

IS IT ONE OF OURS?

Shirley was a dangerous place to be in the summer of 1940. We were in a very vulnerable position, for Croydon Aerodrome, where Hurricane and Spitfire squadrons were now stationed, was only a few miles away, as were the famous Biggin Hill and Kenley airfields. As Hitler's object was to destroy as many British aircraft on the ground as possible, we were in the middle of some prime targets. And not only was the RAF the object of attack, but the many factories in and around Croydon attracted the Luftwaffe's attention. These were now producing munitions and aircraft parts and were also on Hitler's list for destruction.

I was glad it was holiday time and I didn't to have to get up early and go to school when the interminable night raids began – that would have been really hard. Yawning our way through lessons that failed to have any impact on account of the sheer exhaustion of both pupils and teachers would have been counter-productive. We snatched a few hours' sleep whenever possible, waking with a start to what was becoming a very regular sound. The wailing of the siren became a familiar interruption to our day. We would hear the telephone bell ring in the police box on the corner, and we knew that we must stand by, for if it rang a second time the siren would give the warning to take cover, as enemy aircraft were approaching. That ominous wailing was really an awesome sound; even after all these years I have only to hear an air raid siren in an old wartime film and a shiver runs down my spine. It immediately evokes the atmosphere of those extraordinary times – feelings of dread, yet tinged with excitement, and the camaraderie of both neighbours

and complete strangers as we hurried into the shelter together. There were many jokes, of course – mainly about Hitler or Goering, some fairly rude, and all calculated to raise our spirits and morale. If we risked taking the bus for a quick shopping trip to Croydon, and there was suddenly an air raid warning, we'd have to find the nearest shelter there. Many of these were under ground, which I found unpleasantly claustrophobic. During those days of frequent raids it was better not to be far from home, and the shops in Shirley provided pretty well all we really needed. One morning Olga was taking Tess for a walk when the sound of approaching machine gun fire made her leap under a hedge, dragging the dog with her as a stray Stuka roared by, presumably on its way back from Biggin Hill. All the other people in the street had taken similar action, and everyone was badly shaken by the experience. Olga arrived home trembling and terrified. What justification could there possibly be for targeting innocent civilians in this way? And what devilish mind had ordered the installation of a screaming siren on the Stuka to strike terror into the victims as they were dive-bombed? We hated Hitler more than ever – if that were possible.

Some of my friends had Anderson shelters in their gardens, constructed by their fathers. These were made from sheets of corrugated iron, bolted together overhead, another sheet (with an entrance) for the front, and one for the back. They measured six feet by four feet six inches, and were reckoned to accommodate six people – obviously a tight squeeze. A suitably sized hole had to be dug for these shelters, so they were largely below ground, often with turves laid over the roofs, and consequently largely camouflaged. Some keen gardeners grew flowers or even vegetables on top of their Anderson. There were two or three steps down into the interior, which was usually damp, dismal and full of spiders and in very wet weather they could become flooded, which was a definite disadvantage. But people made them as comfortable as they could, with makeshift bunks, cushions and blankets, and of course a supply of books and crosswords. Candles provided

meagre light during a night raid, and torches were at the ready, carefully shielded to suppress any glimmer which might call forth the dreaded “Put that light out!” from a passing warden. Oil lamps were frowned upon, as they posed a fire risk in such a confined space. Thermos flasks of tea and tins of biscuits were an essential part of the equipment needed to sit through an air raid, night or day. There is no doubt that Anderson shelters saved many lives, though they obviously could not have survived a direct hit.

We didn't have an Anderson, so when the siren sounded we would gather up anything we needed and go across the road to take cover in a large surface shelter, which was conveniently opposite our house. This was a rectangular structure, with walls several bricks thick, a concrete floor and a reinforced concrete roof. We told each other we'd be perfectly safe there, though in actual fact, as with the Anderson, a direct hit would have completely flattened the shelter. However, it provided good protection from blast, flying glass splinters and shrapnel, and to be with other people was reassuring. It was pretty comfortable, with wooden seats round the walls – not much fun if you'd been hauled out of a comfortable bed, fast asleep, wrapped in your dressing gown and a blanket, and rushed to this inhospitable refuge for goodness knows how long. Or maybe you were just stepping into a lovely hot bath (only *five* inches of water, remember) and had to pull out the plug furiously, cursing Hitler and his gang, and hurry across the road instead. Night time was the worst; everyone was tired – there had probably been several raids already during the day, and all you longed for was an interrupted night's sleep. We welcomed rainy, misty days and nights, as the Luftwaffe gave us a rest during such weather conditions, but the summer of 1940 seemed to be an unusually fine one. There were days when the 'all clear' (a long, even note on the siren) sounded the end of an 'alert', only to be followed shortly afterwards by yet another warning, and this went on throughout the day – and sometimes the night as well. You'd probably only just put the kettle on, and there it was again. These warnings were not

always followed by an actual raid – they meant that enemy aircraft were approaching in our direction. There were many airfields in the south east and Croydon was not always the target, though during August Biggin Hill was bombed constantly. But the signal to take cover was certainly not to be ignored, as very often the distinctive sound of German aircraft could be heard approaching soon after the siren sounded, followed by the frightening noise of bombs exploding, sometimes uncomfortably near. There was no doubt that the German bombers sounded completely different from our own; the engines produced a regular, throbbing note which we could easily identify. During the day we would hear the comforting sound of the Merlin engines of our Spitfires and Hurricanes as they moved in to attack, and this always provoked a cheer from the occupants of the shelter.

I think night raids were the worst. Not being able to go to bed – a novelty at first for us children – became very trying, and in the darkness the roar of the bombers seemed more menacing as they advanced relentlessly, regardless of the searchlights that criss-crossed the night sky. In those early stages of the war there were no night fighters to deter them. A mobile anti-aircraft gun was stationed in Wickham Road and would tear up and down firing with deafening regularity. I don't suppose it achieved very much, but we felt we were being protected. And of course there was plenty of shrapnel to find next day – we children competed with one another to find the largest or most interesting piece. Some of us had quite a collection.

What a motley crew assembled each night in the shelter! The Clark family from next door were there, of course, with Bonnie the dog. Pets could not be left alone in the house to endure the noise of the raid, terrified and vulnerable, so they accompanied their owners as part of the family. Mrs Clark, in her pink hairnet, was laden with so many supplies that you would have thought she was there for the 'duration'. Mr Clark either retired behind his newspaper, reading out selected reports on the progress of the war