

This story was submitted to the People's War website by Doreen Bennett on behalf of Hazel June Gardner.

BLITZ OVER SOUTHAMPTON

I still remember Sunday 3 September 1939, the strained atmosphere as I sat on the floor playing with my dolls house whilst my Dad was waiting for an announcement on the radio from the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. Normally I would have gone to Sunday School but not today. Most of my friends had been evacuated three days before but I had opted to stay with Mum and Dad and my little sister June, Then it came, the news we had all been dreading. "We are now at war with Germany". Everyone said "It'll be over in 6 months" but it was 6 years and changed all our lives.

At first nothing seemed to be happening, except what we saw on the newsreels, there was extensive fighting in Europe. We had to carry our gas masks everywhere we went in case of a gas attack which thankfully never came. My Dad dug out the garden and put up the Anderson shelter. He put in steps, bunk beds, a shelf and wired it for electricity.

By the summer of 1940 the bombing started over London and the ports on the South Coast. We had the docks and the Super Marine Works where they built the Spitfires, prime targets. My dad was a shoemaker but had to leave his shop every time the sirens went off as he was a special constable attached to Southampton Children's Hospital which had been taken over for bomb victims and body identification.

Night after night my Mum would prepare a tray of sandwiches and a flask of cocoa to take down the shelter with us and Dad's errand boy 'Gogs' who was staying with us. He played his mouth organ and we would sing songs like 'We're gonna hang out the washing on the Zeigfried line', until the sound of the whistling bombs coming down and explosions that shook the ground got too much. Before a raid the barrage balloons would go up, but the enemy planes would fire at them and the blazing helium gas lit up the sky. We also had an anti aircraft gun situated the other side of the garden wall which added to the noise. This went on for months. My school was bombed and my Church when people had gone down to the crypt during a daytime raid, they were buried beneath the rubble. I was very upset by this.

On 30 November 1940 my Mum was cooking a fish tea (it was skate) and we were looking forward to it as food rationing was tight. However we never had that meal as the siren sounded and we had to go down to the shelter once again. A sulphur bomb was dropped on our house that night; if it had been a high explosive I would not have been here to tell you this tale. It burned through the roof into my bedroom and gave off choking fumes. Mt Dad and an ARP warden tried to douse the flames but the sandbags were frozen. The next day my Dad said he was going to take us away to my grandparents who lived in Northampton. Unfortunately, the railway lines had been bombed at Eastleigh and we could not get through. My Dad found a taxi driver willing to take us as long as he could "bring the Missus" We all piled into the taxi and we had a long cramped journey to my Grandparents but what a relief. Sadly, we never went back to Southampton to live.

As my school was closed a few of us went to the rectory to be taught basic arithmetic in the mornings and in the afternoon, we were knitting khaki mittens for the soldiers on the front lines.

One day I was out shopping with my Mum and little sister when the sirens sounded. We were in a large department store named Edwin Jones. We were escorted to the basement where I remember sitting on orange boxes until the 'All Clear' sounded.

My Dad's life was saved by his 'tin helmet' as a piece of red hot shrapnel ricocheted off the rim.

In the mornings those children who were left behind found a new game to play after the raids. We would search for pieces of shrapnel and spent cartridges, collect them in shoe boxes and compare our finds to see who had the biggest pieces. We could not climb over the bomb sites though because there were houses sliced in two with the upstairs fireplaces, shelves and pictures still on the walls, the slightest vibration could bring the whole building down on us.