

When The Bombs Stop Falling

by Bidisha

Inspired by the wartime testimonies of Ben Sacks, James Elgar, Doris Cosgreave and Inge Munroe, which can be heard at the museum in The Library at Willesden Green, and by letters preserved in the Brent archives on the same site.

Irene made a wish as her brother Jem carved the turkey: the war would end and Father would come home. The following Christmas there was no turkey and Jem himself had gone to fight.

Irene spent New Year's Eve outside, watching the searchlights pick out enemy bombers. A lorry turned into the street, pulling an anti-aircraft gun behind it. The soldier manning the gun let a long peal of rounds into the sky and the lorry sped on. Irene saw bombers gathering overhead. "Get inside!" shouted her mother. "They think there's a gun emplacement here!"

They had a few seconds before the bombs hit.

That spring, Jem came home for three days.

"I'm going to design a tank that ends the war," said Irene. "It'll jump trenches, go underground and swim through water."

"Tanks are useless," Jem laughed. "Most of them break down the minute they're on the field and the others collapse under fire."

A tank testing centre opened up the road in Dollis Hill. Irene wanted see if her tank could be made for real, so she waited for her mother to go to sleep, took a butter knife for self-defence and climbed the hill. The centre was surrounded by watchtowers and wire.

"What are you doing?" hissed the night guard.

Irene started trembling.

"I wanted to see if there's a tank that'll win the war and ...and bring my father back. He's a pilot. I made a wish at Christmas – the Christmas before last."

Luckily, the guard was kind.

"We've just the thing. Come with me."

In the warehouse sat a massive metal tank.

"That," announced the guard, "is the Mark 9. One look at that and the enemy will surrender. What's more, it was made in your own back yard."

Jem died in the war and Irene heard nothing more about the Mark 9. Father sent letters home, written in pencil in a sloping hand on porous pages torn from a notebook.

Irene's mother sold her jewellery and house ornaments. Irene looked after the rationing book, keeping track of the points they'd used on tinned food and the weekly coupons for sugar, butter and bread. She dreamed about breakfasting on fresh eggs and sausages – no chance when the meat ration was one shilling per person per week.

Irene's mother began work in the munitions factory, making shell cases for torpedoes. It was heavy work for two pounds a week. She and the other women built air raid shelters in the garden and laid sandbags over the top.

Every day the factory gave its workers a half hour break. A local lady, Aunt Rose, collected ration coupons from each woman, bought cheap cuts of oxtail and liver and made tasty stews for everyone.

“When you join together, things go further. It's the single people that struggle on one ration,” said Rose one lunchtime when Irene was helping her serve.

Suddenly, they heard doodlebugs overhead.

“Don't worry,” said Rose. “As long as you can hear the engine running, you're safe because you know it's going to go past you.”

The engines cut out. They ran to the shelter, the doodlebugs went into a nosedive and the neighbours at 74 and 76 Church Road got a direct hit. Then came the V2 rockets, which struck with no warning. The houses crumbled on top of the shelter and trapped everyone inside for two days.

Irene was evacuated to the seaside. She was allowed a change of clothes, her nightie and underwear, handkerchiefs and a family photograph. She lived for letters from her parents. Her father addressed her as Fluff, her childhood nickname, and wrote, “You are clearly getting some benefit from the sea air, and yes I think you are putting on flesh if you are over eight stone.”

Irene ran away, came home to London and visited the war office.

“I'll do anything,” she told the man at the desk.

“Civil defence need messengers. Can you ride a bicycle?”

“I'll learn.”

“Then get yourself to Tailors Lane. Place called The Hub.”

The Hub was an ordinary office at street level but underground were dozens of operators wearing headphones, sitting at desks plugged with wires. “It’s a telephone exchange,” explained the woman showing Irene around. “We take incident calls and send help: heavy rescue, light rescue and ambulances. If the lines are down, we use messengers. That’s you.”

Irene crossed the city, pedalling wherever she was sent to deliver messages. Gradually she made friends with the ‘ATS girls’ – young women from the Auxiliary Territorial Services.

“We need someone for the quartermaster department. Like wardrobe. You’d be giving us our shoes and socks,” said a Lancashire girl called Sally.

On her first day, Irene found everyone lined up outside the nurse’s office.

“Head inspection,” said Sally. “They’re saying we’ve got lice. Especially us from industrial parts. Nurse is a snob, she thinks we sleep in hovels, five to a bed.”

The common room stank of chemicals and the girls sat about glumly, wearing towel turbans soaked in head lice treatment.

“We’ll be like this for three days,” said Sally. “It’ll all go grand, ‘til we go home on leave and come back just as lousy as before.”

In the last and bloodiest year of the war, Irene became an ambulance driver. She attended a midnight hit on Neasden sheds, where the carriages of the Metropolitan Line trains were kept. Then another call came through: “String of bombs at Stone Bridge. The turning’s demolished from one end to the next. Nothing’s left.”

When Irene was twenty her childhood wish finally came true: the war ended and her father came back. Irene’s mother opened a shop and her father became the local mayor. They died of old age.

Irene inherited her mother’s business. She never married and lived in the same flat all her life. After she died, there was a house clearance. In a shoe box, next to her dentures and plastic rollers, was a bundle of letters addressed to Fluff.