



Martin's Story, Chapter 11

The European part of the war, I always put it that way because people tend to forget that the war in the Far East started two years earlier, but the European part of the Second World War began in September of 1939 and really apart from things like rationing and blackout and things like that it didn't affect the civilian population, unless of course they had family members fighting in the war, at first. But the situation changed in the summer of 1940 when France capitulated and then, at first the Battle of Britain began with the Germans trying to establish control of the air space over Britain so that they could invade Britain. Well fortunately they were not able to establish control of the air space so they could, although they did invade the Channel Islands they did not invade the mainland of Britain. And when they had given that up, when it was getting too far into the season they began to bomb the civilian population. There had been of course bombing of airfields, bombing of radar stations and so on before that, but that was in the south of England and when they began to bomb the civilian population at first it was in London and in other parts of southern England.

We at first had air raid sirens going fairly frequently but that meant that bombers were in the vicinity going on to bomb somewhere else, probably London or what one calls the home counties. And then came a few small bombing raids on Coventry itself. In the late summer and the autumn of 1940 we had as I now know, although I didn't keep count at the time, about 17 small air raids. And then on the 14th of November 1940 we had the biggest air raid that we were ever to have. It started round about 10 past 7 or so in the evening and if you ask me when it ended there is an official answer to that because people know when the last German bombers departed, but to us it wasn't obvious when it ended because by that time the electricity supplies to the whole city had gone and the all-clear which would normally have been sounded could no longer be sounded. So as far as we were concerned it just petered out, we didn't have a clear signal that it was over. But altogether it lasted something like 11 or 11 ½ hours. And during that time of course a very large part of the city was destroyed. In the region where we lived there were quite a few bombs, the nearest two were about 50 or 60 yards from the house where we lived just on the opposite side of the road and a few doors along. And in fact to give you an idea the house had a small front garden in the front and a small garden at the back. The bombs landed on the front side of the house but the next day we found half a paving stone from one of these bombed places in our back garden, it had been lobbed over the row of houses and had landed in our back garden. The house itself lost its doors and windows and part of the roof and had various other structural damage. The advice that the Home Office had given was that if you don't have an air raid shelter, which we didn't, and you don't have a cellar the best place to go is underneath the stairs, that's the strongest part of a house, and we under the stairs had a small pantry which had two advantages as I realise now. One is that it was under the stairs and therefore in the strongest part of the house, and the other is that it had no windows because flying glass can do an awful lot of damage as we were to discover from our other rooms and if those bits of glass hit anybody they could easily kill. So we spent the time in that small pantry and the whole thing was made somewhat worse for us by the fact that my

foster parents had a dog. Now from what I have been told even when he was a young dog he had been very vicious. By now he was old and old age didn't improve his temper. He was really dangerous. My foster parents shouldn't have kept him. He bit quite a few people, he bit me a few times, he bit most of us at various times and my foster parents were always terrified that somebody would report them to the police and they would have to have the dog put down because he bit dustmen and so on, dustmen had to be given half a crown to say nothing about it. Half a crown was quite a lot of money to a dustman in those days. And that sort of thing. And of course every time a bomb came near the dog growled and we were terrified the dog would attack us quite apart from the bombs and so I'm afraid that was a frightening experience.

And of course there was the damage, there was the loss of life of course, and also there was the loss of services because after a raid like that you have no electricity, you have no gas, you have no water, they used to come round with vans bringing water, you brought out your jug and had it filled with water and you were very careful about how you used that water because there would be no more until the van came round the next time. And it was quite a number of weeks before these services were restored. Another thing that happens during air raids of course is that when the water is restored it is coming through pipes that are still leaking and the sewage pipes next to them are also leaking so that in fact water has to be boiled and we all had to be inoculated against typhoid. Even so there were some cases of typhoid in the city. It's the sort of thing which would be unthinkable even in those days in a British city in normal times.