

War Time Experiences.

By Lez Miller

The outbreak of war in 1939, prompted me to leave school and start work. I had been due to leave at the end of term that Christmas anyhow but I was offered a job and my mother persuaded me to take it. At that point I had no idea as to which trade I should enter, we weren't directed in any particular direction at school except the few bright lads whose fathers usually wanted them to go into banking, surveying or other such professions. The rest of us dim wits took whatever openings were available. I finished up learning to cope with all sorts of electrical faults on a range of domestic equipment including radios and later, television receivers. At school, the only instruction on electricity that we received, was to copy the drawing of an electric door bell from the blackboard into our notebooks, and then to listen to an explanation of how it worked. I didn't understand it then, but later, when I had an actual bell in front of me to examine, it became very easy to understand. I must have always been a sceptic as I could not believe the, -to my mind-, ridiculous stories told to us during our scripture lessons at junior school. 'An old man coming down from a mountain carrying tablets of engraved stone'? The only engraved tablets of stone that I knew of at that early age were grave stones, and I knew that it was a two man job to carry one of those.

Work went well and became more interesting as time passed. I started to visit cinemas and in due course was introduced to a glass of beer or two. Drinking became more regular when I joined the newly formed Air Training Corps. There I met lads from other parts of town as well as old school friends. Our main watering holes were Henekey's in High Street and the Brittany bar that had opened under what is now the Churchill Tavern. This was just across the road from the Westcliff Ballroom where we usually gathered on Saturday nights to attend the weekly dances. We never drank to excess, -our pockets wouldn't allow this extravagance-, but we enjoyed ourselves. One lad that I worked with told me that his older brother always reckoned to spend a whole pound on beer on Saturday Night, a frightening thought! Some lads were more interested in dancing than others and it was a chance to get to hold a girl, a very exciting thing to do at that time. We all remembered one young lady, a few years older than us, who was usually accompanied by RAF officers as she lived quite close to Manston camp. On occasions when there was a 'Ball' at the Westcliff, held on Thursday nights when there would be a few extra musicians, we had to pay two and sixpence instead of the usual shilling, but there was also a bar on those nights. On these occasions this young lady would arrive wearing a backless, strapless evening gown, WOW! That really was a sight for sore eyes. We had only seen dresses like that on Hollywood films. This young lady, -not so young now-, is still around and on seeing her in Tesco's about a year ago and, -being much braver now than I was then-, I approached her and thanked her on behalf of all my old friends, for giving us such excitement, we had quite a chat then and on subsequent occasions when I have seen her and we both agreed that although the war had been a terrible thing, we were both very glad to have lived at that time and to experience the genuine closeness and helpfulness of everybody, the dance band music was better than, the lyrics sung by the vocalists were understandable and the musicians were smartly dressed, not a collection of vagabonds.

To get back to the ATC boys, most of us wanted to fly and generally speaking we were divided into those who wanted to become pilots or navigators and other crew members. As we reached the age of call up, we had to attend for a medical examination at Chatham, -(I only got that far as they took a dim view of my short leg due to an accident at the age of twelve)-, those who passed this exam then had to attend for a stricter medical in London and an aptitude test. Those who qualified were in due course posted into the RAF to commence training for their trade. Some went overseas to qualify in Canada, the USA and some to South Africa. These were Pilots and Navigators and came back to England mostly to finish off their training before being posted to operational squadrons, one or two who were rated as above average, stayed on to become instructors. The Air Gunner courses did not take too long

and our first loss was to a lad on his first operational trip, something went wrong and his plane had to land on the sea off the Yorkshire coast when returning home after the raid, the crew all got out safely with the exception of Don who was the rear gunner.

Other losses followed. The overseas trained lads came back but some had to re-muster for another trade. At that time there was a surplus of pilots. A second pilot as such was no longer needed with the four engine aeroplanes and the surplus bods were given the option of joining the Fleet Air Arm and learn to fly onto and off from aircraft carriers, in which case they automatically qualified for a commission. Or to take a Flight Engineer's course and use their piloting experience to good use if the occasion arose. If that did not appeal they could train as glider pilots.

A number of the lads were commissioned and one air gunner was awarded the DFM having completed four operational tours. When he was de-mobbed he became a bus conductor and after a while he died after a heart attack while at work.

While writing about air crew, I would like to mention another Ramsgate man, Mark Bateman. I never knew him as he was older than me, but heard about him from those that did. His father had a pub in King Street, just along from the market square and Mark had been a member of the Ramsgate Municipal Airport and learnt to fly. When war broke out he volunteered for RAF service but had to wait until they were ready to take him. During this waiting period, the evacuation from Dunkirk happened and he went with local boatmen to assist in this operation.

Once in the RAF and after suitable training, he started to fly Beaufighters with Coastal Command. He came through the war and I have since read that he was the first man to sink a U boat with rocket projectiles. I heard more about him in the early eighties when I attended a dinner given by the 'St George's Old Boy's Association', there I met up with Bill Stone, a man I had seen a lot of at The Vale Tavern during the war and after but never really spoken to until that time, apparently Bill had also flown at RMA but was turned down for RAF service on account of being colour blind. One of our ATC lads worked at the same airfield as Mark, as a member of the ground staff, so we had heard a bit about him.

Mark had a younger brother who was in the Navy and on the mine sweepers operating out of Ramsgate harbour. He was a blond lad and very popular with the girls at the Westcliff dances. His ship put to sea one morning and when they were out into the bay, his ship struck a mine and that was the last we saw of him. Mines were dropped around this coast from German aircraft at night so mine sweeping was a daily occurrence and we became used to loud bangs. For a time Wellington bombers, converted for mine sweeping operations by having a large circle fitted under the fuselage and wings that contained a powerful electric magnet energised by equipment carried inside the fuselage, were frequently seen around the coast. The theory was that if they were flown at low level over the shipping routes, they would cause the mines to detonate and be safely out of the way of the explosion when the sea erupted.