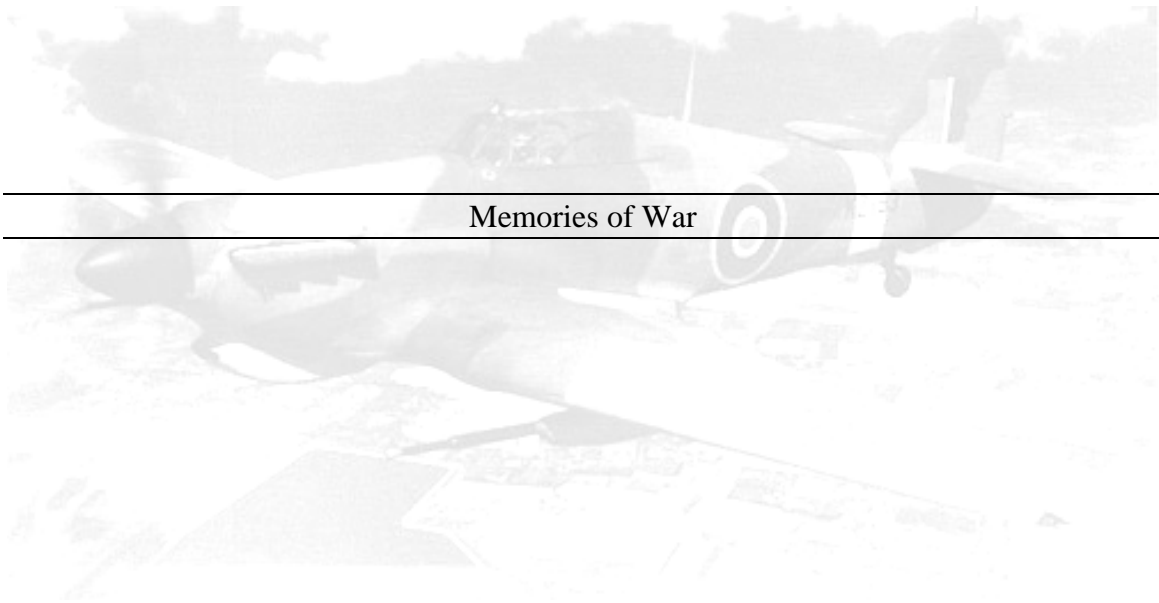


## The Canadian War Museum History Award



Memories of War

Written by: Louise McIver

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my grandfather, Ramsay Manners, and family friend, Nancy McLean, for sharing their personal experiences of World War II.



Family photo of training camp in the United States of America, 1941

## Memories of War

*“At 10.00a.m. on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1939, everybody in Britain was gathered around their radio sets to listen to the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, inform us that Great Britain was now at war with Germany. I remembered feeling a little numb that the politicians had allowed such a terrible thing to happen but I also had a strong feeling of patriotism and a determination to defeat the Germans. Of course we didn’t know what to expect but I was a bit shattered when the Air Raid sirens sounded within the hour.”* These were the words my grandfather used as he began to tell me what it was like to live during the time of the Second World War.

My Grandpa, Ramsay Manners, was 17 years old and living with his family when the war started. He lived in Croydon, 12 miles from Trafalgar Square, on the outskirts of London. Even though this area was not as badly bombed as central London, frightening air raid sirens, the rumble of overhead planes, and the distant sound of bombs were heard frequently. By “the end of December 1940, 136 bombers attacked the city of London.”<sup>1</sup> The night raids were much more frightening than the daytime raids because of the search lights and the noise which reminded people of the imminent danger of attack. When the sirens sounded people had to swiftly leave their homes and run to the nearest public shelter if they did not have one of their own. These shelters were crowded and filled with frightened people of all ages who were obligated to spend anywhere from a few hours to all night there. “Your life rotated around the sirens.”<sup>2</sup> My Grandpa told me *“Every day we would watch the German bombers and fighters engaged by the Royal Air Force fighters and we would see planes from both sides being shot down, often in flames,*

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<sup>1</sup> Fountain, Nigel. WWII, The People’s Story. Pleasantville: Michael O’Mara Books Limited, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Fountain, Nigel. WWII, The People’s Story. Pleasantville: Michael O’Mara Books Limited, 2003

*and airmen bailing out and descending by parachute.”* Everybody dreaded going out into the street, afraid of the devastation they might find. “People took shelter in warehouse basements and underground (subway) stations where they slept on makeshift beds amid primitive conditions with no privacy and poor sanitation facilities.”<sup>3</sup> A number of people were regularly forced to spend their nights in such a way, including my grandfather’s family.

Croydon, where Grandpa and his family lived, suffered quite a lot of bombing. Grandpa said it was fairly common for his family and the neighbours to watch the searchlights trying to pick out the bombers. The constant roar of the Anti-Aircraft guns, the whine of the enemy bombers, the explosion of the bombs and the bright fires which lit up the night sky are images which have remained with my Grandpa’s generation ever since. *“I can remember rushing around our garden scooping sand on to several incendiary bombs which could have set our house alight. On 28<sup>th</sup> September 1940 an enormous explosion was heard when a landmine was dropped in a Recreation Ground about a quarter of a mile from our house. Shortly afterwards the air-raid warden came to tell us that another landmine had embedded itself about 5 ft deep only 150 yards away but had failed to explode. We were forced to leave our house and to go to a public air-raid shelter a bit further away. My mother and siblings spent two nights in that shelter until a friend offered them accommodation outside the danger area.”* A few days later a Naval Squad came to remove the landmine. As it was lifted out of the ground it slipped and fell, exploding with earthquake-like consequences. When they returned to their house they found every window broken and many of the roof tiles were missing. The

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<sup>3</sup> “The Blitz.” *The History Place: World War Two in Europe.* n.d. Online. Available <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/timeline/about-blitz.htm>. 21 Mar. 2005.

house next door and many other properties were in ruins so my Grandpa's family felt very thankful. It was a month before they were able to return to their home. After the land mine experience my Great-Grandmother sent Mary and Norman (Grandpa's siblings) to stay with her sister, Dora, in Scotland. They were there for about two and a half years before it was thought safe to bring them home. This scenario was acted out all over southern England with families sending their children away to the countryside and even as far away as Canada. It was very difficult for both the adults and the children to deal with long separations. Visits did not occur often partly due to difficulties with travel and also because it unsettled children who were already homesick.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the war being fought in Europe initially, the whole of England was affected by the conflict. Both Grandpa and a family friend, Nancy McLean, said everyone anxiously read the daily papers and listened for news on the radio to keep abreast of the events. Posters started appearing, appealing to the public to contribute to the war effort.<sup>5</sup> In addition to those men and women who joined the armed forces there were many who were either too young or too old who participated in national security and joined organizations such as the Home Guard and the Air Raid Precautions organizations. "[Farmers] and various other people engaged in Reserved Occupations."<sup>6</sup> Reserved Occupations were jobs that were considered too important, people could not leave them to fight in the war. A home defence force was created by men who were too old or unfit to fight, this became known as the Home Guard.<sup>7</sup> Initially they did not have

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<sup>4</sup> Wicks, Ben. *No Time to Wave Goodbye*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, 1988

<sup>5</sup> Fountain, Nigel. *WWII, The People's Story*. Pleasantville: Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 2003

<sup>6</sup> "The Homeguard — Hemyock Residents Remember WWII." *Hemyock Castle*. n.d. Online. Available <http://www.hemyockcastle.co.uk/ww2/ww2-dads.php>. 21 Mar. 2005.

<sup>7</sup> "The Homeguard — Hemyock Residents Remember WWII." *Hemyock Castle*. n.d. Online. Available <http://www.hemyockcastle.co.uk/ww2/ww2-dads.php>. 21 Mar. 2005.

proper equipment and Grandpa said that they would practise drills using brooms and pitch-forks instead of rifles. The Home Guard was an important part of national security efforts because these men defended small towns while the soldiers were away fighting.

It was not just the working life that changed when the war arrived. Peoples' routines and day-to-day lives were dramatically altered. Grandpa told me that the main changes they noticed from peacetime included the issue of gas masks, strict enforcement of the blackout of all windows during the hours of darkness, and rationing. He said *"Food rationing meant we got very little fresh meat, very few eggs and only two ounces of butter per week each; exotic fruit like bananas were totally unobtainable."* It was thought that the general population had a healthier diet through rationing because they did not have the many treats they enjoyed pre-war.<sup>8</sup> Clothing was also rationed by coupons, as was gasoline. Frequently methane gas was used as a substitute for gasoline.<sup>9</sup> Everybody had to carry gas masks when they left the house and because of the limited diet, orange juice, cod liver oil, and milk were issued at schools. "Ration books were a part of every British household's life."<sup>10</sup> Nancy, who was 14 at the time and lived in Scotland, told me that people spent hours lining up outside grocery shops to get their allocated rations and housewives had to be very ingenious with their cooking to make varied and nutritious meals. Cakes and biscuits were rarely available, and even in hotels the menu was quite limited.

In August 1941 (at the age of 19) my grandfather joined the Royal Air Force and after some basic initial training was sent to the United States of America for flying

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<sup>8</sup> Fountain, Nigel. WWII, The People's Story. Pleasantville: Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 2003

<sup>9</sup> Sayers, W.C. Berwick. Croydon and the Second World War: the official history of was work of the borough. Croydon: W.C. Berwick Sayers, 1948

<sup>10</sup> Fountain, Nigel. WWII, The People's Story. Pleasantville: Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 2003

training. He then sailed from Clyde, Scotland, in January 1942 for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Living conditions were very rough and sparse. The men slept in hammocks and had to keep the mess rooms neat and clean. The journey took fourteen days because of all the zigzagging and altering of the course of the ship due to the danger of U-boats. After docking in Halifax, Grandpa was put on a train and sent to Moncton, New Brunswick, which was the Reception Centre for all personnel posted anywhere in North America. He then went on another train for the long journey to Albany in Georgia, before going to Primary Flying School in Lakeland, Florida. Grandpa described a typical day by saying *“My squadron would rise at 7:00am. We usually flew mornings and afternoons and about twice a week at night. Also at least once every week we would have a session of instrument flying on the Link Trainer”* (a device to teach pilots to fly by their instruments alone without being able to see the sky or the ground). *“When the weather was too bad for flying we stayed in the flight hut and played cards and monopoly.”*

Grandpa came home from New York on the Queen Elizabeth which had been stripped down to basics. *“I slept in what had been a second class cabin, designed for two, with five other fellas in three two-tier bunks. There was insufficient headroom to sit upright in bed and barely enough room to move between the bunks. The ship was so over-loaded that the queues for meals went on almost 24 hours per day.”* The trip took seven days and they landed in Scotland on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1943. After further training Grandpa was posted to the 289 Squadron, an Anti-Aircraft co-op unit, the flying being to train the gunners and searchlight crews. *“Unlike many of my friends I did no operational flying against Germany and really I had a pretty “cushy” war. Several of my friends were killed on sorties against the Germans and others were taken prisoner. Bomber*

*Command lost 55,000 aircrew and of the pilots enlisted in 1939, only ten percent lived to the end of the war.”<sup>11</sup>*

On 9<sup>th</sup> September 1943, Allied Forces invaded Italy from which followed a very long hard struggle and it took until June 1944 before Rome was captured by the Allies. On 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1944 (D-Day) Allied Forces landed in Normandy.<sup>12</sup> Grandpa remembered this day and told me, *“The invasion date had been kept a close secret and I, stationed in Northumbria, was no more aware than a man in the street. My mother, however, was aware it had started because the skies over Croydon were black with planes and gliders. Some days before, my step-father, a surgeon, had been sent for, to take up surgical duties at one of the emergency hospitals which had been set up to deal with the wounded.”*

This was both an exciting and frightening time for those living in southern England as they became aware of the planes flying towards France in huge numbers.

The next important event on the Home Front was the arrival of the flying bombs of which Grandpa Ramsay saw many examples of their devastation when he was visiting the London area. He said his family had to contend with these things daily. The V1 (called the ‘Doodle Bug’) would fly near to London after which it dived to earth and exploded about a ton of armament. People were very frightened by the noise they made as they approached. The V2 was a long range rocket and about 1300 V2s were fired on the London area by the Germans, mainly from a base near The Hague, and they killed

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<sup>11</sup> Probert, Henry. Bomber Harris. London: Greenhill, 2001

<sup>12</sup> Young, Brigadier Peter. The World Almanac of World War II: The Complete and Comprehensive Documentary of World War II. London: Bison Books Ltd, 1981



2724 people and seriously injured 6476. In Croydon alone over 100 V1s exploded, the total for the whole of London was 8500.<sup>13</sup>

Final victory in Europe was declared on 8th May, 1945. Street parties were held all over the country and huge crowds assembled to celebrate in Trafalgar Square and Picadilly Circus. The King and Queen and Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, appeared on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to great cheers. The whole country seemed to go crazy with dancing, singing and parties in the street and celebratory drinks. A Victory Parade took place in London on August 10, 1945. People witnessed a colourful, uplifting procession of marching bands and representatives of all the armed forces. The cheering and flag waving was non-stop.<sup>14</sup>

My grandfather was fortunate in that the war gave him the opportunity to travel, meet new people and learn how to fly. He did not experience many of the horrors that affected so many other people in Britain and throughout Europe. Although the war was a terrible point in history that resulted in millions of deaths, Grandpa said it brought out the best in people. There was a camaraderie with neighbours helping each other out and sharing what little they had. Once the war was over the British people did not dwell on the past, preferring to look to the future with determination and resolve rather than to live in the past. Learning about the Second World War from talking with my grandfather has given me a greater understanding of the life changing experiences a whole generation lived through and has strengthened my desire for peace.

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<sup>13</sup> Churchill, Winston. *The Second World War, volume VI*. London: Cassell, 1954

<sup>14</sup> Fletcher, Tom. "Part 8... V - E Day (Victory in Europe) 1945." n.d. Online. Available <http://www.macksites.com/PART8.htm>. 23 Mar. 2005.

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