

# The Battle for Britain on the Suburb

The glorious weather of the summer of 1940 was the kind we dream about today. It began early and went on into September. But 60 years ago the Suburb experienced what must have been its most devastating catastrophe. Falling silently by

separate parachutes a pair of 'landmines', each with a ton of high explosive, landed 250 yards apart in the old Suburb. It was 10.20pm on Wednesday 25 September. Churchill later wrote that "such bombs of a weight and explosive power had never

been carried by aircraft before. To this there was no defence except reprisal."

Since the declaration of war on 3 September 1939 little seemed to have happened at home. In particular none of the forecast mass air attacks on Britain materialised. An American had named it 'the phoney war'. Looking out on a deserted Central Square, Frank Ballard, the Minister of the Free Church, was reminded of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*. But within a year the Suburb found itself in the front line!

One after another of our European allies fell to the Nazis. France would be next, so how could the British army escape? Three historic events in the Battle for Britain were about to take place, thus marking a turning point in the war. First came the miracle of evacuation. From the beaches of Dunkirk between 28 May and 3 June 1940, 225,000 British troops, and half as many French and Belgian, were shipped out in dramatic circumstances. Many there died, became prisoners, or escaped in other ways. Vic Flowers, who lived in Willifield Way, found himself on 17 June at St Nazaire with two other RAF men who were directed to board an overcrowded troopship. As they struggled up the gangway he experienced a terrible premonition. His pals needed no persuasion; they pushed their way back down and left the port. Shortly after, screaming Stuka dive bombers sank the vessel, SS Lancastrian, with the loss of more than 3,000 lives. Churchill embargoed the news. In the chaos the three somehow made their way to Brest, where they boarded the liner *Strathcaird*, which took them safely to Plymouth.

The second event later came to be called the Battle of Britain. Most people now expected Hitler to follow up with the invasion of Britain, and the Home Guard were formed. But the enemy's plans depended on first winning undisputed air supremacy, so they set out to destroy the RAF fighter force and its airfields. If Suburb residents thought that Dunkirk was a bit too near home for comfort, they had not expected to have a ringside seat for a battle. If the ack-ack guns on the Heath Extension were not firing there was no need to stay indoors, particularly in such lovely weather. The course of the battle above the Suburb took the form of high-level dog fights as fighter aircraft chased each other in deadly earnest, weaving and diving around so high that they were barely visible. But their engines left white vapour trails which looked like a gigantic spaghetti junction painted on



Coleridge Walk wrecked by the landmine

the azure sky. Such a scene was witnessed one Saturday afternoon by a group of old boys from Child's Way school who met regularly to play Monopoly in a back garden in Erskine Hill.

At night the boys eagerly awaited the latest score on the wireless. Although enemy planes had well out-numbered ours, their actual losses in the end were still twice ours. The immediate affect of the victory was the indefinite postponement of Allied invasion plans, and Hitler never had a further opportunity. Winston Churchill (without whom one dare not think what would have happened) praised the many workers and supporting units who had all played a part, but he wrote: "At the summit the stamina and valour of our fighter pilots remained unconquerable and supreme." Flight Lieutenant Eric Lovett DFC, whose home was in Creswick Walk, was already a Hurricane pilot when war began. He destroyed five enemy aircraft and was shot down himself twice - with serious burns from which he died on 7 September. In these unusual circumstances, Father Maxwell Rennie, the Vicar of St Jude's, was still able to take the funeral service of his parishioner.

The enemy now began to turn attention to the civilian population. The first bomb to fall in North London arrived on Friday 30 August when it flattened the house of Alistair Sim, the actor, in Wildwood Road. Although he was away at the time, one of the soldiers billeted there died before he could reach the shelter. This was the first time the Hendon civil defence services were in action. Lord Soper recalled the incident. His family were safely in a brick shelter in his garden, next door to Dame Myra Hess. They remembered the rubbernecks flocking to see the sight. Unfortunately a second bomb fell a month later which left his home uninhabitable. Again they were unhurt but had to move immediately to the Kingsway Hall Mission. They were not to return to the Suburb until after the war. As with some other cases, neither

of these bombs was recorded in the Suburb's list.

Having lost the air battle, the enemy decided to bring Britain to its knees by aerial bombardment, and on Saturday 7 September launched a major attack on London. This marked the start of the third event of 1940, known universally as 'The Blitz'. 350 bombers with fighter escort flew up the Thames to set light to the East End and the London docks. Such was the conflagration, fed by leaking gas mains, that it was clearly visible from the Suburb. Once again the guns on the Heath were silent and residents came out to view the fire from the Institute. Twelve miles to the south east, beyond Highgate, sheets of flame leaped high into the night sky, a terrifying sight. The bombing attacks on London that began that night continued until 14 May 1941.

Although on a relatively minor scale, the Suburb's turn was about to come. On 20 September, Gladys Hunter of Brookland Rise wrote to a friend in the north: "We have been having rather a too lively a time with air raids. You may have seen in the papers that the Germans seem to have established a regular route each night over a North West London Suburb We happen to have the misfortune to be that Suburb and this week has been most trying. Each night we have had a continuous raid for 9 or 10 hours with ear-splitting ack-ack gunfire, interspersed every while with bombs. Two fell in Brim Hill and Gurney Drive... Three died, and several injured, and a crater big enough to take a bus." There had been a bomb in the Market Place, fires in Denman Drive and six unexploded bombs waiting to go off in the area

between Temple Fortune Lane, Farm Walk, Temple Fortune Hill and Willifield Way which had therefore been evacuated. "I met scores of people there this morning with armfuls of clothes going to other parts of the Suburb. The milkman tells me there is damage in Central Square."

But on 26 September Gladys had much more alarming news for her friend: "The poor old Suburb suffered so badly last night. I can't realise yet myself the appalling damage. The raid lasted from 8.30 p.m. to 5.30 am. A land mine fell on Willifield Green and another in Coleridge Walk. About 300 flats and houses are uninhabitable." Two houses in the Walk were wiped out altogether with a family in each. The rest were almost in ruins. Adjacent roads within a 500 yard radius also suffered. Roof tiles avalanched, windows and doors were broken, ceilings fell down, dust and soot were everywhere. Gladys concluded: "In Temple Fortune every single shop front from Sainsburys (opposite Willifield Way) down to Lindons (corner of Bridge Lane) is smashed, goods were strewn on the pavements. Cheerio! We're still smiling but it's a bit forced today!"

Irene Hazelhurst lived with her parents in Wordsworth Walk, which looked across the allotments to Coleridge Walk. They were sleeping downstairs when the landmines exploded and spent the rest of the night in the brick air-raid shelter in Brookside Walk with many others. On the next day she made a phone call to a relative in Leatherhead who invited the family to go there. She found a taxi prepared to take them all



The King and Queen visit Willifield Green to see the devastation.

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Warden's Post, Willifield Green after the landmine.



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