**The Fury and Might of the Enemy**

Mr Grimes rang the bell, and relief flooded over me. Class 5B got up in unison, the screech of chairs along the cellar floor signalled the end of the school day.  Not that we learnt much in school those days, old Grimes and one-eyed Jock MacTavish were the only teachers left and we had run out of paper. Mostly then we just made up new games as soldiers protecting Coventry from Hitler’s invasion of Britain, while Grimes huffed and puffed trying to get the potatoes he had planted on the playing field to grow.

“Oi Jim” shouted Chalky White from across the room, making me jump.

He sneered and stormed out of the makeshift classroom gesticulating he would see me outside the school gates. That morning, he had been caught pretending to be a Nazi with a loaded luger pistol  and had finally been caned after two years of evading the teachers. The satisfaction that spread over Grimes’s face as he brought the cane over Chalky’s skinny backside made us all feel just a little bit better inside. But it had put Chalky in a horrible mood, I would have to avoid him getting home or he would have my guts for garters.

Harry and I seized our bicycles and slipped between the broken back wall of the playground. We cycled the long way home up past the cathedral, so that Chalky and his gang didn’t catch us. It was getting dark and despite pedalling hard we felt the chill of the November afternoon. Once we were out of sight we stopped to watch the flotilla of barrage balloons across the city skies supposedly offering protection from attack by the Luftwaffe.  However, they did no good. Every night since July, German planes had been blitzing London and they seemed to be getting further north with Liverpool and even Glasgow getting hit.

When I got home for tea later that evening, Mum and Mary were sitting around the fire. I began my daily rant about school, telling them about Chalky, Grimes’s potatoes and how the city had felt strangely quiet with its silver halo of balloons glinting in the moonlight. Mum had nabbed the last batch at the bakers, and was cooking  fish and chips.

“We are gonna eat like kings,” Mary said, taking a break from darning our socks.

“Dad’s away out for night with the Home Guard, so all the more for us. We perhaps shouldn’t tell him I scored a nice piece of fish as a treat,” Mum told us smugly. We grabbed our cutlery, and set to work, savouring the feast as we listened to the evening broadcast from Mr. Churchill. That was when the siren sounded.

“Whooooooooo-aaaaaaaahhh”, the pitch of the long wail of the siren rose and fell alternately.

Mary covered her ears while Mum grabbed the bag of emergency rations that hung on the kitchen door. Leaving our plates on the table like stones in a graveyard, we ran down the back steps and dived into the Anderson shelter at the bottom of the garden. I hated that shelter, it smelt of rotten potatoes and made me choke on the taste of peat which tickled the back of my throat like burning tyres. The cold, muddy floor had a permanent puddle formed in the middle and jagged lumps of stone bruised my feet as I crossed it while the walls of corrugated iron left angry red scratches if you got too close.

Every time the siren went off, we had to drop everything and then sit in the dark waiting for the all clear. Was that night just going to be just another false alarm?  Suddenly I heard the low drone of the bombers diesel engines humming and whirring like bees. I had just scrambled onto the top bunk, when the ground shook.

“Wshhhhhhhhhhhh,” went the sound of a bomb as it fell from the sky. Then another and another, they were getting closer and closer. Bombs began to fall in a continual rhythm. I knew that each boom that sounded could be one of our friends or family being killed.

Meanwhile, Mum and Mary were cuddled together in the bunk below me. I could hear Mary whimpering but no one said a word as I slipped quietly from my bed and stuck my head out of the shelter to take a look. The sky was red, flames illuminating a smokey haze over the city skyline, the full moon so bright it felt almost like daylight. Search lights formed arcs over the city, a light show of crisscrossing beams hunting for the enemy. I looked up, above me there were planes, hundreds of them. The Luftwaffe flew wing to wing, tail to tail, black as ink. They were like a swarm of bats. Each was branded with the symbol of the Jerries, of Hitler’s henchmen.  Black bombs were falling all around me. Shadows, silhouetted in the night sky.

Where was Dad, could he have made it to a shelter? Only time would tell… Slowly I pulled my head back through the door and climbed under my itchy blanket. With every bomb, dark mud fell from the shelter roof until we were covered with sooty dust. The smell of gas and burning made me cough and in the thick air it was hard to breathe. Throughout that long, lonely night I was terrified, I lay stock-still in my bunk, counting whistle after whistle, bomb after bomb, explosion after explosion, waiting for silence.

Finally everything went quiet as the new day dawned. The siren sounded the long blast for  ‘all clear’ and we climbed out from the shelter and stepped cautiously into the garden. All around us lay damage and destruction, the whole of our street was demolished. Destroyed. Our house was the only one left standing. A solitary beacon in a sea of smouldering structures and blackened buildings. As we picked our way through the rubble, a stream of neighbours filed past. I saw the crying faces of my friends,  their only possessions, the clothes on their backs and the few household items  they could carry. I saw their misery and woe,  the fear in their eyes, and wondered how I  would cope if we  had lost our home, the only house I had ever lived in. Mum, Mary and I stood like statues and stared at the scene in front of us in silence, the lump in my throat making words impossible.

Then suddenly an air raid warden appeared, he had bags under his  eyes and his breath was shallow and quick under his floppy moustache. “Ma’am! There is an unexploded bomb in your garden! Do not enter the house, you must evacuate immediately.”

We left, without a backward glance, and followed the families heading like a column of ants in search of shelter. The evidence of the night of terror surrounded us, familiar shops and factories destroyed, the streets flooded by burst water pipes and a crater in the road so big a bus would fit in it.  Over a third of the city was engulfed in flames. The historic cathedral, Harry and I had cycled past just a few hours earlier, now burnt to the ground, standing in ruins.  However all I could think of was finding my Dad. Dad who had worked a twelve hour shift in the factory before heading out for the war effort. Dad who had been out all night…

Finally we reached Broadgate, the crossroads at the heart of the city, unrecognisable with the bomb damaged buildings all around it.  Despite the smoke and fallen debris I spotted my Dad standing tall talking to some of his mates.  His uniform was filthy and covered in black soot, and his usually immaculately  bryl-creamed  hair hung in a matted lump across his face. He looked like he had been dragged through a hedge backwards. As we approached him, he turned and despite the obvious exhaustion of the night, beamed at me.

 “Well, am I glad to see you lot,” he began, as he gathered Mum, Mary and I up in the tightest hug ever. “Have I  had a night to remember!” Dad told us that night he had saved a lot of lives. He told us  how he had led a rescue party in dangerous conditions and pulled a lot of people from a burning building, even with the threat of gas, and an unexploded bomb. He told us how he had saved one family and then went back in for another family and then when the building started to fall down and other people had given up and my Dad went back in and rescued someone more. Around us everyone went quiet, then they cheered and clapped. A group of men started singing, “For he's a jolly good fellow.” I felt so proud,  the threat of an unexploded bomb in our garden seemed miniscule after what Dad had done. My Dad was a hero, one of the many people that night who had risked their own lives to save the lives of others.

Chalky White was dead, a direct hit. There was no surviving it. He had refused to stay in the shelter, his own confidence getting the better of him, running out in the night to watch as the planes flew over the city. I didn’t like Chalky much, but I was miserable when I heard what had happened.  “He's with the angels now,”  Mum said as she turned to me and dabbed the tears on my dirty face with her hankey. Over five hundred people died on that night of the 14th November when Hitler launched his fury and might on the people of Coventry.  When I think back  I remember how the bombing changed our lives forever; we lost our home, our friends, our cathedral and everything I had known in the city. I think of all the people lost to the horrors of war but how we stayed strong and didn’t let it break us.

Jim Wakefield, born 1930, Coventry.