



A Ventnor Childhood in WW2 by Marigold Harding Part 2: Raids on Ventnor

Things had been very quiet for the first months of the war. We often watched dog-fights in the air above us, with a mad dash for cover if a plane came our way. But after Dunkirk, enemy activity began to increase, and the war came closer to home. In August 1940 during school holidays I was walking with my mother and baby brother who was in a pram, when the siren went. At first we took no notice, then suddenly there were twenty Junker 88 dive bombers screaming down with their terrifying whistling bombs. My Grandmother was now working as a live-in cook for a family not far away so we made a frantic dash for cover to their house. The owner's son, who was a few years older than me, was having a great time watching a dog-fight between the Junkers and Spitfires, but each time I tried to join him at the door I was hauled back inside by the scruff of the neck. They were aiming for the Radar Station on the Downs. There were three steel pylons 350 feet high and four wooden pylons 240 feet high on top of the 900ft Downs - quite a target as you can imagine.

I was on my own with my baby brother in a pram for a walk during one bombing raid. We dashed into a shop doorway and when the raid was over the streets were littered with rubble, and the closer we got to home the worse it was. I had a struggle to keep from tears wondering if my home and family were safe, as work-men helped me to lift the pram over the debris of broken glass, window frames and timbers of our local pub that had been damaged. It was a relief both to me and my mother when we finally arrived home. Our local fish and chip owners had a small monkey which used to sit at the end of the counter (no health regulations then). He always knew when the planes were coming long before the siren went, and would get so agitated and jump up and down screeching, so they had their own early alarm. Unfortunately he couldn't stop the bombs and in one raid the shop was hit.



In 1942, when my brother Desmond' was about two and a half, he wandered away from home one day, the first time he had done so, and of course there was a raid. I had to get Granny and my other brother David, only a few weeks old, to the shelter while mother searched for Desmond while bombs were dropping and guns firing. He came running for his life with, to quote my mother, "his little legs higher than his head" with feathers and soot in his hair and face. In his last year at school he was a great runner and won the 200, 400 and 800 yard and the mile, and we put it down to his great run at two and a half! After that incident he was hysterical every time he heard a plane. He was positive the planes came out of the chimney pots they were so low - the Germans had discovered that if they flew in at sea-level they could not be detected by radar.



All our beaches had anti-tank traps which were made of iron pipes, and about three metres high. They were great for gymnastics, hanging by the knees, daring to jump from the highest rail. On one occasion I was on the beach with a friend when she asked me how to identify a spitfire. As we watched two planes coming towards us I started to explain, then said "these are not spitfires!" . . . The next thing I was flat on the sand with one of the soldiers on top of me as I watched the bullets spray into the sand just by my side. It was all over in seconds, but the beaches were closed to us after that episode, no more swimming! (This picture does not show Marigold - the two girls are WRNS, from the Radar Station, relaxing on the pier at Ventnor with the beach fortifications and the Gaiety visible behind them.)

By this time I was at High School in Ryde, a half hour ferry ride away from Portsmouth which is, of course, a large Naval base. I left home at 7.30 to walk to the station to take the train to Ryde, returning at 6.30, which was a bit scary for an eleven year old in the blackout during the dark winter months, also a long day. Being so close to Portsmouth we often had raids on the town. On the way home our train would often stay in the two mile long tunnel if there was a raid, which made us even later. After one big raid where our school was damaged and another school bombed and a child killed, my mother decided she didn't want me at Ryde school as she never knew from 7.30 in the morning till 6.30 at night if I was dead or alive. This, together with Desmond's terror of the bombers, was to bring a big change in my life.