

A Child in WWII

The remarkable generation that won WWII are all but gone. We, the children of WWII, now in our 80's and 90's, are the last to witness first hand, their endurance, their losses, their victories and the sacrifices they made for my generation and every generation since, in a war where every single person in this country was on the firing line.

The first memory I have is of the bombing of Plymouth. Must have been no more than four. In the middle of the night, listening to the bombs screaming down, exploding, destroying houses, workplaces, even air raid shelters; killing men, women and children all around us. But I thought I was safe, always lying under an upturned sofa. What would possibly go wrong?

Family life was broken. Our fathers were away from home. For much of the war I lived with our grandmother, three of her daughters, three children and two evacuees from Europe – all in a moderate 3-bed semi in Torbay. I possibly saw my father briefly five or six times during the whole war. Many never saw their fathers at all, for they were serving overseas, POW's or had already given their lives for us.

We were with grandma in June 1944, at the time of D-Day - surrounded by thousands of Canadian and US troops, hundreds of vehicles and tons of munitions and equipment. On a rainy night, A young Canadian Officer knocked on our door. He asked grandma if his platoon could pitch their tents in the garden. Grandma said no, they could sleep in the house. When I came down in the morning, all the floor was khaki with resting men in uniform. Weaponry everywhere. They were in the early twenties, very friendly and chatted away to us kids. Within 72 hours, of the twenty or so who had stayed with us, fourteen had been killed in action, drowned, blown up or shot on Omaha beach. A terrible memory, that is still with me to today.

Grandma opened the house in the afternoons to Polish airmen based close by. Some had terrible burns and injuries but fought on. We should never forget the bravery and sacrifice of the Poles and Czechs, without whom we could well have lost the Battle of Britain, and consequently, the war.

May 8th 1945 – VE Day – what celebrations! I was six. Mum and I were back in Plymouth. We walked two miles to the Hoe for one of the biggest dances of the War. Thousands of service men and women and civilians dancing to military bands well into the night. Searchlights playing in the sky, occasionally lighting up low flying aircraft taking part in the celebrations. Ships fired off maroons and flares. Truly a night to remember.

But that was not the end of WWII. It would continue for 3 more months until Japan surrendered. Thousands more would die or be severely injured and mentally scarred before it came to an end on 15th August.

We had endured the blackout, severe rationing and restrictions. You never left anything on your plate in those days! It was over a year after the war before we knew what ice cream and bananas tasted like. But grandma used to make us Minto's from dried milk and mint flavouring. Never tasted a better sweet since!

It was not until 1947/48 that I came face-to-face with 'the enemy'. A group of German POW's were engaged in cutting a path through a wood to put in power lines up to our then house on the edge of Dartmoor. Mum would make tea and cakes which I, then eight or nine, would take to them. A couple spoke good English. We would sit on tree stumps chatting. I once showed them a lump of shrapnel from one of the bombs they dropped on Plymouth. The day they finished, they asked their guard if they could come to the house to say goodbye to us. They were decent men, not very different from the Canadians who were with us prior to D-Day.

Go away from today, remembering what the WWII generation did for us – the Servicemen, Servicewomen and the Civilians who often found themselves in frightening and dangerous situations, but carried on regardless. Keep alive the memory of those in your families who played a part in giving us the freedom we have today. Commit it to paper. Tell your children, grandchildren and great grandchildren about the ones you knew and talked to.

Without what they gave, life for us would have become horrendous. Many of you would not have had a life at all. We owe them so much.

They must never be forgotten.