

## PART 3 - REMINISCENCES

A few people share their memories of wartime.

### Patricia McGowan's Story



[This is the story of Patricia McGowan who was a teenager in Birmingham during the Second World War. The story was submitted to the BBC's excellent [People's War website](#) on behalf of Patricia who lived in Birmingham during the Second World War.]

During late 1939 and the early 1940s, we in Birmingham were to suffer from quite a few air raids. It is somewhat difficult to set down here all the experiences we encountered at this particular time. We became accustomed to spending many long hours in the Anderson shelter at the bottom of the garden. This was a wooden construction with a corrugated iron cover, most of the structure being deep in the ground with about a fifth above the ground. It had a wooden door, which we bolted by means of a wooden bar fixed into two grooves either side of it. Inside there were two long benches at either side and in between these we had room for a small table on which we stood a small oil lamp. The benches were wide enough to sit upon and also had some space underneath for various provisions.

The entire area of the shelter smelled dank and very earthy and at first it was unpleasant but gradually our nostrils became used to the odour and we even associated this smell with safety, as this was the place where we could have some hope of escaping death or injury. Of course, a direct hit was a disaster we did not care to contemplate.

We lived quite near to a park where anti-aircraft guns were mounted. The noise from these guns was so deafening that at first, being new to the situation of air raids, we thought they were bombs being dropped and often heard neighbours screaming. We realised after a while that the sound of these guns was really music to our ears as they were our protection to some extent.

Referring to some of my old diaries I note that the air raids usually started about 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening and continued until the early hours of the morning. As soon as the siren sounded, Daddy would prepare to leave the house taking with him some cushions and the little lamp, plus a few odds and ends. Mother would then make a flask of tea or coffee and sometimes soup, some sandwiches and a biscuit tin full of cookies. Without fail, she always had, under her arm, the attaché case in which our life insurance policies were housed and also documents such as Birth Certificates and Death Certificates, old photographs and personal letters, in fact anything that qualified as being important and precious. Once settled inside the shelter, Daddy would make a ceremony of almost ramming the wooden plank across the doorway and driving it securely home. Depending upon the intensity of the raid and where it was concentrated, either we sat quietly drinking from our flask and waiting and listening, or, if the raid was aimed at our particular area, we would be fearful and cringing on our little hard wooden seats and praying for dear life.

Patricia went out to a dance one evening, and then an air raid started. She was offered the opportunity to take shelter with some strangers, but she decided to go home as her parents would be very worried about her...

I shall never forget the sight of my mother standing at the gate looking anxiously up and down the road for a sight of me. There was such relief on her face when she spotted me with the Warden coming towards her. She cried and I cried, and the Warden stood by and said, 'Right you are home with Mom at last. Glad to have been of help to you both.' And he left us.

The raid was still on so I went with Mother straight away to the air raid shelter, and Daddy was so pleased to see me 'all in one piece' and unscathed. There followed a nice cup of tea and a bite to eat and a little lecture [well meant I'm sure] about the awful risk I took by going off to dances with air raids happening like tonight! I had learned my lesson, but even so, the fact that I had enjoyed the evening was some sort of compensation for the horror I had been through. The raid that night lasted for a long time and we emerged from the shelter when the 'All Clear' sounded at about 5:30am. We felt very ragged indeed and aching in every part of our bodies.

Morning — and there was so much stress about that not everybody returned to work. In our road itself there were houses down to a heap of rubble, people crying in the street and talking about folk they knew who had been hurt during the night; some killed also. My friend Pat and I went for a walk to see the extent of the damage and to see if we could do anything to help those in trouble. As always, after a raid most people would go looking for and enquiring about loved ones, relatives and friends.

I told Pat about the awful experience I'd had during the late evening and we retraced the steps I had taken along the road. Many houses were just heaps of bricks and rubble, some only slightly damaged, most of them with windows broken and the roofs caved in. As I neared the house where I had sheltered in the entry with Mollie, I saw that the entry was no more! There was no house at all, no sign of a shelter either — the whole place was a devastation of bricks, rubble and destroyed belongings. I felt terrible and began to weep for the poor people who had died there and for the lady who had tried to help us.

Mollie and I had a lucky escape. Pat and I made enquiries and we were told that the family of that house had all perished and it was a direct hit on their shelter. It made me think how one's decisions can change things round. Mollie and I had made the right decision not to stay with the lady and her family and it is daunting to realise that if we had stayed, I would not have lived to write this story.

### **Alan Smith's Story**

We had an Anderson shelter in our back garden in Manchester.

It had a concrete basement sunk into the ground, with six curved corrugated sheets which overlapped in the centre set into it. It was sealed at the rear, with a small door at the front. The German planes used to come over every night in part of 1941 and 1942.

We had a double mattress on box springs in ours. But the cement cracked and it flooded, so we could not use it any more. After that, every time the sirens sounded, we had to rush over to a neighbour's and spend most of the night in their Anderson until the all clear went. In the mornings most of the school kids, myself included, used to go into the back garden looking for shrapnel from the incendiary bombs, land mines and ack ack shells.

One night my folks and I were going to spend the night with one of my dad's sisters after visiting my grandparents. It was almost pitch black as there were no lights. The sirens went off just after we left my grandparents' house. We were almost at my aunt's house when a truck with an ack ack gun mounted on the back stopped near us and started blasting away at the Heinkels and Dorniers caught in the searchlight beams. Then they drove off to stop somewhere else and repeated their actions. Suddenly we heard shrapnel bouncing off the road alongside us. We all dove into a nearby recessed doorway of a Victorian period house. When we arrived home the following morning, we found the back door of our house had been blown off its hinges, windows broken, and soot all over the living room floor from the fireplace chimney.

My mother said, "Well, at least old Adolph cleaned my chimney for me". It turned out that a land mine ( a canister type bomb attached to a parachute) had landed in

a railroad gully less than a quarter of a mile away, and exploded. The blast blew upwards and out over our house, flattening houses about a mile away, all around the blast area.

We always knew when it was Jerry overhead, their engines made a droning sound. I went to school one day and found that it was closed. An unexploded bomb had gone through the roof, the upper and lower halls, and ended up in the basement. I had to go to another school for six months until the damage was repaired.

I think that we were far healthier then than society is today, mostly due to the rationing and the type of food available. I still believe that I could have eaten in one day the amount of rations were were given for a week for my mom, dad and I.

I used to come home from school (my mother was working for Fairy aviation, riveting planes, my dad was building Lancaster bombers) and I would get a slice of bread, smear it with a thin layer of dripping, then add vinegar and salt and pepper. It was delicious!.

I think we all had square bums from eating fish and chips.

When we could afford them that is.

In 1945 towards the end of the war, one of my chums came to school and told a group of us, 'You'll never guess what I've got?' He opened a piece of paper, and there lay what looked like a little brown lump. It was a banana. It had shrunk to about three inches long. We were all awe struck! We couldn't remember what a banana looked like. He said that a paratrooper had come into his folks pub and had given it to him.

He came in another day with a beautiful German luger.

The headmaster heard about it, and confiscated it right away. I'll bet the old man still had it when he died.

### **Ron Harvey's Story**

[Ron lived in Bethnal Green and was among the very first to be 'bombed out' - on the night of 24/25 August 1940. His story is quoted in Patrick Bishop's *Battle of Britain*.]

When the warning sounded I was woken up by mum or dad and I went downstairs through the kitchen into the backyard to the shelter where there were already some neighbours ... I remember it was a bright moonlit night. Being 12 years old, I wasn't taking notice of the grownups. I was just at the door of the shelter and I heard this German plane come over and I knew it was German because of the

drone of the engine. A few seconds passed and then there was a whistle of a bomb coming down. I was just by the door.

Someone shouted "There's something coming down. Duck!" and I ducked and I must have had my face to the right because I saw the two black balls fall on the house.

The bombs exploded and it wasn't like a 'boom' or a blast, more like the crack of a Thunderbolt, which echoed through the street for a few seconds and that was that. The shelter was full of dust and someone said 'Gas!' but I knew it wasn't, it was brick dust.

The next thing I remember is being out of the shelter ... and there was all this activity going on - I suppose it was rescue work. And there were lots of people digging out my sister and her boyfriend. They were roughed up a bit, a few bruises; all the chimneys had come down.

There was no damage from miles and miles around before that, I was going to school just around the corner, it was as if there wasn't a war on. That was the beginning of the war for me, when things started happening.

### **Moira Ingram's Story**

[In a letter to her mother on 4th October 1940, Moira Ingram, who was just starting to experience the bombing in Manchester, described the problem of being brave or being safe:-]

You have certainly been having it hot with Uncle Adolf. So have we!

Last night we had a peaceful night with no warnings, but the night before I got the scare of my life. I was in bed when the sirens went, and feeling tired, I decided to stay put. However, about five minutes later there was a terrific banging and crashing and whizzing, about 10 bombs dropping. Well, the bed shook and the ornaments jumped, but I, being unusually brave stayed put, thinking he had finished.

About three minutes afterwards, however, he sent another stick of bombs down, and one of them was a screaming bomb. These fell very close, in fact I closed my eyes and waited for the house to fall, but nothing happened. Mr Powell ran upstairs and shouted to me to get up and go downstairs.

There was no need for him to tell me, I was half dressed by that time, although my knees were knocking and my legs wouldn't hold me up. When I arrived downstairs I found that beds had been made up down there and we retired in comparative safety, the Air Raid Shelter being three inches deep in water. (We could have gone

in but it means that we have to carry crowds of cushions and things in to make it comfortable, and we can't leave them in with it being so wet). Then, about ten minutes, after he dropped nine – one after the other, but this time further away, and later still, in fact most of the night he was dropping them, but not near enough for us to get windy.

Eventually we went to sleep and were awakened the following morning at 7.15 by the sirens again. Evidently he had come to view the damage.

### **Wartime shelter photos**

For some excellent images of how families lived in their Anderson shelters, see [Alex Arbuckle's collection on Mashable.com](#).

### **Memories of wartime**

This [half-hour Vimeo film](https://vimeo.com/420285009) ( <https://vimeo.com/420285009> ) features some great recollections from those who lived through the war - including about Anderson shelters of course!

END