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REMINISCENCES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

JILLY COOPER

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Victory in Europe – these three words still bring a lump to my throat, and make the hairs on the back of my neck prickle with excitement. But it is difficult for anyone to appreciate the euphoria and colossal sense of achievement we felt on VE day, unless they realise the gruelling hardship endured in Britain throughout the war.

Not that it was hard for me. Only two years old when war began, I had never known anything else. My first hazy memories were of my father going off to fight in France in 1939, and my brother Timothy, my Nanny, Jamie our Scottish terrier and about 45 teddy bears, making a nightmare 14 hour journey up to Yorkshire to stay with an aunt.

There was no heating on the train, no lights, no food. We wolfed our dried egg sandwiches in the first half hour, and the queues were so long at all the station buffets that my mother never dared buy any food in case the train moved on. As night fell she kept opening the blackout curtains a fraction, desperate that we might have passed our destination as unlit stations flashed by.

I clearly remember her singing at the top of her voice, when after weeks of frantic uncertainty, a telegram arrived saying my father was safe home from Dunkirk... I remember my mother disappearing into a great bear hug, when she met my father at Leeds the next day. She expected him to be haggard, but he had never looked better; tanned by the French sun and sea air, and two stone lighter from not eating.

A reticent modest man he talked little about the ordeal. One of his fellow officers in France was the champion shot at Bisley. When he, my father, and a party of soldiers were creeping towards Dunkirk, a German tank appeared on the horizon, more than 2000 yards away. Through binoculars, they saw the turret open and a German officer pop his head out. Casually, as though there was absolutely no danger from the British, he lit a cigarette. The Bisley

champion borrowed a rifle from one of the men and, incredibly, picked the German off.

“We couldn’t stand his damn nonchalance,” was my gather’s only comment.

Nor did he dwell on the terrors of Dunkirk, except to describe one ludicrous incident. Waiting endlessly for a little boat, he suddenly noticed the rocks were covered in tar, and instinctively, despite bombs and bullets falling around him, removed his tin hat and sat on it, so his trousers wouldn’t get dirty.

Happily on his return he was posted to the Staff College, and we went to live in Camberley. Here we all carried gas masks, which we never used, and identity disks were attached to our wrists with our names, addresses, and telephone numbers.

Then occurred my worst tragedy of the war; my adored brother Timothy, then aged seven, was sent away to prep school. To my mother’s distress at his departure was added dismay when an irate neighbour rang up saying, “Please come and fetch Timothy, he has been crying on my doorstep for the past three days.” Frantic that my brother had run away from school, my mother tore round to find our Scottie, Jamie, to whose collar Timothy’s old identity disk had been transferred, sitting outside her house, whining after the neighbour’s bitch.

In 1941 my father went to the War Office and we moved, till the end of the war, to Cobham; a sleepy and in those days a very rural suburb. It had a winding river, a village green, and white pebble dashed houses with red roofs and leaded windows, whose gardens were hidden from the outside world by great ramparts of rhododendrons.

Cobham’s tranquillity was as illusion. By night the Tartar Hill guns pounded away; the village was blacked out except for a huddle of searchlights scraping the sky like rapiers; the sirens howled, and the whole family, including Jamie the dog, would seek refuge in the broom cupboard under the stairs.

Having known nothing else, I didn’t realise how short of food we were. Probably because my mother, who never weighed more than six stone throughout the war, gave me most of her rations. I remember eating delicious spinach made from nettles, and making my weekly treat of a boiled egg last for at least six pieces of bread. Because fat was so short, my mother mixed butter and margarine, but never resorted as some did to making cakes with liquid paraffin.

The greatest excitement of the war was when my father went to Portugal and bought a group of islands called the Azores (so that the Germans couldn't have them), and also brought back the first orange I had ever tasted. On a later mission to America he returned with my first ever banana, and longed-for lipstick and silk stockings for my mother.

The best thing about Portugal, said my father, was seeing all the lights on. The black-out in England was horrible –menacing- like having a thick blanket thrown over one's head, whenever one ventured outside. One night when my mother was in hospital with pneumonia, my father picked me up from the people opposite when he got home. Crossing our road in inky blackness he tripped over a paving stone and dropped me, breaking my arm.

Far worse than the blackout or the lack of food was the cold as we queued in the bitter winters that characterised the war. I had terrible chilblains. At home it was almost colder- our only heating being a small coal fire in the drawing room.

My mother was appointed 'Road Mother', which meant she had to keep our bath filled with water (which often froze) at all times in case the air raid warden opposite needed to extinguish anything.

Everyone bicycled everywhere. If anyone came to stay my father went to the station riding his own bike and steering my brother's bike. This had a wonky seat that tipped backwards. When one aunt arrived all we could see was her nervous little face peering just above the handlebars.

There were few cars on the road and no signposts. Leatherhead, four miles away but unvisited, seemed like Africa. In this curiously enclosed world people seldom went out at night. We made our own amusements singing around the piano. 'Run rabbit, run' and 'Hey little hen' lifted our spirits.

Clothes being so short I was lucky my mother was good at sewing and made most of mine. For my sixth birthday, all the children invited had a 'going home' present of a little horse made from an old brown blanket, each with a mane and tail of different coloured wool.

As the bombs got worse my parents installed a Morrison shelter; a huge ugly green metal table with mesh sides. It only left space in the dining room for one narrow single bed. This was shared by my parents, stretched out like anchovies in a tin, for the rest of the war. At the first wail of a siren they rolled into the shelter beside Jamie and me.

For me it was a fantastic comfort having them so near, wracked as I was by fearful nightmares of German parachutists disguised as nuns, the Gestapo tugging out my finger nails and Japs sidling through the bamboo shoots, filling me with water and jumping on my stomach.

My attitudes were very simple. The French were 'soppy dates' because they caved in. Monty was a star who turned the war. The Americans were also stars, because they threw me chewing gum out of passing tanks.

It is impossible to describe the adulation we felt for the cuddly, jaunty, defiant figure of Mr Churchill; at times the glowing red tip of his cigar seemed the only thing that lightened our darkness. Hitler was of course the arch fiend – the focus of all our loathing.

D-day raised everyone's hopes. Over the fence I heard people saying the war would be over by Christmas. I was thrilled – my father had promised me a pony. But the mood of optimism was shattered by the arrival of the doodle bugs terrorising Southern England. One fell as we were about to bathe in the river. Hearing the throbbing overhead like some malignant flying taxi, we almost all flattened in the wild garlic. Exceptions were two of my little friends who prostrated themselves in the one bed of nettles not yet turned into spinach, which caused more tears than the subsequent explosion.

Another bomb fell on our school. All the windows were blown in, filling the orange jelly we were eating with lethal splinters. Within minutes hoards of ashen faced mothers converged from all sides, like the Valkyries, peddling furiously. Fortunately none of us was hurt. School on the other hand was closed for two months – my first inkling that Hitler might be on my side.

My father was a brigadier now -one of the youngest in the Army – I nearly burst with pride each morning as I saw him stride off down the road with a red band on his hat. But for my mother; he left home six days a week for bomb torn London and was never home until after nine at night. Considering how many fathers were away fighting, or in staff jobs, most children were brought up in virtually one-parent families. As the war entered its sixth year the strain began to tell; mothers became rattier and staff at school more bad-tempered.

Then at long last, May 7<sup>th</sup> 1945 we heard on the wireless that the Germans had surrendered. "Pinch me" my mother said, "so that I know that I am awake." Why was she crying? She never cried before, except when Jamie was put down. Had we lost after all? Then she laughed and dried her eyes on her apron, and we ran into the street. People were cheering and hugging, and hanging out the flags

– a little crumpled after five years in the attic. Then suddenly the bells rang out, pealing gloriously from Cobham, Oxshott and Leatherhead; echoing across the flat black-earthed Surrey landscape, announcing the fall of the powers of darkness.

The only cloud on the horizon was the Russians, who were treating British prisoners abominably, behaving more like enemies than allies. They even sabotaged VE Day, mulling over terms, so that the world knew on the 7<sup>th</sup>, there was no official announcement until 3 o'clock on the 8<sup>th</sup>. My father took May 8<sup>th</sup> off. My brother came home from prep school. Together in the kitchen we listened to Mr Churchill's bull dog growl: "The evil doers lie prostrate before us. Advance Britannia," followed by cheer upon cheer.

We had a great party in the evening at one of the big houses on the hill. The weather was muggy and warm. Carrying a red jelly and a shepherd's pie containing our entire week's meat ration we walked to the party. Every house was ablaze with lights and strewn with union jacks and bunting. The scent of the lilacs and the tang of the nearby pinewoods mingled with the smell of hundreds of bonfires and beacons, turning the sky to rose.

Teaching the party we found bunting hung from light all round the garden. The women looked lovely in their cotton dresses – one enterprising lady had even run up a long skirt from her blackout curtains. But my mother, as always, seemed loveliest in her green flowered dress which matched her eyes.

Drifting around was old lady Thornley, a legend in Cobham since she emerged unhurt from the drawing room after a direct hit on her house. Her husband seeing her white hair totally blackened with soot said gallantly, "My dear, you look twenty years younger."

I was madly in love with our host, who went up to London every day in a black coat with an astrakhan collar. The host's father in law, a knight, very high up in the Civil Service, was a great character. Running around in pre-war gym shoes, he supervised the huge bonfire, which reared up nearly 2 feet tall at the bottom of the garden. Perched on top was an effigy of Hitler...

At last the great pyre roared into golden flame. After 2000 days of blackout the brilliance was breathtaking. Birds disturbed by the unaccustomed brightness sang their heads off. Insects freaked out, moths bashing against the lights and colossal maybugs bombing us like doodle bugs.

Later we toasted Mr Churchill and the King and Queen, and there was singing. My favourite song, written by Hubert Gregg was about getting 'lit up when the lights go up in London... Then we bellowed out' "There'll always be an England" and all the grown ups cried...

My poor brother remembers having the most excruciating earache that night and no one taking any notice because they were all plastered. I got awful indigestion from eating half raw baked potatoes with charred outsides from the bonfire. My best friend guzzled a whole tin of condensed milk and was sick in the rhododendrons.

But the Tartar Hill guns were silent as, half asleep, we were carried somewhat unsteadily home by my parents. Gradually it sank in that we had won the war and that we were free.

My father made us a see-saw for Christmas 1944, which not only went up and down but also round and round. It was such a novelty that our garden was always packed with excited, yelling children, fighting for a turn. The see-saw had a hollow base with a hole in it. Putting his hand inside to tighten the screw the morning after VE day, my father was amazed to find a blue tit sitting on four eggs, which she later hatched out.

Despite all of the yelling, the fighting, the bombs and the pounding guns, she had determinedly stuck to her post and raised her family. Just as the British, despite the terrors and hardships, she had finally won through. She seemed to symbolise our war.