

# Adolph Hitler – or Oxhey's Part in his Downfall!

*(Apologies to Spike Milligan)*

War came to Oxhey rather early – I think it was about 1937 when the Government decided to test the defences of UK against Air Attack. A Searchlight Battery, Royal Engineers, probably from Harrow Territorial Army, was deployed one weekend on the golf course at Oxhey. We children heard about it on the 'grapevine' and decided to go and see it. A small group of us left Watford Heath to go down the footpath that led to Absalom's Wood (Penrose's), over the railway footbridge and across the fields, over the brook, to the 'Green' where there was a large periscope. In the winter the reverse slope was used as a toboggan run when we were Scouts and we had a giant sledge holding about 10 boys. This afternoon the area was covered with bell tents (1914 pattern), a row of large lorries and a searchlight. It consisted of a large diameter circular drum with a glass front, mounted on gimbals, secured to a chassis with 4 wheels. Much more important to us boys was a deadly looking 'Lewis' machine gun mounted on a tripod, to resist dive-bombers. "Gi'e us a go," we begged the soldier in charge – "F\*\*\* off," was his reply and a large hand was raised to give us a clout – we took the hint! It did not pay to cheek adults in those days as retribution was swift!

Nothing seemed to be happening and my pals found out the 'Light' would not go on for many hours. They went off to play in the brook, building water wheels or dams or up to the railway line to place pennies on the rails so the trains flattened them out. I was more stubborn (or stupid) and I asked the soldier what the problem was and why it took so long. "Waiting for candles," he replied. "Go on, you're having me on" was my answer. "Like all kids – a smart arse, know everything, come round here," and he took me round to the front of the searchlight. Opening the door he showed me a space between the glass and the polished reflector plate. "That's where they go," he said. I remained unconvinced. Round to the side he took me, one hand grasping my ear, and showed me a brass plate. "What does that writing state?" he demanded and I read "umpteenthousand candle power!" The soldier had me cold – I

could only stammer an apology. "They will come soon but it takes hours to pack them in the casing and then sometimes we run out of matches lighting all the candles," he went on. I could see the logic of what the soldier said. Eventually the searchlight went on to reveal an ancient biplane slowly flying across the sky. I dare not go home across the fields so set off towards Hampermill Lane and got lost. A policeman found me and gave a lift home on his bike. 'Half a crown' changed hands and I was sent up to bed.

My Dear Old Dad (D.O.D.) had served in 1914 after an adventurous life abroad. His regiment was London Irish Rifles and he fought as a Private Rifleman in France, Belgium, Egypt, Palestine, Salonika and Macedonia. He continued to study weapons and tactics as a hobby. In 1938, convinced as many were that War was inevitable, he decided to build a bomb proof 'dugout'. Together with my brother Jim and hindered by Mick and myself, he dug a large hole in our lawn. The sides were concrete panels from his work and metal posts were concreted in. Then Chamberlain came back with his 'piece of paper' and Dad was overwhelmed with work connected with impending war, despite the Government's promise that War had been averted. The Council delivered an 'Anderson' Shelter and this fitted into the hole nicely. It was a corrugated iron, semicircular shed with an escape hatch one end and an open entrance the other. Dad put 3 feet of earth on top and turned it into a rockery. It was a great place to grow marrows too. A metal door was bought and hinged on to the entrance with a 'blast' wall in front. Eventually, electric light and bunks were fitted. Cork insulation was applied to absorb condensation without success. D.O.D. invited us children to sleep down there all the time for the first two years together with an adult. It was damp, dark, full of insects and very stuffy with the door closed. Open, it was freezing cold in winter and very hot in summer. No wonder we had perpetual colds. Dad's firm was now making concrete shelters for MPs and Civil Servants with all 'mod cons', concrete pipes for the new

camps springing up everywhere and even concrete landing craft! I do wish I had saved some of the publicity leaflets!

My D.O.D. had been gathering technical information on weapons and explosives for a long time and preparing scale drawings (he was a superb draughtsman). He realised that there were no training manuals on German weapons so published a series of booklets starting with grenades. The Military Intelligence arrested him and confiscated all his work, without payment, for the Regular Army! He was released once they had decided he was not an Enemy Agent (he never dressed as a Nun, which was recognised at the time as a sure way of detecting a German Agent or Parachutist!)

One morning a long column of army vehicles arrived in the Avenue and down in Oxhey Street. The young officer in charge had come to bid farewell to his parent (the 'Colonel') who lived in the big house on our side, adjoining the Brennans. I believe he was killed in France and the family moved away as the Smees bought the property.

About 1940, Churchill raised the LDV (Local Defence Volunteers) and our lot later became the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion Hertfordshire Home Guard. The HQ was the Gasworks in the High Street and they soon became known as the 'Gasworks Gang'.<sup>1</sup> Wives were very suspicious of the LDV as their menfolk seemed over-anxious to join and were mysterious about their duties. "Defending the Pubs more likely", was the general verdict. There were no weapons, no uniforms except a large khaki patch with LDV in black letters, sewn onto the sleeve. Later they got a khaki blouse and trousers, a leather belt with brass buckle, ammunition, black boots and short leather anklets, into which trousers were tucked. A side hat (forage cap) with a brass stag in a circle with letters Home Guard was eventually issued.

My D.O.D. went up in the attic and from behind a rafter produced a bundle which, when opened, contained a black leather holster, a belt and a 9mm German automatic pistol with

two magazines. He had shot an officer in Palestine and 'souvenired' his pistol. On the strength of his technical knowledge and possessing one of the few weapons, Dad was made Sergeant. Later, when the LDV became Home Guard and things were more organised, D.O.D. was commissioned and became Weapons Training Officer. American rifles and bayonets were issued but for a long time, no modern weapons were available. A Colonel Blacker (ret'd) began to design weapons for the Home Guard and soon around Oxhey, at crossroads and bridges, appeared concrete pits with a concrete circular plinth with a stainless steel tube in the middle. This was to take a fearsome mortar called a 'Blacker Bombard', which fired beer bottles filled with petrol/oil. Later still, another weapon – the Smith Gun, was issued. This had a smooth bore barrel, crude sights and two convex solid wheels. It was towed by a car or pulled easily by two men. Turned on its side, the wheels allowed the gun to rotate and it fired small shells.

Dad commenced to issue his manuals for all these weapons and they were snapped up by H.G.'s anxious to learn. Manuals followed on the Bombard, Smith Gun and German weapons. Sold by W H Smith at 2/6d a manual, Dad was a happy man. Local 'politics' ensured he never got promoted beyond Lieutenant but he was known and respected throughout the county.

Having joined the LDV at the Gas Works, Dad started up a 'Bomb Factory' in our house, since weapons were not available. We children were co-opted to fill Benskin's beer bottles by the dozen with a mixture of petrol, oil, wax etc. to form a 'Molotov Cocktail' bomb for use against tanks. Fuses were made from string soaked in salt petre and other chemicals. We cut lengths, soaked them and put them to dry on the patio wall. Lengths were set alight and time measured, to give an idea of how long they would take. Crude but efficient. I accidentally dropped another type of small grenade into the 'Anderson' and blew up the bunks etc. My parents were not amused and nor were the neighbours. It was difficult to sit down for several days!

My brother Jim volunteered for the Royal Navy but waiting to 'come of age' he became a store man for the Home Guard. The colonel of 6<sup>th</sup> Herts H.G. either had one arm or could not raise his arm, so he ordered a hand made, very expensive carbine, fitted to fire with one hand from the shoulder. Jim brought it home and we all had a go at targets at the end of the garden (I hope no one was in the allotments).

Jim left and Wendy, my elder sister, became a Postwoman; my mother worked nights at a light engineering factory making anti-aircraft gun shells. Everybody had to do their 'bit'. Brother Mick and myself collected salvage with the Scouts and help in the WVS canteen in Casiobury Park, washing up mainly. We offered to help look after the cakes and sandwiches but the women refused – why were adults so suspicious of boys in those days?

Rationing came in and soon our sweet ration was very small indeed. Gob stoppers and the despised boiled sweets became popular due to their lasting properties.

Our parents were plagued by a succession of petty minor Council Officials and particularly, overbearing women, demanding information or assistance. My mother was a very imposing lady with an 'aristocratic' voice and a lively temper. They all got short shrift, I am afraid. My parents did have to accept some things though. You were 'fair game' to some Council Officials with Socialist /Marxist ideas. We had to accept lodgers for instance. The official demanded to see every room and all rooms counted as bedrooms. Our lodgers were Noreen and Mick – he was a southern Irish, Regular Artillery Bandsman and Noreen was American, wed on a pre-war tour. She was wealthy – had 2 cars in USA and was very spoilt. Life as a private's wife did not suit her. Her mother sent her regular food parcels, including 7 lb tins of marshmallow. She would not give up one mouthful, even to our little sister Janet, but would eat spoonfuls out of a tin in front of us. We were really pleased when Noreen went and was replaced by a young man, employed on war work who

became one of the family for a long time. It was very hard on mother to have to share her home with strangers. In the summer we collected blackberries for jam (there was a sugar allowance later) and 'Hips' from wild roses to provide Vitamin 'C'. When Wendy had a baby she got Rose Hip Syrup on ration and ghastly was its taste!

Wardens patrolled rigorously and Mr Sargent was our Warden. He got Dad fined because we children turned on a light, without blackout. Firemen came round and all the antiques and thousands of books, housed in our attic (the remains of Dad's antique shop venture) were taken out and burned in the garden. I never saw my Dad so upset.

We heard that brother Jim's ship, HMS Cairo on the Malta Convoy, had been torpedoed and we did not know if he was saved. Mother went to work that night and made a national record for the number of anti-aircraft shells made! He was saved by a Destroyer whose Captain came from Oxhey (I do not know his name). Later Jim joined a destroyer which turned turtle in the Channel. He then joined HMS Sheffield on Russian Convoys as a RADAR operator and despite being continually at sea during the whole of the War, he survived.

Sister Wendy married another sailor and came off stage to be a wife, mother and Postwoman. In her spare time (?) she gave private dancing lessons at home.

We would sit on the bridge parapet and watch the trains go by and see the loads of tanks, guns etc. We were keen aircraft spotters too, right from the beginning. We soon learnt to listen to the engine noise and could tell aircraft simply by sound. Later we watched Spitfires and Tempests attacking 'Flying Bombs' by tipping them over by a wing.

There were many exhibitions to go to – especially in London. Outside Watford Town Hall there were parades in aid of 'Wings Week' or Savings Bonds etc. I remember a tank and a Hurricane being on show, for example. There was a wonderful 'Burma' exhibition in London with realistic imitation jungle, even down to croco-

diles! We could watch London burning during the Blitz. The Rockets, especially the one which landed in Watford, were very frightening.

Our parents tried – not always successfully – to keep us apart from the War as far as possible.

'D-Day was special. To see hordes of bombers passing overhead and to hear the hourly reports on the radio was breathtakingly exciting. The Radio of course was vital. News – especially 9pm news – was sacred. Adults gathered round and were very quiet. We learnt of the torpedoing of Jim's ship before we got the telegram. People were more stoical then – no hysteria – no public tears – just a quiet determination to get on with the War.

Neighbours respected grief or quietly helped out – seeing us children off to school, for example.

The War ended for our family with the party organised by my Mother at the Parish Hall (*now Table Hall, soon to be demolished*) in Pinner Road, opposite the Co-op (*now Hairtech and Video shop*). My sister Wendy sang

'In My Sweet Little Alice Blue Gown' wearing her wartime wedding dress of blue. She also did acrobatic dancing and played the Accordion. The Blackout was taken down and the Anderson discarded. Later the Council demanded its return! Dad's firm went back to making drainage pipes, brother-in-law Leslie came home and moved with Wendy to the new council estate at Garston. Brother Jim came back, married Hilda Hanham and went off to Berkhamsted to start a shop. I left school to join Stimpson Lock and Vince at Bushey and then at Oxhey Station. Brother Mick was apprenticed to Rembrandts. Sister Janet eventually went into jewellery and watches.

The War – yes, those of us who are left now remember the War. Many bad memories, but a lot of good ones too.

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Thank you David, for your magnificent contribution to our set of History Sheets. We do appreciate the time and effort you spent in writing them, especially as you did it all in longhand. I'm sure everyone enjoyed reading them and is sorry that this is the last one in the series! *Editor*

1. David says that Colonel John Sainsbury TD.FSA, has written several books at low cost recording the history of Hertfordshire soldiers including Yeomanry, Infantry, Artillery and recording all medals and decorations awarded to Hertfordshire men and women. He is now writing a book on the Home Guard and would like to hear of anyone connected with the 6th Battalion Hertfordshire Home Guard whose HQ was at the Gas Works in Lower High Street, or anyone connected with Home Guard in Herts. He can be contacted on 01438 715053 or write to him at: 2 New Place, Welwyn, AL6 9QA.
2. David would be pleased to hear from anyone who served in Croxley Green in 479 or 286 Herts Yeomanry R.A.