

## The way we were By George Simpson

Published Date: 10 September 2009



*I copied this article from the Brighouse (Yorkshire near Huddersfield) Echo. I hope they don't mind my attempt to increase it's circulation somewhat – But when I saw it was by an ex WW2 Merchant Seaman and full of such interesting detail I couldn't resist it.*

**Left** -George in his teens looking dapper in his suit complete with a hanky in the top pocket and a MN badge in his lapel, no doubt just paid off and cruising the town looking for a escort of the female kind.

**SEVENTY** years ago this summer the family of former Brighouse businessman George Simpson was issued with gas masks and instructions to build an air raid shelter in their garden. For George, who was about to start secondary school, it was a great adventure. But just three years later, and aged only 14, he joined the Merchant Navy and found himself on the River Mersey heading for the North Atlantic. Here he vividly recalls his wartime experiences . .

IT was during the school summer holidays that council workmen came and pegged out an approximate 6ft by 4ft plot in our garden, marking an area where a 4ft hole should be dug.

Alongside they'd also left a curious pile of galvanised, corrugated sheet metalwork, together with a hessian bag containing nuts, bolts and a crude spanner.

The accompanying leaflet informed us that this was our very own Anderson Air Raid Shelter.

When Dad came home, he quickly sized it all up and with one of his acid asides said: "You're big enough, ugly enough, it's time to start earning your keep" – and promptly handed the job to me.

Right from the start, in terms of frenetic build speed, my neighbourly opposition left me in the starting blocks. As for comfort provision, I was totally outclassed. Bunk beds were being assembled and raised floors, complete with resurrected pieces of old carpet, were being laid. Suddenly a use was found for that beat-up old paraffin heater and a curtain of heavy duty blackout material was fixed over the entrance so that a newly-acquired spirit lamp could be set up to illuminate the interior.

You would have thought there was an intention to spend every waking moment in the blessed things.

Back at Simpson villas, built on much lower ground, my own lights were slowly dimmed and finally put out when the first of the autumn rains gradually filled our dugout with three feet of water. Worse still, it stubbornly refused to drain and acquired a sheet of ice in the winter.

Dad, a veteran of four years of jumping in and out of water-logged trenches in the last lot, seemed to take a perverse delight in all this. Having little time for the Anderson concept anyway, he eventually brought home some sandbags and together we blocked up the entrance.

In the first week in August the council delivered four gasmasks. These were hideous contraptions, smelly and difficult to breathe in, most especially for anyone with existing respiratory problems. Nevertheless, they had to be carried everywhere. Without it, one was refused access to school, workplace, cinema and all public buildings.

Later in the month a letter arrived from Huddersfield's Department of Education.

Apparently anticipating declaration of war, the reopening of the school I was about to attend was put back for two weeks. Evidently this was to afford the faculty time to arrange air raid dispersal billets for 400 boys throughout the surrounding Fartown and Birkby area.

When school finally assembled the thing I found strange, in the months that followed, was that teachers appeared to treat the war as a non-event. Dunkirk, the invasion of Russia, America's entry into the war and the fall of Singapore etc, none of it appeared on the classroom radar.

Teachers who were called up or volunteered seemingly disappeared into a black hole and were never heard of again. Only once did a crack appear when our French teacher testily remarked: "This war isn't going to be over shortly and some of you will be in France with a rifle in your hand before it's finished.

So it would be as well to apply yourselves to this language course, you're going to need it." Numbing words, indeed, for some.

At this time conscription and call-up for those aged 20 and above had been in operation since April. It didn't take long for the 18 to 19-year age group to cotton on that call-up equalled Army.

Those who didn't relish the idea of sticking bayonets into straw dummies quickly scampered off to their nearest RN or RAF recruiting centre. Not everyone found acceptance and with long faces reluctantly reconciled themselves to a future of khaki and square-bashing.

Slowly a strange absence of boisterousness at weekends and during evenings began to pervade the streets.

From September 1st the evacuation of women and children from major cities began in earnest.

I was reminded of this by a recent magazine cover bearing the title 'Britain at War, 70th Commemorative Issue'. It featured an obviously distressed little girl, aged about five. In her right hand she clutched a small parcel, probably containing a change of clothing.

Around her neck hung a large label bearing the word London-----. The rest was illegible, but in all probability stated her particulars. From her left hand the ubiquitous gasmask box hung from its string. Crouched alongside was an official, clearly doing his best to console her.

These were not joyous days, as hundreds of special trains carried children away to unspecified countryside destinations. Mites who hitherto had never ventured much further than the end of their own street before. Cinema news reels captured the poignancy of these moments, as commiserating mothers stood in forlorn knots weeping on station platforms.

The first visible expression of the endless tears about to be shed before it was all over.

Running in tandem for those children who could pass a stiff medical and whose parents could afford, was the evacuation of five to 15-year-olds to America, the Dominions and Commonwealth countries, was quickly finding favour. Initially considered a success it foundered with the sinking of the Ellerman liner,

City of Benares. Out of Liverpool for Canada on Friday, September 13th, 1940 she was torpedoed four days later while in convoy OB213.

A majority of the survivors, 105, were picked up the following day, but the remaining 40 had to endure a further seven days in an open boat before being rescued. Altogether 255 lives were lost including 77 of the 90 children together with their six adult escorts.

Where had all the flowers gone?

With the commencement of the blitz nationwide fire-watching became the norm. Needless to say it soon proved a good excuse for fickle assignments. Enough said!

In the early summer of 1942 I abandoned quadratic equations and French verbs, swapped my gasmask for a life-jacket and headed off down the Mersey for the North Atlantic.

No tuition on earth could prepare a man, let alone a youth of 14, for that awful soul-draining place.

A single overnight convoy battle in the mists off southern Greenland was where youthful innocence took flight and all remnants of romantic sea-faring notion morphed into stark reality with every bang. In that grey, heaving vastness a titanic battle, of which few at home were even vaguely aware, was taking place in a continuing contest like no other. Tragically, as dawn broke following each night of terror, everyone who could count knew we were losing it.

In the year I went away no fewer than 1,663 British, Allied and neutral ships seeking convoy protection, were lost.

Should these obscenities have been repeated throughout 1943 then it would inevitably have meant that as a functioning, fighting nation we would have been finished.

As it was, it almost reduced to breaking point the pool of experienced seamen available for sea-going duties. Such was the gravity that the country was scoured for anyone with deck or engine room experience who had previously left the service. Anyone below the age of 40 and found fit was forcibly drafted back to sea. I sailed with three such "conscripts" and they weren't best pleased.

Understandably, considerable effort was put into survival practices; lifeboats, gravity launch rafts, full body survival suits and the inevitable life-jacket which almost everyone worked in, slept on and even took to the toilet. Not that such possessive diligence came with a guarantee.

As one cynic remarked: "In northern latitudes it stays afloat until you freeze to death and in the tropics until the sharks turn up."

Later we were issued with a battery operated red light to attach to the jacket's shoulder. This enabled speedier sighting of the wearer while he bobbed about amid the waves on a dark night. Somehow I didn't fancy it.

When I came home on leave I'd evidently changed. Mother surprised me by saying: "You were calling out and shouting in your sleep again last night, George, you didn't used to." It wasn't a statement, it was a question. She'd have had a pink fit if I'd told her even half the truth, so I bent it a bit. Wouldn't you?

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*The story continues with his thoughts on the war on the home front. ED.*

Moonlit nights were of inestimable value during the blackout, without its pale light navigating unfamiliar streets could be a real hazard. Motorists, few as they were in wartime, must have had an awful time driving about with dimmed lights shrouded in those metal shields.

Statistics were not produced as readily in those days for fear of aiding the enemy. Well, anyway, that's what our leaders unfailingly claimed, but there cannot fail to have been a considerable number of stumbles and lamp-post incidents that turned serious, apart from many fatal road accidents.

However, as I recall it, the street lights eventually came on a few months before VE Day. I am still convinced Vera Lynn's version of: "When The Lights Go On Again All Over The World" had something to do with it.

Dependent upon and regulated by shipping losses rationing was a way of ensuring a degree of fairness in the distribution of food and other scarce commodities. It became a sore point, when after the war, I learned that were it not for a certain American Admiral's vehement anti-British obduracy, coupled with our own inter-service rivalries, the British housewife's lot on the Home Front could have been significantly improved. Combined failure at the top to recognise and take a grip on the ongoing mid Atlantic catastrophe resulted in losses that could so easily have been avoided.

Proof of this came in the latter part of 1943 when total shipping losses for the final six months of that year fell dramatically to 204. Amazing what a little head banging can achieve.

There were few medals and little glory being won in the struggle to bring home the housewife's bacon. What little kudos there was has to be shared with those RN and RNVR guys who went out and actually wrung salt water from their socks.

Then there are the Coastal Command fliers who finally neutralised the U-boat killing grounds.

As for the civilian crews I sailed with in the MN, what can I say?

"Fortunate is a country to have such men who wouldn't quit and who time after time went back to find out why."

Finally, I feel I have to draw attention to those great wartime housewives who managed somehow to feed their families for a week on amounts we presently consume in a day. God bless 'em, for how my mother and the rest did it I'll never know.

A great account of those days. Thank you George.

Being born in 1937 my war was a happy one, it just came naturally!

I remember I must have killed a Zillion Germans with my little wooden gun, playing soldiers. ED.