



A Ventnor Childhood in WW2 by Marigold Harding *Part 3: In the Country*

By 1943 my Dad's work was repairing Walrus and Sunderland flying boats in Freshwater, the other side of the Island, where there were few raids. One day he happened to be at home when there was a raid on Ventnor and that settled it - we weren't staying there any longer. With my little brother Desmond so afraid and all the raids, we were off to the country, away from the Downs and



the radar station. The country, St Lawrence, was actually only two miles away. We had no electricity so naturally no hot water. How my poor mother coped, I don't know. *[Several Ventnor families moved away from the centre of town to escape the bombing - Fay Brown's family also moved to St Lawrence. Marigold's family moved to Pulpit Cottage, Seven Sisters Rd]*

We had no air-raid shelter here, so my parents obtained a Morrison table shelter. It was too big for our little kitchen so it was put in the bedroom with a large mattress in it. My brother and I slept there and Granny slept in a bed in the same room. When there was a raid Mum, Dad, baby David and Granny all crashed in on top of us. *[Morrison shelters, like the one shown here, had a heavy steel top and a wire cage round the sides and could be used as a table in the daytime while providing sleeping space for two or three people at night]*

When we had been in the country a few months, an anti-aircraft battery was installed on the cliffs above us. Each time there was a raid (mostly at night) we could hear the officers calling out numbers of the gunners and to fire and the cheers going up when a plane was brought down, especially by the ATS girls. I don't know if you can imagine what it was like to have an anti-aircraft battery so close, when the guns were firing it was impossible to talk and shrapnel would fall on the roof - but they did a wonderful job. My parents often invited several gunners to meals and they were always appreciative of home cooking.

It was almost impossible to get transport from the country to the station for me to travel to Ryde school, so, much to my disgust, I had to attend a little country school where education finished at 14. I cycled two miles to the school every day. The local Council School was built under the Downs and with the bombing this was considered too dangerous so the children were moved to Steephill Castle, a castle built by a wealthy local in the 1800s. I went by bus there once a week for domestic science lessons. The cookery classes were in rooms six floors up at the top of the turret. When the siren went we had to (quote) *'put out all the gas ovens and proceed in an orderly fashion to the basement and shelter'*. As the staircase was a metal spiral staircase, I think there were more children injured on the stairs than Hitler's bombings on the town. Messerschmitts seemed to have a fondness for roaring over at tree-top height when it was time for us to catch the bus home and many times we lay in the gutters with heads buried, bottoms up, waiting for whatever, which fortunately didn't come.

In 1944 Dad was still working at Freshwater from where you could see Southampton Water. He told us that there were boats everywhere and landing barges so close together you could walk from one to another, so we knew something was going on and that the invasion was close. Also there were hundreds of army lorries with British and American troops on the go, who whistled and waved, knowing they were off to the invasion. By this time I was 15 and had started work, so I appreciated the whistles.



Then about 5 o'clock one morning on 6 June 1944 we woke to a loud hum that got louder and louder until the whole air around us reverberated. And we were counting layer upon layer of planes as far as eye could see. Then someone said look out to sea and we saw all these landing craft almost bow to stern - 7000 of them. We - being my mother, brothers, Granny and the neighbours, all in our night attire - were laughing and dancing in the road: D Day had begun!

Ventnor & District Local History Society. Thanks to Marigold Harding for these recollections. Photographs of Morrison shelter and ships mustering off the Isle of Wight on D Day are from the Imperial War Museum.