

THE WAR-TIME MEMORIES OF RUTH CAMERON

I was at home on the Sunday morning when war was declared 3rd September 1939 and I remember my mother weeping.

At the time I was a 16 year old who lived with her parents in a three bed-roomed detached house at 21 Francis Way, Silver End, Essex named after Francis Crittall whose factory made metal windows.

Early on, we had two evacuees billeted on us. They were two London boys (Johnnie Thatcher and Ken Marriott) coincidently from Edmonton where my father had been to the same grammar school as Ken. They arrived in the clothes they stood up in and stayed for about 6 months. My parents received an allowance from the Government to cover their costs. Ken attended my old school (Braintree County High School) while they were with us.

I was all booked to go to Chelsea Polythechnic to do a course in domestic science when war broke out but my parents would not allow me to leave home for fear of invasion and bombing so I left school on 1st January 1940 and took a job at Courtaulds Research Laboratories at Bocking near Braintree.

My mother, who had never been out to work before, worked for some time on munitions in the Crittall factory but stopped because of the pace. She went to Writtle Agricultural College to learn to run a "jam centre" making jam in the Silver End village hall with the local fruit â€“ mainly from gardens- strictly controlled sugar (which was rationed) and jam jars which people had recycled. Sometimes I went along to help with preparing the fruit etc. The produce was sold in the local shops like the Co-op close by, on ration points. This only went on for a couple of years, and may not have started until 1941. Rationing was very tight although we were lucky living in a country district and were able to keep a few hens and had garden produce.

I went to evening classes to do an inter BSc course in chemistry, physics pure and applied maths which was taught by my former grammar school teachers. Cycling home one evening along country lanes, lit only by searchlights playing on the clouds. I was stopped by a figure

stepping out of the shadows who wanted to know why I had no lights on my bike. It was the village policeman. I told him I had just bought a new battery and it had blown the bulb. (This was a frequent occurrence as batteries were often over-charged.) So he told me to continue on my way but to get off if a car came, knowing full well that this was extremely unlikely, since petrol was in such short supply.
There was a gypsy woman who used to come round regularly for clothing, rabbit skins etc. She had a large family and hence a lot of ration points some of which she eventually sold to my mother to spend on dried fruit for my wedding cake in 1945. Rationing was very strict and continued into the 1950s.
We were offered an Anderson shelter but when it arrived it turned out to be a Morrison shelter which was erected in the sitting room. It was a large metal table with wire netting sides and when the siren went we all climbed in, dog first. It was surprising how quickly he knew what the siren meant and what fun he thought it was.
A stick of bombs was dropped just beyond our garden in the fields and my parents' house had a very large crack all down one side. They were eventually restored.
The church where I was married at Rivenhall had the windows boarded up â€“ there had been a land mine close by. The windows were eventually replaced.
We were surrounded by airfields and we got quite used to planes taking off, usually at night. The worst were the Marauders. They were so noisy that things on the dressing table would rattle with the vibration. The airfield nearest to us was staffed by Americans in the later months of the war.
I remember playing a tennis match in a local village with a dog-fight going on overhead. The tennis was much more important to us â€“ we got very blasÃ©. For entertainment there were village hops (dances) and we could go into town to the cinema. As well as tennis and football, badminton was played in the village hall.
I was not called up. I was too young at first and later was in a reserved occupation as a lot of our work was for the Ministry of Supply. Being a textile firm it is obvious that there would be an involvement in parachute fabric but I was not directly involved in this. It was largely testing for porosity etc by the physics lab.
As I worked in the chemistry lab my work was of a different nature:
1. Resin treatment for viscose to impart affinity for acid dyes so that it could be mixed with wool for service uniforms. (Wool was in short supply and had to be imported.)
2. Finding a replacement for the old iodine-starch method of recording for SONAR in ships and submarines as it faded too quickly. As we had knowledge of dyestuffs, the idea was to impregnate the paper with the dye bath and the mordant would be released by passing a current. Our method was used for a number of years.
3. To use viscose to replace nylon etc for goods parachutes - high tenacity viscose was developed for this purpose.
4. To produce paper for secret documents that would leave no readable ash. Just my boss Dr Walter and I worked for weeks in a disused dye-house nitrating and treating reams of quarto airmail paper that were sent to us. We used a homemade injection fume cupboard and a large photographic dish and introduced small quantities of paper into a mixture of fuming nitric and concentrated acids. This was quenched in one of the wooden dye barques and left to stabilise in hot water overnight. On removal it treated with our special ashless, gelatin sizes and each sheet was pinned up separately to dry. The piles of treated paper were then pressed to flatten them and then dispatched. I never heard of any high-ranking official losing his eyebrows with

what must have been a highly explosive product (nitro-cellulose!)
Dr Walter, a Scot, was a "gas detection officer" attached to the Home Guard, and also a fire watcher.
In the cellar of the labs there was a small stove where we could "cook" our lunch â€“ usually a baked potato or occasionally a tin of beans. If we had not got anything we would walk to the town and go to the British Restaurant where we could get a hot meal off ration. The BR was manned by volunteers and the meal of perhaps mince and potatoes followed by rice pudding cost a shilling. (A co-worker Robert Fenner eventually went off to fight in the 8th Army. He survived to marry a girl from the Physics Lab.)
At the time of Arnhem and D-day invasions, the other lab workers and I went up onto the flat roof of the lab to watch the planes. Stirling and Lancaster bombers each towing a glider, were flying directly overhead in three columns. It was the most amazing sight. They had just come up from nearby airfields and seemed so close you felt you could touch them. But at the time I do not think I realised what it must have meant to the thousands â€“ a little older than myself â€“ to be going to war this way. As we were under the central column the sky seemed full of them.
Towards the end of the war the V1s and V2s used to go over us if they were slightly off course on their way to London. The dog Bing, named after the singer Bing Crosby, did not like them!

In 1945 Ruth married Walter, in the presence of both sets of their parents. They are pictured above with their Best Man. He died in 1988, she died in 2012