the side', but this he refused to do. It was against his principles.

He grew onions by the hundredweight, and had to impose his own 'rationing' system by only letting his regular 'clients' buy sufficient for their own needs. Onions became almost a luxury item of food. He fattened a few cockerels for the Christmas dinner table and a few chosen friends — and just occasionally, as a special treat, we had an old hen for dinner who was past laying. We kept rabbits in redundant hen houses, again selling some to the few chosen clients. There was plenty of green stuff from the vegetables for their feed. All in all, with a mother who was a good and very economical cook, we did not do too badly. Also there were mushrooms to gather, together with wild strawberries, raspberries and blackberries in due season. There were also apples and plums, and the extra sugar allowed when jam-making time came round was taken full advantage of. When one remembers that food rationing and shortages generally continued long after the war was over, and that it was 1952/3 before ration books were no longer needed, we had a lot of time to get used to making do. When ration books were finally dispensed with I was married with a small son. I left school in 1941 to work at Roche Products in Welwyn Garden City where I stayed until I was married in 1949. For me, wartime was part of my growing-up years and taken as a matter of course — after all it was no good complaining, there were many people in a far worse situation and one just got on with what life had to offer and made the best of it.