BUCKERELL AT WAR
Recollections by Ann Rosewell

I have no recollection of war being mentioned, until that fateful Sunday morning in September 1939, when I listened, with my parents, to Neville Chamberlain's broadcast. Soon afterwards, Mrs Collins came to our door, "Is there any news Bess?", she asked mother. "Yes Vi", Mum replied, "war was declared early this morning." As tears welled up in the eyes of this serving Naval Officer's wife, Mum took her arm and said, "Come in Vi, we'll have a nice cup of tea".

Soon we were issued with our gas masks and these had to be taken everywhere with us in their stout cardboard boxes, which we slung over our shoulders. At school we hung them on the back rails of our desks. We knew that we might have gas mask drill at any time during lessons, when our Headteacher, Mrs Edwards, would shout "Gas" and we all grabbed the boxes and put on our masks as soon as we were able. Then Mrs Edwards would come around and check that our masks were well fitting and, if necessary, adjust the straps to suit the size of our heads. We took this very seriously indeed, because Mr Bakke, who lived at Avonhayes Cottage, had been gassed in the First World War and we all knew that he still had difficulty in breathing.

As a precaution against flying glass in case our schoolroom windows were smashed during an air raid, the older pupils helped Mrs Edwards to glue fine muslin onto the glass and pasted paper strips diagonally onto each pane.

On Friday afternoons some of us were detailed to go around the village collecting salvage. Householders placed waste paper in one hessian sack and tins, bottles and jars in another. There were few tins and bottles in those days and most jars were saved to re-use when making jam, pickles or chutney.

In the autumn we were taken out around the fields and lanes to gather rosehips, the fruit of the wild rose, and these were sent away to be made into rosehip syrup, which was issued to the under-fives to boost their intake of vitamin C when oranges were unobtainable. We also collected acorns, which were fed to pigs.

One year, along with Mrs Edwards, we returned to school each day to make "comforts for the troops", a Red Cross Scheme. Not many boys came, but those who did rolled bandages. The younger girls, including myself, knitted hot water bottle covers in garter stitch, using scraps of brightly-coloured wool and made little roll-up needlework cases, which held two reels of thread, a few needles, a couple of shirt buttons and a safety pin or two. Mrs Edwards and the older girls sewed hospital shirts, rather like a tabard, which tied with tapes on each side. The weather must have been fine during that holiday because we took our work into Schoolroom Field, behind Knabben, and adjoining the school playground and we sat in the shade of a large oak tree and Mrs Edwards read aloud to us.

One day, as I returned home from school, I came upon Mum and Dad carrying two of our armchairs up the road and Dad jokingly told me that we were moving into The Rectory to live. This, of course, was not so and I soon discovered that the men of the village had joined the LDV, Local Defence Volunteers – not Look, Duck and Vanish, as some would have us believe!

Three men at a time were to spend the nights in the guardroom – the chapelroom in The Rectory – and take it in turns to guard the road by the War Memorial, in case of German invasion. Along with men from surrounding villages, they took it in turn to guard the railway tunnel outside Honiton.

The boys soon had a new game: no more Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and Indians, instead they would challenge the younger lads and the girls, "Halt, who goes there, friend or foe?". We always answered "friend", of course, and back would come the command, "Advance friend to be recognised".

We watched with interest on drill nights as the men marched up and down the road. To begin with, only those who owned 12-bore shotguns were armed, so the others cut cudgels from the hedge. Eventually they were issued with rifles. These had been in store and Mum was obliged to light the copper in order to get adequate hot water, which was poured down the barrels to remove the grease which had been applied to prevent rust. Dad, who was an excellent shot, was issued with a cup discharger, an attachment which was fitted to the end of the rifle barrel and actually fired hand grenades.

Dad did everything for our church at that time, except preach, including stoking the boiler on Saturday nights to ensure that the church was warm for services the following day. The guardsmen who were on duty on winter nights were only too pleased to go into the stokehole for a warm-up and, while they were there, put on a shovelful of coke, which meant that Dad had an unbroken night's sleep.

Eventually, a room in The Armoury became the guardroom and ammunition – grenades and Molotove cocktails – was stored. Dad always impressed upon me that I must never remove the pin from a grenade and, if anyone else did so, I was to run as fast as I could (not his exact words!). I have often heard Dad relate the following tale. He was in the guardroom one night while one of his number was on patrol in Curscombe Lane. Suddenly a cry was heard, "Take cover, take cover", then deathly silence. When some time had elapsed and the patrolling corporal failed to appear, Dad went in search of him. The unfortunate man had intended to take a short cut through Higher Field (where Greencroft now stands), via the parish stile to Orchard Farm and the churchyard. Unfortunately, the strap of his rifle had become entangled in the stile, he had slipped forward and his fixed bayonet had penetrated the earth below. He was absolutely unable to extricate himself. The bright light he had seen, which had prompted him to shout "Take cover", thinking that it was a landmine, was the full moon rising!!

In their spare time, the Home Guard formed a concert party and entertained at intervals in the schoolroom. Some performed little sketches or told jokes and I can well remember Dad's rendering of "Hearts of Oak", Harold Godfrey's "Burlington Bertie" and "The Miner's Dream of Home" and farmer John Wheaton, who lived at Hackhams Farm and sang tenor with Dad in the church choir, singing "The Farmer's Boy".

Early in the war a charabanc load of children arrived, with little more than the clothes in which they stood, plus their gas masks – evacuees. They all wore labels, so we knew their names, but I had great difficulty in understanding a word they said. They were all from Bankside School, as were their two teachers, so they knew each other. I was puzzled that they all had the same address – Peabody Buildings. It must have been so strange for them. Most had never seen a farm animal and the story went round that one argued that milk did not come from cows, but from bottles. We soon made friends, though, and I am still in touch with one girl who was billeted at Splatthayes with her sister and two cousins.

Early in the war, when the siren, which was perched on the top of Honiton Police Station, sounded, Mum would get us out of bed and make us lie down on a mattress downstairs. Dad always got up and took the church key and put it into the church door, so that in the event of a bomb and/or fire, the first one there could easily gain access. I used to sneak out if I could and watch the searchlight, situated under Gittisham Hill, scanning the sky for the Luftwaffe. The intermittent drone of enemy aircraft was unmistakable. I could see the flashes as the shells from the anti-aircraft guns burst and the tracer bullets as they streaked across the night sky. Our windows rattled as Exeter was blitzed and we wondered if Winnie Bakke, a nurse at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, was safe and well. We could smell the smoke as Plymouth bore the brunt of Jerry's onslaught.

Not all Germany's sorties were confined to the hours of darkness and one Tuesday lunchtime we heard a tremendous explosion and I dashed to the front door in time to see a German Junkers flying low, machine-guns blazzing, over the railway line which ran between Honiton and the then Sidmouth Junction railway station (now Feniton). The bomb had landed on Honiton's Heathfield Army Camp (now Heathpark). I well recall my brother's reaction. Still a toddler, "Bloody Jerries", he shrieked, as he dived under the kitchen table.

You must be wondering, dear reader, how on earth I can remember that this occurred on a Tuesday. I will tell you. When, because of the increase in military traffic on the A30, the road became too dangerous for horses to travel along it to The Forge at Gittisham in order to be shod, Dad built an extension to his workshop in the orchard at Orchard Farm, where he carried on his business as a wheelwright and carpenter. In it he installed a forge and every Tuesday Art Rowe, Julian's grandfather, would cycle to Buckerell, his sledgehammer and other tools of his trade strapped to the cross bar of his bike. Horses were brought to be shod from near and far. There were few tractors then, so not just hacks and hunters were brought, but, of course, the heavy horses too.

The extra and heavy traffic was not just confined to the main roads, and army convoys, carrying troops on manoeuvres, also used our country roads. Soldiers stationed in Honiton marched through the village and GIs would throw chewing gum for us. The white Americans were housed in Heathfield Camp and the others under canvas and in Nissan huts at Broomhills Camp, just Exeter side of the Catholic Church.

Our war was not confined to land either and night after night, as dusk fell, we would watch as flying Fortresses and Liberators, some towing gliders, flew out from Dunkeswell and Smeatharpe. I have often wondered if we actually saw the 'plane in which Joseph Kennedy, brother of JFK, flew to his death. Often, as we came out of school for lunch at noon, we would see these enormous 'planes limping back to base, their fuselage torn and sometimes their engines disabled or even shot away.

We were also victims of the petrol shortage – not that there were many cars in Buckerell – but the tradesmen, including our butcher, could only manage to deliver once a week on a Friday, when he brought the weekend joint. Refrigerators were few and far between and so, even with a wooden-framed meat safe, which was covered with perforated zinc and kept in a shaded part of the garden, meat would never have kept for a week.

On Tuesdays I would hurry home from school, take Mum's bike and cycle into Honiton to fetch meat for ourselves and our neighbours. I had to hurry in order to be home before darkness fell. On one occasion, hurtling down Town Hill, I either hit a bump or a pothole and, to my absolute horror, heard a loud "splat" as one of my parcels shot overboard from the wooden box fastened to the carrier of the bicycle. When I was able to stop and turn around, I saw a convoy of army lorries heading towards me and the parcel lying in the road. To my absolute relief, I saw the driver of the leading vehicle put his arm out of the cab window to signal that he was pulling to the right and, as one, those following did likewise. My parcel of two pounds of tripe was safe, if a little gritty. Mum re-wrapped it in newspaper and all was well.

Life was full of surprises and, one day, on returning from school, we discovered that next door's iron railings had been cut down. This was what is now the red house below the War Memorial. The railings have been replaced by a lonicera hedge. Those belonging to The Rectory (now The Old Rectory) had also been removed from the low, curved black wall behind the War Memorial. These were lovely, tall and always painted white. Not even the railings and chains surrounding the tombstones in the churchyard escaped. Many iron garden gates were also collected and piled up along with the rest of the metal awaiting collection at a later date. By the time the lorries arrived, though, many of these had been re-hung in their rightful places.

Things appeared, too, as if by magic and I can remember the road-blocks, constructed of sapling trees, looking like giant sawing horses and festooned with barbed wire. There was one at Blacksmith Field gate (bottom of Cynnie's garden) but it was never needed. One morning, when we ventured out, we discovered that the countryside was strewn with strips of silver foil. This, said the boys, had been dropped by the Germans to disrupt our radar systems and enable enemy 'planes to fly in over our coast undetected. We girls soon found that by carefully folding and weaving we could make bangles, belts, hairbands and even a tiara.

In an attempt to aid the war effort, during school holidays we involved ourselves in the making of camouflage nets. A lady who lived in one of the big houses – one of the blue rinse brigade – was the organiser. A finished net was laid out on the floor of the Rectory room (no longer there) and another plain net was placed over it. We were given a number of hessian strips, dyed in many shades of green, brown and fawn, and we had to tie these strips into the topmost net to correspond with the colours of the net beneath. On one particular occasion the dyed strips were still wet and our hands and knees were very badly stained. I cannot think that it was this which caused my young brother to "flip", because he usually enjoyed being dirty. No so today, however, and he gathered up a handful of strips, threw them into the air and they landed on the beautifully coiffured hair of the organiser. He took advantage of the ensuing commotion and fled home to his mother, while the rest of us faced the music.

One of the last things one would expect to see travelling through Buckerell would be ships, but travel they did, on a lorry, of course. The reason for coming this way was because they were too tall to go under Iron Bridge, which carried the railway over the A30, Honiton side of Fenny Bridges. Not only was the load high, but wide as well and it invariably became stuck on the corner of Higher Field (where Greencroft now stands).

From his workshop in the orchard at Orchard Farm, Dad could see what was going on and, armed with pick and shovel, he would go to help. On one occasion he tore his shirt. Only a tiny three-cornered tear, but the speedcop who was escorting the load told him that he must submit a claim. Dad was horrified, "No", he insisted, "certainly not, Mother will mend that". However, pressed by the motor patrol constable, he did claim 17/6d (87½p) which, when it was paid, was enough to buy two new shirts, and Mum mended the one he had torn. Much later, a helicopter, also on a lorry, became stuck in the same place.

We were lucky here. The nearest bombs fell in the grounds of what is now Deer Park Hotel, so nothing very close, and no one was injured. I watched with interest as Mum changed her recipes to suit the available ingredients, for instance, making a quiche lorraine using corned beef and dried egg instead of bacon and fresh eggs. At Christmas she made sure that our cake was dark in colour by adding a bit of cocoa and topping it with mock marzipan, consisting of cake crumbs, margarine and a little almond essence.

I think, in truth, that I was too young to realise just how serious war is. Then came Peace, the church bells could ring out again and Dad set about teaching us youngsters to ring – but that is another story!

Ann Rosewall - 2001