

Growing up in wartime Deddington

John Fortescue



The Fortescue's house in Church Street - now Old Malthouse
John is standing beside the second window from the right

I was born 75 miles northwest of London in the UK at a village called Deddington. Deddington is 6 miles south of Banbury and 16 miles north of Oxford. I was playing near our kitchen door at 11am on September 3rd 1939 when the Prime Minister (Mr. Chamberlain) announced on the radio that 'we were at war with Germany'.

The news was not unexpected. A few weeks before, we had given up our sitting room to be a 'First Aid Post' in wartime. The stone floor was scrubbed, all the furniture removed, pictures and drapes taken down. An assortment of bandages and splints were put into the room together with a medical doctor's examination table. In the vicarage across the road, empty rooms were prepared as a hospital for casualties who were expected from London very soon.

When the war came, most of the patients in the hospital were children with skin diseases. Most had been 'evacuated' from the poorest districts of London. Many of them had never been in the countryside before. For example, some of the evacuees thought milk came in bottles from factories! Cows and green fields are unknown in the East End of London. The evacuee children had been taken from their parents at two or three days notice. They were to be in the country 'for the duration of the war'. Many never saw their parents again because their parents were killed in the Blitz bombing of London the following year.

In September 1939, it was expected that London would be bombed on the first day of the war. It was vital to get the evacuees out of the capital as soon as possible. At that time the popular song was "We are going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line." Other signs of the war were everybody began to carry a gas mask, identity card, and a ration book. All cars had headlights covered except for tiny slits. Gas was strictly rationed and the blackout was strictly enforced - even in Deddington. Window panes of houses were covered with strips of masking tape to reduce the risk of flying glass. Then, unexpectedly, the 'phoney war' began and lasted all winter. The heavy fighting on the continent did not begin until the following spring with the invasion of Denmark and Norway by the Germans.

On my 13th birthday, February 4th 1940, my high school in Banbury, 6 miles north of Deddington, was burned to the ground. The fire was not due to enemy action (or sabotage) as some suggested. It was started by an overheated stove chimney above one of the classrooms on the second floor. The fire then spread rapidly within the roof and gutted the building which was only a few years old. The fire was a catastrophe for the school and because of it I was put into another school. It was a 'Public (i.e. private) School' and I was a weekly boarder. The food and the staff were of poor quality owing to the war. At that time, the prefects and masters could beat the boys with a shoe (or cane) at will - for real (or imagined) faults. For example, I was beaten three times on my backside with a shoe on the evening of my arrival - for breaking a rule I could not have possibly know existed. After a while the school was not so bad especially after I became friends with the dormitory bully. He ensured my survival.

In 1940, as spring moved into summer, the war news became worse and worse. The Dunkirk evacuation occurred and then France fell. In the cool of the morning at Deddington, we could just hear the rumble of guns across the Channel in France.

A branch of the 'Local Defence Volunteers' (later to become the 'Home Guard') were organised in Deddington. They were armed with shotguns and old rifles. In some places, the Home Guard was armed with pikes taken from museums. The Home Guard around Deddington made roadblocks of trees pivoted at one end with a wagon wheel at the other. Everybody was on the lookout for German parachutists.

The classic story at the time was of a burning crashed German aircraft with a village yokel standing by leaning on a pitchfork and chewing a straw. A few minutes later the local Home Guard rushed up on his bicycle and asked "Anybody still alive?" The yokel was supposed to have looked at the Home Guard and said slowly "One came out but I forked him back in again!" The story well illustrates the feelings of adult Deddingtonians at the time.

As the summer wore on it seemed that England would be invaded and the Home Guard put posts and barbed wire in fields to stop gliders landing. That summer, Major General P.C.S. Hobart DSO, MC, (acknowledged by the Germans as one of the world's foremost experts on mobile tank warfare), was put on the retired list by the British Army. In the middle of the summer, he came to live in Deddington for several years. Back in the Army later in the war he distinguished himself by organizing the 'funnies' (tanks that could swim, explode mines using flails, or cross anti-tank ditches by driving over the top of one another) for the invasion of Normandy.

Just prior to arriving In Deddington, Hobart served as a Corporal in the Home Guard in Chipping Camden. Eventually, Mr. Churchill heard of his predicament and he was recalled by the Army for an interview. It is said that Hobart wrote a letter to army headquarters asking if he should appear for his interview in the uniform of a corporal in the Home Guard or a Major General in the Army. History does not record which he chose.

As the Battle of Britain reached its climax there was little air fighting as far north as Deddington, but we did see many German aircraft on the ground. A small factory at Adderbury (between Deddington and Banbury) was converted to recycle the metal from crashed German aircraft. The crashed planes were tracked to the

factory in 'Queen Marys'. These were 60ft long low loader trucks specially built for transporting aircraft. A yellow nosed, Me 109 with bullet holes across its fin, body and wing, was placed at the front gate of the factory for several weeks for all to see.

After the Battle of Britain, London was bombed almost every night for three months. I was still at the Public School at the time. Every now and again we would have an air raid drill. The whole school would then troop down to the cellars below the school buildings and sit in the cold cellar for an hour or so. One night it was different. The target for the German bombers was Coventry, about 30 miles to the north of us. That night the German planes flew directly over the school. As the night wore on the glow from fires in Coventry could be seen clearly from the school's top windows. The families of two of my classmates lived in Coventry. Fortunately, after a couple of anxious days, the boys heard that their families were all safe.

In 1941 it became evident that the war would be worldwide and last a long time. First Germany attacked Russia on June 22nd, then Pearl Harbour occurred at the end of the year (December 7th) and ensured American participation. The first event was more important for us in England because the Germans left us alone for a while and an invasion was no longer expected. Occasional sharp night bombing raids reminded us we were still very much at war. Incidentally, the lull enabled the Home Guard to be equipped with more up-to-date weapons and the pikes were put back in museums.

As a result of privations at the Public School in 1940/41 I lost 14 lbs in weight in 9 months. I was glad to return to the Banbury Grammar School. At first it was still quartered in various buildings in downtown Banbury awaiting the rebuilding of the school. For the next three summers I would usually cycle each day the 6 miles to Banbury to school. In the winter a special school bus us took us to school which was an innovation in England at the time.

During 1941, many RAF airfields were constructed around Deddington. Eventually, there were 14 of them within a radius of about 20 miles from the village. Most were used for training bomber pilots and air crews using Wellington bombers. On some airfields Bristol Blenheims, Airspeed Oxfords and Avro Ansons were used for training air crews. Operational RAF bombers were all twin-engined. The new generation of four-engined Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters came later and began to be used in numbers the next year.

As schoolboys, we avidly studied aircraft silhouettes on cards as children today study baseball cards. Fortunately for us, no German aircraft were seen around Deddington during daylight. Occasionally, a German aircraft would over fly Deddington at night. One morning, a stick of 12 unexploded German bombs were located in farmer's fields near the village. None had exploded. During the morning the bomb disposal people came to dig them out. After the bomb disposal squad had left in the evening, my friend and I climbed down several of the holes looking for souvenirs. We found nothing of interest. At supper the next evening, my friend Tony's grandparents gave him a long lecture about those "foolish children who had been reported inspecting the bomb holes". He told me it was very difficult to keep a straight face with the dried mud from the bomb holes still on his boots.

RAF airplane accidents were frequent in those days. My friends and I visited several of these crash sites, without seeing any bodies. We collected bits of aluminium which we later melted down and cast into ash trays in our home made foundry.

In 1942, when I was 15 years old, things began to heat up for me personally. On Friday nights throughout the winter months I would do "fire watching" at the Banbury Grammar School. The advantage was we were paid a small sum for sleeping at the school; the disadvantage was there was usually little sleeping done. One or two, small hand water pumps and buckets of sand were available to put out fires if incendiary bombs should fall on the school. Fortunately, the fire watchers were never needed.

On May 30th 1942, the first 1000 bomber raid was made by the RAF on Cologne. Wellington aircraft normally used for training at local airfields, such as Upper Heyford, were included in the raid. At the time, my family had just made friends with a young RAF couple who were billeted in Deddington. They were young and very much in love and had been married only a few weeks. I thought the lady was very pretty. Her husband did not come back from the Cologne raid. After several weeks it was learned that he had been killed.

While cycling to school through Adderbury in the Fall of 1942, I used to pass the entrance gates to an old mansion which was occupied by soldiers. As I passed the sentry box at the end of the drive way on one particularly cold morning, I was greeted by a large man with a gun who said unexpectedly 'Kinda cold ain't it". The Americans had arrived. Soon Americans were everywhere and, if one was lucky, one could get candy from them. Candy was strictly rationed in England at the time and boxes of chocolates were unknown.

One evening that summer, some friends came for supper and brought along with them a Norwegian scientist. He was very friendly although he spoke little English. He kept consulting a little black dictionary during conversations all evening. After that we saw him several times at intervals of several weeks. We believed he was a courier for us with the Norwegian underground. Then one day we were told he would not be visiting us again. On one of his trips back to Norway he had been captured by the Gestapo. I never heard his fate. His name was Sven Sommer.

The American build up continued in Southern England with Sherman tanks on the highways and Fortresses and Liberators, Dakotas and Thunderbolts in the skies. In the spring of 1943, I joined the Deddington post of the Royal Observer Corps. This was a part time organization which kept a 24 hour watch on aircraft in all weathers all through the war. The Deddington post included a total of about 15 Observers, mostly older men, with some younger men who were medically unfit to fight. I was the youngest member. We wore blue battle dress uniforms and were issued with thick waterproof winter coats. These were very warm and the envy of everyone at the time. For over two years, my duty hours at the post were from 2 pm to 6 pm on Saturday afternoons with other shifts as required. I never saw a German aircraft from the post although allied aircraft were around all the time.

In slack times, the lonely men on the posts talked for hours with the 'girls' who manned the plotting table at Bedford. We met these women very seldom, if at all, although we became very familiar with details of their lives. Everyone in England at that time was familiar with the phrase 'Careless talk costs lives'. In the Observer Corps it was said 'Careless talk costs wives'. Maybe this is the reason why the wife

of a wonderful old ex-London policeman (who was my partner on the Observer Corps Post many times) would occasionally get butter-less 'bread sandwiches' for his lunch. In 1945, when post observers visited Bedford for the first time, there were many surprises when faces were finally put to voices.

Our Observer Corps post was sited on relatively high ground. The post overlooked an airfield at Barford St John, about five miles to the northwest. In early June of 1943, I had the thrill of a lifetime. For some months we had heard gossip about of British experimental aircraft with jet propulsion. On May 28th 1943 I was at the Observer Post when a twin jet aircraft landed there. It stayed there for several weeks and frequently flew over the Observer Post. It was very secret and had a special code name. Observers were not to plot it, just to say the time when it took off and when it landed. It was the very first prototype Gloster Meteor. We also saw the first allied jet aircraft, the Gloster Pioneer, in flight. As far as I know it did not land at Barford. All was very secret. For example, a man in a pub near Edge Hill airfield (12 miles from Deddington) demonstrated the high rate of climb of the Pioneer by rapidly raising a mug of beer above his head. It was said that just afterwards two plain clothes policemen in raincoats then stepped forward and arrested him on the spot and took him away. (All Irish workmen, some of whom worked on airfields, were suspected to be spies).

During the Fall of 1943 we began to see squadrons of American Fortresses and Liberators flying around to gain height before going to bomb Germany, or France. By the end of the year British four-engined bombers (Lancasters, Halifaxes and Stirlings) were commonplace especially on mornings when they had bombed France. One day, about noon, a squadron of Lancasters flew over Deddington very low. They had been to bomb a special factory in France in daylight, which was rare for the RAF at that time.

I was also in the Air Training Corps (ATC). We did drill and navigation and lectures of aircraft recognition. But the best part of being in the ATC was we could go to any RAF airfield with the possibility of flying in the aircraft which were in the air that day. I accumulated some 36 hours flying time in this way, mainly in Ansons and Oxfords but with some hours in Blenheims and Wellingtons and even a Lysander. The Bristol Blenheims were at Silverstone airfield which is now (1997) used for Formula 1 Motor Racing.

The highlight of my ATC experience was a flight to a bombing range at Weston Super Mare in the tail turret of a Wellington bomber. When the pilot suggested that I 'test my guns' (four .303 machine guns) I had to explain to him who I was. Another memorable experience was flying in the rear open cockpit of biplane Hawker Audaxes and Hawker Hectors. These planes sometimes towed Hotspur gliders for training airborne troops. A friend and I once went on a 'training scheme' in a Hotspur III glider to Chipping Norton airfield along with some of these soldiers. It was only after we returned from this trip that we heard that the main spar of these gliders was good for 10 hours and the aircraft we flew in had at least 110 hours of flying.

In May 1944, everybody knew that an invasion of France would come soon. Around that time the Observer Corps instituted the 'Spitfire' Badge in aircraft recognition. This was a most difficult test and might include pictures of any kind of aircraft in the war- including Japanese and Russian. A friend and I both passed the test and had the badge sewn on our uniforms. Then, one evening in the house of one of the

Deddington observers, we were invited to a secret meeting. Observers, especially those with the Spitfire badge, were urgently required to identify aircraft in the vicinity of ships of the invasion fleets.

We with the Spitfire badge were offered two months as a Petty Officer in the Navy to spot aircraft for the guns on the ships on D-Day and beyond. My friend and I were accepted with the proviso that our 'employer' would give written permission to go. I rushed home and told my father and he said "If you want to go to France you had better go."

Unfortunately, the headmaster of Banbury Grammar School was not amused. He gave me a long lecture on the many former pupils who had been killed in the war and refused to sign my papers. So I stayed home for the next two months and helped to fill in my friend's shifts at the Observer Post. My friend went to Normandy and returned unharmed with many interesting stories. He saw very few German aircraft. He was so near to France that he could read the time on the French church clocks.

There was plenty of plotting to do at the Post at that time. Massive fleets of American and British bombers were commonplace. One day at the Post I counted 36 different types of aircraft. Another day we saw over 500 aircraft in the sky at once - the boxes of American bombers going out to France to the east and the British bombers returning home in the west. Overhead the sky was strangely silent and as clear as though it had been cut with a knife. Prior to D-Day we saw hoards of American Dakotas towing Hadrian gliders and the British equivalent, Halifaxes and Stirlings towing Horsa gliders. We were amazed to see how quickly aircraft appeared with black and white 'invasion stripes' when the time for the invasion came.

There were no German aircraft in the vicinity of Deddington during daylight in the summer of 1944 although a few intruders would come in to airfields now and then after dark. As the war in Europe continued during the Fall and Winter of 1944-5, most of the action we saw was heavy bombers either going to, or coming back, from Germany. Occasionally we would see a damaged plane with an engine out, or a hole in the wing. It was hard to believe as we looked over the tranquil Deddington countryside, that only a few hours before the crews of these bombers had been in a shooting war.

There was one further reminder of the 'hot war' on the continent. During the winter of 1944-45, very early in the morning, on an exceptionally clear frosty morning, one could see vertical vapour trails in the far, far, distance. They were caused by the German V2 rockets being fired from Holland. When the vapour trail ended it was a sign that a rocket was on its way to kill people in London. After May 8th 1945, the war was over and there were no more V2s.

Editor's notes:

The article was written in April 1997 for John's son, Forest. His class at Orange Glen High School, USA, had been given a project to find out what their fathers had done during WWII. I am most grateful to Forest and Diana's son, Ross, for providing the article, additional information on John's army service (p.21) and two photographs which can be found in the Deddington OnLine Gallery.

John's sister, Diana, also wrote about her wartime experiences while serving in the Women's Land Army and Timber Corps. These can be read in the book on page 186.