



WWII Interviews

Michael Clarke was interviewed by his daughter, Sally Ann Clarke.

The Bombing of Kembrey Street

I think I was 6 or 7 at that time (1941-42). One night I was woken up by my mother. I was dreaming that coal was falling all over me but it was the plaster off the ceiling, the ceiling was coming down and my mother got my brother and I down to hide under the stairs. This was deemed the safest place to be. My father was already there. It would have been a bit packed in there. Horrendous noise. Why we didn't get up when the sirens went I don't know. People didn't, they thought it wouldn't touch me, it would be someone else's problem. This was before we had a steel table shelter. In the morning the whole streets, up and down were deep in dust and shattered glass. It was almost like it snowed but it wasn't snow it was debris. We had chickens in the back garden and a huge stone had blown into the air and smashed the roof of the chicken shed and in either end of the wedged roof there were the chickens. They had survived.

But across the way in Kembrey Street, several houses, one of them where my friend Brian Odey lived, were flattened, absolutely flattened. They were about mid way down on the right hand side about 300 yards from where we lived. He and his mother were both dead, some people the other side of the road were dead and another couple were badly injured. That was that, it was the end of a very nice family. He was a super lad, too good to be true. He wasn't one of the bad boys, he was intelligent. There was a lot, as you would expect, a lot of death and destruction. I can remember going to school and they called the attendance register, when they called Brian Odey, I stood up and said he was killed last night in the bombing raid. Which they politely smoothed over, so not to upset the kids I suppose. Nevertheless, it was not made a point off, it was just hushed up. Some people in Kembrey Street were blown out of the house, right out of their house in a steel shelter and landed on the rubble of a house on the other side of the road. The people were slightly injured but not much.

I don't remember feeling frightened; you could say it was a bit of an adventure. That was the worst bombing I can remember because it was so close. 300 yards is a sneeze away for a pilot, if he'd let it go slightly earlier he would have hit us.

At the top of Kembrey street was Plessey Company which they were probably trying to hit. After that bombing raid in Kembrey street, where the road ended, on the corner of the field, there was a very large crater where a bomb had gone off. Over a period of time, we would look in there to try and find scraps of bombs and shrapnel. Kids had all sorts of collections of shrapnel, tail fins. I wasn't all that keen on collecting it myself. Over a period of time this pit filled with water, there were newts, but you had to watch that when you stood at the side, it was very soft sided and you could slide down towards the water.

Italian POW's

At the top to Kembrey Street there was prisoner of war camp, mostly full of Italians. We would go up there and shout through the fence at them and they would shout back in their best English they could come up with. They all had a brownish coloured uniform but some, who were considered dangerous, had markers on them, a yellow spot on their front, on their legs or back so if they tried to escape the guards could aim for those points. When we went up there they tried to persuade us to bring our sisters up (if we had a sister), things like that. The Italian's used to work on local farms, there were also some Germans. A lot of the Italian and German POW's didn't go home after the war, they stayed on in Swindon.

Home Guard

My dad was pronounced unfit for active service. He had to join the Home Guard. He had to report to the Palace Cinema in Gorse Hill and they had a gun of sorts on the roof and if anyone came over they would be there to try and defend the town. They must have had places all over Swindon but this was the only one I was aware of. He turned up for his first night with his gaiters on up side down! Which always made us laugh in our family. It was just like 'Dad's Army'! He was a butcher but he had to work at 'Super Marine' in Kingsdown, a factory that produced Hawser glider towing cables. Pop made some of the tow ropes that pulled these gliders into the air. It was regarded as essential war work. So he gave up his job as a butcher, so that someone else would come in and be a butcher. He actually got well paid for it and they could get bonuses. Pop was no good at it, he was very slow, but the guys around him would do his share so they could all get the bonus. He was a butcher in the wrong job.

When he went back to being a butcher we always had a regular supply of meat. My mother always complained that we had the roughest cuts but I don't think she realized that many people didn't have any meat. We were lucky my uncle was a butcher and my aunt and uncle were grocers. I can not complain that we had a bad war. We, my brother Dave and I were well fed and healthy and strong.

Soldiers from Dunkirk

One time, we had a returning batch of army people who had been at Dunkirk marching through the middle of Swindon and they camped for a night or two on Crowdie Hill, only with bivouac tents on the side of the hill and there were hundreds of bedraggled soldiers walking up the road, very depressed and demoralized. They walked passed our house (in Cricklade Road) from the station. Women would run out from the houses on the side of the road and give them cups of tea.

American Soldiers

Towards the end of the War there were American personnel stationed around Swindon in various places and they would come into town at the weekends. There'd be some punch ups and fights with some of the local blokes, one American was beaten to death by the town hall, right in the middle of Swindon. They used to drive through the town with these columns of lorries, huge great lorries with guys on the back and all us kids used to run up behind the lorries because they would throw chewing gum and sweets. We would pick them up on the side of the road; we'd swap with each other. There was this horrible chewing gum, like dentine, but it didn't matter if it was something sweet and it was chewable.

Machine Guns on Cricklade Road

I can't say I was ever terrified. I can remember coming back from school and walking up Cricklade Road with a couple of other lads and a plane came over the top, along the length of Cricklade road. Rat-tat-tatting with machine guns. The bullets were dapping off the road. We got into someone's porch in the front of the house until it disappeared. It was only minutes, half a minute maybe, it was so quick it had come and gone, he strafed Pinehurst School, he must have thought it was a factory or a laboratory or something. I went home and told everyone what a close one it was. Why was I running round the streets when there had probably been a siren, I don't know.

VE Day

I remember VE Day. We had street parties all the way up Cricklade Road. One huge, long trestle table. And everyone that lived around that area would bring something in the way of food. And the kids sat down and we had jelly and ice cream."

Extract from WWII People's War

Contributed by Sally Ann Clarke

People in story: Michael George Clarke, Arthur James Clarke, Nell Doreen Clarke

Location of story: Cricklade Road and Kembrey Street, Swindon

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