

Ronald Leedham – Wartime Memories

War Starts

I was eight, nine, when the war started. We were told there was a war on, we were going to fight the Germans because the caretaker of the home, him and his wife, well he had been in the navy in the first war. We used to call them mum and dad 'cause they were so nice. So he told us, 'Oh we're going to war, we're going to fight the Germans again' and this, that and the other and so, especially the boys, you know, wey hey, we're away.

Because we were close to **Biggin Hill** there were always a lot of aircraft around anyway. We didn't know they were our air force, we thought they were police planes, **Spitfires** and **Hurricanes** and the big ones were for **RAF** (Royal Air Force) but the small ones were police planes. But anyway, we were always interested in these, you'd see these **squadrons** flying around, all above us. And then when the war started, after **Dunkirk** and they really stepped up the fun and games with the **Luftwaffe** and I can remember the school was prepared for trouble, there's no doubt about that because it was a lovely old house, absolutely beautiful, by far the best looking house I've ever been in. The grounds were smashing, beautiful trees again. I was lucky like that when I was a kid, they were all good, big, well established country houses and country gardens, they were lovely.

But anyway, they had big windows obviously, as they used to in those days and they had **sandbags** all the way up the windows. You could hardly see, they left a space at the top to let air and light in but all the rest of it was **sandbagged** up, thousands and thousands of sandbags. When there was an **air raid** of any description, we all had to go into one of the downstairs rooms, which was the... it wasn't the school room, oh it was our play room, that was it and we all had to go in there, all the staff had to go in there, the domestic staff, nursing staff and all the children, 25 boys, 25 girls, we all had to go into this one room and if there was a raid on in the night, somehow we all had to go and sleep in that room as well. We didn't have many air raids as such those days, it was all fighter attacks and I can remember when they attacked Biggin Hill, they had a little bash at it for about five days I think. And I can remember us all in this play room, looking through the amount of window that we had left over the thing and we could see all the battle going on up there, you know.

God, the staff were absolutely terrified. Crying, huddled down, you know, getting the kids under them and there was us boys looking up, couldn't believe our luck. And there were..

Messerschmitts and Spitfires and Hurricanes chasing each other all over the place and guns banging away and oh dear, terrific racket going on. But, you know, we all survived that and we always hoped that it's go on and on and on 'cause we enjoyed it.

Video clip 3.56 mins: <http://bit.ly/1qOuM6a>



Two *Spitfire Mk.IX* of 611 Sqn. over Biggin Hill in 1943

Buzz Bombs and Doodlebugs

I can remember the first one I saw. We heard some during the night, there were these noises during the night and we were talking about it. 'What was that one that went over during the night?' and we all thought, oh it was a **bomber** with engine trouble 'cause they didn't sound right and it went on, there were two or three of them during the night and when, the next day it was cloudy and I can remember being dressed in the dormitory, trying to get dressed and looking out of the window and I saw this funny thing go from east to west. Now, **buzz bombs** went from south to north, every time, bang, bang, bang, back and forth. But this one was going from east to west and it was a funny looking thing compared with all the aircraft and it was making this funny noise and it was quite low. Anyway it disappeared back into the clouds and, we talked about it over breakfast and there were more of these noises went over, we couldn't make it out at all. Then, of course, when the sky cleared, we could see what was happening. There were these... things like a **torpedo** with wings and another torpedo on top of it, with the motor that made this bang, bang, bang, bang, bang noise as it went along. And it really shook the country, we weren't expecting it, because there was no defence against them at all at first.



Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1973-029A-24A
Foto: Lysjak / 1944/1946

A German crew rolls out a V-1

Then in a matter of days, the countryside changed. They put up **barrage balloons** everywhere. I've never seen so many barrage balloons in all my life. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of barrage balloons. To the north of the house, the house, between the house and Sevenoaks and from Sevenoaks onwards, it was a big balloon barrage. God knows where they got them all from. There were thousands and thousands of them and between the barrage balloons and the guns, you had a passage where the aircraft patrolled up and down, they had it in stages, they kept on changing it but at this particular time. And we used to see these blooming flying bombs, **doodlebugs**, buzz bombs, whatever you like to call them and they used to fly into these barrage balloons and sometimes they'd hit a wire and go down the wire and explode at the bottom and probably killed all the **WAAF** aircrew down there (WAAF, Women's Auxiliary Air Force - later became Women's Royal Air Force) but there were other times when they maybe hit a balloon and the cable would break and the balloon would shoot up in the air and there are other times when I've seen them go straight through the cables, not touch one of them. Honestly, how they got through it? It must have been like a fence, but they went straight through. I couldn't believe it. What was the reason for the barrage balloons? Well they were normally put up to stop aircraft

flying too low. Because you've got a balloon up there and you've got a great big thick cable and aircraft don't like hitting cables and so what they did is, they put all these things up. The flying bombs, I don't think they were more than a thousand feet up, they were quite low and so if you had a balloon up there, you had a lot of balloons and a lot of cables coming down, the bombs would hit the cables and stop them going into London. That only worked to a degree. They didn't, they weren't fool-proof. But then, of course, all the time there were the **anti-aircraft guns** firing at them.

The whole countryside went berserk. More so than I ever saw it in the **Blitz**. It was an unbelievable period. I can remember there were the times when they were supposed to have come over and they'd run out of fuel and when the engines stopped, the bomb came down, bang, which is the thing you usually see on the television. What they don't tell you is that quite often, for some reason or other, when the engine cuts out, they didn't come down, they went on gliding. And they were the dangerous ones. I've seen them coming, when they were getting very low, 'cause they were gliding, I've seen them cut through the tops of trees in the park and go over the house; that was a bit frightening. At mealtimes we used to have one of the older boys would stand outside the dining room, looking towards the south and if he saw one of these things gliding across the trees, he used to give us a yell and we'd have to get under the table... You know, it changed our lives completely.

Video clip 5.27 mins: <http://bit.ly/1jaEDoV>



Barrage balloons over London during World War II. Buckingham Palace and the Victoria Memorial can be seen in the middle ground.

Incendiary Bombs in the Park

We used to go for long walks in Knole Park. We did a lot of walking, us kids, unbelievable. Those of us that could, we got taken out in Knole Park, roaming over the hills and over the trees, all birch, all beech trees they were, magnificent. The right time of year the place was full of nuts. There were sweet chestnuts and we used whole bags of sweet chestnuts and walking up to the old house, Knole House with all the horse chestnuts around it. There were some ponds there where we used to catch newts and things like that, you know, tadpoles, there were lots of deer. And I can remember one day there'd been an **air raid** the night before and we went in, on the Saturday night, there'd been an air raid and we could remember 'cause when possible we always used to look out of the windows, we had **blackout** but we used to get up behind the blackout. We weren't supposed to and bloody dangerous actually, although the windows were taped up, you know, the glass could have shattered. and I remember one night we saw this great big white glow in the sky over Knole Park and we went over in that direction the next day and we found there was a great field, like a big playing field, it was a big flat area, big grassed area and it had taken a full load of **incendiaries**. And they were... the ground was white with the phosphorus where it had burnt and there were all these tail fins of the **incendiary bombs**. An incendiary bomb is about that big and about that round and there were all these tail fins sticking up out of these burnt holes in the ground. There were hundreds and hundreds of them and some of them hadn't gone off and so we were picking these unexploded incendiary bombs up and looking at them and putting them back down again. But, yes Sunday afternoons could be quite good, when it was dry. When it was wet, of course, we had to read and all that sort of thing.

Video clip 2.20 mins: <http://bit.ly/1mIFTQX>



["Window"](#) (left) and incendiary and [Blockbuster bombs](#) (right) dropped from [Avro Lancaster](#) over Duisburg in 1944

Dogfight

When I arrived at Sevenoaks, there was an **air raid** on, the warning had gone when we were leaving Coney Hill and it was about 20 miles to Sevenoaks, went there in the school bus It wasn't an air raid so much, as a **dogfight** going on overhead and I can remember seeing the boys, they had benches in the playground and as we drove up, there were these boys lying back watching, watching the dogfight above them and other kids lying around, sort of standing around. Nobody took cover, nobody took cover at all, it was just, it had happened before, do it again, you know the sort of thing. Strange.

Video clip 0.48 mins: <http://bit.ly/1gVJaMw>



Intercepting a large formation of German bombers on their way to bomb an airplane factory, two [Heinkel He 111s](#) are shown from the guncamera in a British Spitfire Mark I. [Tracer ammunition](#) can be seen hitting the rear quarter of one plane.

Sheltering in the Church

And then we used to watch the **bombers** going over, the **Heinkels** and whatnot, you could see them, great blocks of them going over towards London or wherever they were going. We used to see that going on and then they started doing the **raids**, the proper raids at night. **The Battle of Britain** only lasted a few months, then when that stopped, the **Blitz** started and well, that was when the fun and games started and there was one night where.. we were all sleeping downstairs again, on mattresses, and I can remember this blinding flash and a terrific bang, awful noise and everything shook and all the staff came belting in again, 'Quick, quick, quick, we've got to get out, we've got to get out, quick.' God knows why, we were much safer where we were.

And they had us all dressed, all in a great long crocodile and we went out of the playground, below the playground there was a wood which was part of our playground. It was a lovely wood down there and further down from there was the Baptist church near where the caretaker lived, because they were devout Baptists. And we all had to go down in the night, during the **air raid**, all holding hands, going down through the wood and along the path at the bottom, through the wood, down to the Baptist church and all the time of course, it was bloody mayhem... gorr. For some reason, they thought we'd be safer in a church and the church, there weren't any pews down but somewhere there were mattresses everywhere and we all had to lie down on mattresses and they gave us hot drinks and half the staff were crying and us kids, I think some of the girls might have been crying but the boys weren't, we thought it was wonderful.

But fancy to think that we'd be safe, walking through an air raid with **shells** bursting overhead, with fires, glow over London like no-one's business, noise everywhere, flashes, just to put us in a church 'cause they thought we might be safe, bit muddled thinking there you know. You'd have died just as well there. It was a very funny experience, I never found out why they made us walk through that lot, as children of eight, nine, ten. It's very strange, very strange. And yet a few weeks after then I left there and I went to Sevenoaks, I was 11 and I heard that the place had been bombed. It had taken a direct hit and a couple of the staff had been killed but don't know what happened to the kids, I don't think they were hurt. But the place did eventually get bombed. So I suppose... whether the church got bombed as well, I don't know.

Video clip 3.43 mins: <http://bit.ly/1EqSm1>



Homeless and/or orphaned children settle down to sleep on camp beds in the air raid shelter at John Keble Church. A basket in the centre of the photograph probably contains a small baby, also made homeless by the Blitz.