
Opening Extract from...

The Blitz

The British Under Attack

Written by Juliet Gardiner

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PREFACE

These are the facts, observe them how you will:
Forget for a moment the medals and the glory,
The clean shape of the bomb, designed to kill,
And the proud headlines of the papers' story.

Remember the walls of brick that forty years
Had nursed to make a neat though shabby home;
The impertinence of death, ignoring tears,
That smashed the house and left untouched the Dome.

Bodies in death are not magnificent or stately,
Bones are not elegant that blast has shattered;
This sorry, stained and crumpled rag was lately
A man whose like was made of little things that mattered;

Now he is just a nuisance, liable to stink,
A breeding-ground for flies, a test-tube for disease:
Bury him quickly and never pause to think
What is the future like to men like these?

People are more than places, more than pride;
A million photographs record the works of Wren;
A city remains a city on credit from the tide
That flows among its rocks, a sea of men.

Ruthven Todd, 'These are the Facts'

'Blitz' is an abbreviation of the German word '*Blitzkrieg*', meaning 'lightning war'. It all too accurately describes Hitler's advance through western

Europe in May and June 1940, as Norway, then Holland, Belgium and France fell to the German forces within weeks; but it hardly seems appropriate for the almost continual aerial bombardment of the British Isles that started on 7 September 1940 and continued with little relief until 10 May 1941. Yet 'blitz' is the name by which these eight months were known. It was a German word, and like lightning it came from the sky, and could and did kill. Indeed, an air raid was in many ways like a terrible storm – the sky livid, rent by jagged flashes, obscured by black clouds rolling across it or lit up by the reflected glow of fires, while the noise of bombs and guns echoed like the thunder of Mars, the god of war.

The blitz was the test of war for the British people: it touched everyone's lives, it mobilised the population, and in phrases that have become time-worn but are nevertheless true, put civilians on the front line and made the home front the battlefront. Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, which preceded it, had essentially been military operations. The blitz was total war. Its intensity and inescapability made it possible to call the Second World War 'the people's war', in which, in the words of the poet Robert Graves, a soldier 'cannot even feel that his rendezvous with death is more certain than that of his Aunt Fanny, the firewatcher'.

The blitz was the war that everyone in Britain had been expecting, and fearing, since that warm Sunday morning in September 1939 when Neville Chamberlain had announced that 'Britain is now at war with Germany'. Although there had been sporadic raids throughout the 'phoney war' that followed, it was not until almost exactly a year after that declaration that the Luftwaffe bombers arrived in force over London. Although England's capital was bombed more heavily and more continuously than anywhere else in the country, the blitz was an attack on the whole United Kingdom: few places escaped its direct effects, none its indirect ones.

In January 1941 George Orwell wrote to the editors of the American journal the *Partisan Review*, to which he would contribute a 'London Letter' throughout the rest of the war: 'On that day in September when the Germans broke through and set the docks on fire, I think few people can have watched those enormous fires without feeling that this was the end of an epoch. One seemed to feel that the immense changes through which our society has got to pass were going to happen there and then.' But he went on to say that these feelings had been erroneous: 'to an astonishing extent things have slipped back to normal . . . When all is said and done one's main impression is the immense solidarity of ordinary people, the

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widespread yet vague consciousness that things can never be the same again, and yet, together with that, the tendency of life to slip back into the familiar pattern.'

Just a month later, Orwell was demanding that 'either we turn this war into a revolutionary war [against privilege and influence, and for equality and freedom] or we lose it'. Neither happened. The equivocation and ambivalence of wanting change and wanting things to be as they had always been would persist, and politicians consistently declined to define Britain's war aims other than by the simple word 'victory'.

Yet the blitz *was* a defining moment in Britain's history. More than cityscapes were reconfigured in those eight months. The attrition that had been anticipated for over a decade revealed both the incompetence of the authorities, and their misunderstanding of the nature of such warfare and of the needs of the people. But at the same time it demonstrated their sometimes grudging, usually tardy, willingness to accommodate, compromise and innovate. And perhaps, above all, eventually and imperfectly, to listen. To keep the people 'on side' as much as possible, since it was recognised that civilian morale was vital in maintaining full-scale war production and thus Britain's ability to prosecute the war at a time when victory was very far from assured. For this reason, and others, the blitz did prove to be a forcing house, a laboratory, the intense distillation of how an external threat could weld together a nation while at the same time failing to resolve many of its tensions.

The blitz has given the British – politicians in particular – a storehouse of images on which to draw at times of crisis: the symbol of an indomitable nation, united in resolution. The true story is, of course, more nuanced and complicated than that, cross-hatched as it must be by the freight of the pre-war years, of differing experiences and expectations. There were thousands of examples of extreme bravery, fortitude and selflessness. There was also a pervasive sense of exhaustion, uncertainty and anxiety, and acts of selfishness, intransigence and contumely. The words that best sum up the blitz are probably 'endurance' and 'defiance'. And arising out of that, a sense of entitlement: that a nation that had been exhorted to 'take it' could reasonably expect, when the war was finally over, to 'get [some] of it', in terms of greater equality, more employment, better housing, education and life chances in general.

In 1940 the use of the transitive verb 'to blitz' signified 'to destroy by aerial bombardment'. Seventy years later it is sometimes used to mean 'to

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deal with something energetically; to concentrate a lot of effort on something to get it done'. Both meanings resonate in our understanding of the blitz of 1940–41 and its aftermath.

Juliet Gardiner
June 2010

Before

> I think it is well for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can prevent him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through . . . the only defence is in offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves.
>
> Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin, speaking in the House of Commons in 1932

Robert Baltrop was sitting on the roof of a Sainsbury's store in east London on Saturday, 7 September 1940. It was a warm late-summer afternoon, the rays of the sun stretching across the concrete rooftops. The air-raid alert had just sounded, so Baltrop, who worked as a porter in the store, 'humping and cleaning and that sort of thing', had clambered out to take up his post on lookout duty. 'It wasn't bad being a watcher during these daytime warnings, sitting up there in the sunshine and smoking and watching the sky, and looking down at the people going about their business as usual in the streets below. I wasn't really sure what I was watching for, anything dangerous – fires or bombs falling or planes getting near, and I don't really know what I could have done about it. I suppose I should have had to go down the steps and tell them in the shop that a bomb had fallen on them!'

The war was more than a year old by this time. It had been another lovely summer day when Hitler had failed to respond to Britain's ultimatum to withdraw German troops from Poland, and the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, had broadcast to the nation at 11.15 on 3 September 1939 to tell the British people that 'despite all my long struggle to win peace . . . this country is at war with Germany'. Within minutes the air-raid sirens sounded, and Londoners scurried to take shelter. The war that everybody had been expecting had started. Only it hadn't. That first alert was a

false alarm, and a metaphor for a long autumn, winter and spring of expectation and fearful anticipation. But until the summer of 1940 there was little sign of the Armageddon that had been feared – except at sea, where the 'Battle of the Atlantic', which would take the lives of more than 30,000 merchant seamen by 1945, had been raging since the outbreak of war as Germany sought to stop supplies reaching Britain to enable her to keep fighting. By the late spring hardly anyone was carrying their gas mask any more, shelters were filling up with water through disuse, a ban had been put on recruiting any more Air Raid Patrol (ARP) wardens, and many volunteers, bored with the endless waiting around, drinking cups of tea and playing darts, had resigned, since there didn't seem to be much for them to do other than act like martinets when any chink showed through the blackout curtains on their patch. Housewives were already beginning to feel fed up with rationing, and the endless queuing and ingenuity in the kitchen that wartime shortages would demand, and more than 60 per cent of the mothers and children who had joined the government's evacuation scheme on the eve of war had drifted back home to the cities by January 1940, no longer convinced that their homes would be bombed, or their children killed, which had been the compelling reason for the exodus. It truly did seem to be a 'bore war' – all the regulations, restrictions and privations of wartime, with few of the dangers on the home front that would make them seem justified.

On 4 April 1940, in what Winston Churchill, recalled to the Cabinet on the outbreak of war as First Lord of the Admiralty, thought was 'a speech of unusual optimism', Chamberlain sanguinely told a Conservative gathering that Hitler had 'missed the bus' in seizing the offensive. Five days later German forces moved to occupy Norway and Denmark, and on 10 May, as Baltrop recalled, 'quite suddenly the Germans invaded the Low Countries; there was the evacuation from Dunkirk [which the British press largely treated as a victory rather than a defeat]; and on 22 June France signed an armistice with Germany. I remember at the Sainsbury's where I worked, somebody coming into the warehouse and almost with satisfaction rubbing his hands together and saying, "Well, we're on our own now" . . . There was a feeling that we were in the war now, and a certain feeling of resolve about it. Dunkirk had its effect. There were Churchill's speeches – "We will fight on the beaches and we will never surrender" – and very quickly daytime air raid warnings started. Again, there was this curious

thing just like at the beginning of the war. We expected the worst and it didn't happen like that. We started getting air raid warnings by day and night. [Sainsbury's] agreed with the other shops round about, they would put up the shutters immediately. But nothing happened, and people didn't go home. They stayed in the streets. So the "gentlemen's agreement" between shopkeepers was dropped, and the shops started to open again even when the air raid warnings went, and . . . life went on through the summer. But they were getting nearer.'

Italy had entered the war in support of Germany on 10 June, and six days later the French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, resigned and Marshal Philippe Pétain, a military hero of the First World War, took over, and shortly afterwards signed an armistice surrendering northern and western France to the advancing German forces. From across the Channel, Winston Churchill, Prime Minister since Chamberlain had resigned on 10 May, surveyed the defeated British Expeditionary Force evacuated from Dunkirk, and on 18 June, the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, he addressed the House of Commons. Whatever had happened in France, he assured MPs, would make 'no difference to the resolve of Britain and the British Empire to fight on if necessary for years, if necessary alone'. He predicted that:

> the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States [he added pointedly, since America was still pursuing an official policy of neutrality] will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age . . . Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth lasts for a thousand years, men will still say 'This was their finest hour.'

The swift fall of France had not been foreseen by the German high command, and for several weeks they were at something of a loss to know what to do next. In mid-June, as German forces made their final assault

on Paris, 120 German bombers attacked eastern England, killing nine in Cambridge,* and the first bomb in the London area fell on Addington near Croydon, though at that time Hitler had expressly placed London off-limits for attack. Throughout June and July there were intermittent random, small-scale daylight raids around the capital and on coastal towns in the south and east, and as far north as the Tyne. South Wales was bombed and shipping in the English Channel attacked, and on 12 July twenty-nine Aberdonians were killed and 103 seriously injured in a raid for which no warning had been given. On 16 July Hitler issued Directive no.16, *Preparations for the Invasion of Britain*, and such an invasion seemed a real possibility to the British. There were rumours from all over the country of sightings of German parachutists (maybe dressed as nuns) floating down, of barges massing in the Channel, of flotillas of gliders conveying troops from occupied France to East Anglia and Kent. On 18 August the *Sunday Express* suggested that 18 September would be a good day for a German invasion: 'The tide would be high, the nights longer than at present, and sea mists and fogs are prevalent at the equinox. Therefore, unless the Nazis come between the eighteenth and twenty-third of next month, they will be wise to postpone their visit until next spring.'

Towns along the Kent and Sussex coasts were evacuated, beaches were mined, piers dismantled and barbed wire uncoiled. An appeal by Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for War, broadcast just after the BBC nine o'clock news on 14 May, for volunteers 'to serve in the defence of their country in its hour of peril' had resulted in a stampede that had reached one and a half million by the end of June. For many months these Local Defence Volunteers (soon to be renamed the Home Guard at Churchill's insistence) had no uniform other than a brassard, and since all military equipment had first to be channelled to re-equip the denuded army, nothing to fight with other than a pitchfork or broomstick, or if they were fortunate, a First World War Lee Enfield rifle. Nevertheless, the band of under-resourced men was evidence of a willingness to 'defend our island whatever the cost may be', as Churchill had demanded.

Hitler hoped that Britain could be persuaded to abandon the fight and

* The first civilian British bombing death had in fact come on 16 March 1940, when an Orcadian labourer was killed as he stood by his croft door in the hamlet of Bridge of Waithe. It was presumed that the German plane had lost its way, or had mistaken the hamlet for a nearby airfield.

sue for peace when faced with the success of the blitzkrieg that had swept through the Low Countries and France and now threatened its shores. However, a final peace offer was rejected by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, on 22 July, and since it was clear that, despite the odds, Britain intended to fight on alone (though of course supported by Empire and dominion forces), various means were considered of bringing the country to its knees, including invasion. But it was obvious that there could be no successful invasion until German planes enjoyed air supremacy, and the aim of what has become known as the 'Battle of Britain' that summer was to wipe out the country's defences. By early July the Luftwaffe was dive-bombing British shipping and ports along the south coast and engaging RAF fighter planes in aerial combat; on 8 August it switched to trying to knock out Britain's fighter defences, with attacks on airfields, radar stations and other targets such as repair sheds and anti-aircraft guns and equipment.

It soon became apparent to Hitler that this strategy on its own was not working. 'The collapse of England in the year 1940 is under present circumstances no longer to be reckoned on,' he told his HQ staff on 20 August. The dogfights over southern England and the bombing raids on RAF targets had not succeeded in putting Britain's air force out of commission. The battle continued, although 15 September 1940 has since been celebrated as Battle of Britain Day, the day on which in retrospect it became clear that against the odds Britain had retained mastery of its skies.

However, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, Air Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the German air force since 1935, assumed on the basis of inaccurate intelligence that Fighter Command was all but annihilated, and was anxious to attack London in the hope that this would draw RAF fighter planes to the capital, where they could be picked off. On 24 August, in contravention of Hitler's orders, the Luftwaffe dropped several bombs on London. Although this was most likely an error, it gave Churchill the opportunity to order raids on Berlin, in the expectation that Hitler would retaliate and send his bombers to London, where they would be expected – and supposedly dealt with – thus relieving the pressure on the Western Front in France. On 2 September Göring ordered the Luftwaffe to switch to bombing Britain's industrial and administrative centres and transport and communication links, while the strategy the Kriegsmarine (the German navy) advocated, the blockading of British ports and attacks on her shipping, continued unabated.

So the war entered a new phase. The 'Battle of Britain' was to be carried on by other means. Germany's targets were now industrial installations and transport and communication links around major cities. It was hoped that this would 'cripple' Britain and compel her to seek peace. The home front would become a front-line battlefield for the next five years. And on 7 September 1940, 'Black Saturday', the first day of the war of persistent aerial attack that became known as the blitz, it was the London docks that were in the Luftwaffe's sights.

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Black Saturday, 7 September 1940

> [The British] will understand now, as night after night, we give them the answer [to RAF bombing raids on Germany] – when they declare they will attack our towns on a large scale, then we will erase theirs.
>
> Adolf Hitler speaking in the Berlin Sportspalast, 4 September 1940

'The Reichsmarschall is leaving his train and is coming past us. He sees us. Is this what he was intending? Is he really coming? Yes. He is coming! The Reichsmarschall is coming from his train and is coming to the radio,' the German announcer reported excitedly on 7 September. Hermann Göring, a large, heavy man, clad in a greatcoat, wearing the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross, which he had been awarded as a result of the French campaign, at his throat, strode to the microphone to address his fellow countrymen and women. 'I now want to take this opportunity of speaking to you, to say this moment is a historic one. As a result of the provocative British attacks on Berlin on recent nights the Führer has decided to order a mighty blow to be struck in revenge against the capital of the British Empire. I personally have assumed the leadership of this attack, and today I hear above me the roaring of victorious German squadrons which now, for the first time, are driving towards the heart of the enemy in full daylight, accompanied by countless fighter squadrons.' So saying, the Commander of the German air force clambered back into the carriage of his personal train, 'Robinson', and resumed his journey back from the Channel coast where he had stood on the cliffs of Cap Gris Nez, binoculars trained on Britain, watching the German aircraft set out on their mission and maybe hoping to catch a glimpse of the effects of the havoc their bombs would wreak in their 'major strike on Target Loge' (the German code name for London).

Sitting in deckchairs, mowing the lawn or visiting friends that sun-filled afternoon, people in Kent looked up as the drone of planes grew louder

and louder – 'like the far away thunder of a giant waterfall', thought the American journalist Virginia Cowles. She was having tea in the garden of the Palladian Mereworth Castle, the home of the press baron Esmond Harmsworth, eldest son of Viscount Rothermere, in Kent, forty miles from London. 'We lay on the grass, our eyes strained towards the sky; we made out a batch of tiny white specks, like clouds of insects moving north west in the direction of the capital. Some of them – the bombers – were flying in even formation, while the others – the fighters – swarmed protectively around . . . during the next hour [we] counted over a hundred and fifty planes. They were not meeting any resistance.' To the urbane diplomat turned journalist and author Harold Nicolson, now a Junior Minister at the Ministry of Information, sitting with his wife Vita Sackville-West in their garden at Sissinghurst, also in Kent, the 'wave after wave of enemy aircraft planes looked like silver gnats above us in the air'.

The siren had sounded at 4.43 p.m. that Saturday. Londoners had got used to its ululating note: the sound of 'Wailing Winnie' or 'Moaning Minnie' had been frequent during the last few weeks of constant 'nuisance raids'. 'We are growing accustomed to sudden warnings, and we have developed a quickening of our sense of danger . . . we are not panicky, but we are, at any rate subconsciously, more on the look-out than had hitherto been the case at any time during last year,' the Harley Street psychologist and BBC producer Anthony Weymouth had written in his diary back in August. Harold Nicolson would have agreed. 'People are becoming quite used to these interruptions,' he wrote in his diary as he heard the siren wail on 26 August. 'I do not think that that drone in the sky means death to many people at the moment. It seems so incredible as I sit here at my window, looking out on the fuchsias and zinnias with yellow butterflies playing around each other, that in a few seconds I may see other butterflies circling in the air intent on murdering each other.'

Yet despite the increasing frequency of the alerts, the mournful notes could still send a shiver of dread down people's spines. 'Whoohoo go the goblins, coming back at nightfall/Whoohoo go the witches reaching out their hands for us . . . Are we sure we will be the lucky ones/. . . They have come back, we always knew they would after the story ended,' wrote the author Naomi Mitchison in one of her 'blitz poems'.

The planes droned on. As Robert Baltrop sat on the roof of Sainsbury's, 'all of a sudden on the skyline coming up the Thames were [black specks] like swarms of flies . . . weaving their way through puffs of smoke . . . and

my reaction was one of astonishment and . . . well, what's going to happen now? They were flying across my line of vision, and sitting up there on the roof, I had a perfect view of them, watching them fly across the Thames . . . coming in . . . past Dagenham and Rainham and Barking, and they were heading straight for London, and it was going to be the docks that were going to get it . . . I began to hear loud thumps, and those were bombs falling, and clouds of smoke were rising up – clouds of black smoke floating away until you couldn't see anything but a huge bank of smoke, and still they were coming.'

The operational orders issued to 1 Fliegerkorps for that afternoon informed the pilots that 'The purpose of the initial attack is to force English fighters into the air so that they will have reached the end of their endurance at the time of the main attack.' To achieve 'the maximum effect it is essential that units fly as a highly concentrated force . . . The main objective of the operation is to prove that the Luftwaffe can achieve this.'

'We have had many air-raid warnings during the last week, and as soon as the sirens have sounded we have invariably done what we've been told to do – go to a place of safety,' noted Anthony Weymouth, whose 'place of safety' was the hall of his ground-floor flat. 'It is well inside the building, and between us and the blast of bombs are two sitting rooms and the hall of the building. The only windows in the hall have been shuttered and we have been told to leave all the windows open to avoid, so far as possible, broken glass.' So on 7 September Weymouth and his family 'waited for an hour or so, some of us sitting on the mattresses which are now a permanent part of our hall furniture, some squatting on the floor. Audrey [his wife] put on her [ARP warden's] tin hat and went round her sector to see if she was needed. She returned to tell us that a big fire was raging in the City.'

But it wasn't the City of London that three hundred German planes were converging on that late afternoon: it was 'Target G', the docks that lay in the bight of the Thames where it loops around in a U shape like a small child's badly built wooden railway, a lazy-looking attempt to encircle not some pleasant riverside picnic place but Silvertown, a jumble of docks, warehouses and small houses built for workers in the docks and the nearby factories in days when industry and home were hugger-mugger in the poorer parts of towns and cities.

The German pilots had no difficulty in identifying their targets in the clear afternoon light. The first bombs fell on the Ford motor works at

Dagenham, closely followed by a rain of high explosives and fire bombs on Beckton gasworks, the largest in Europe. Below them now lay the great Thames bight at Woolwich Reach, enclosing the three Royal Docks, their warehouses and sheds stacked with foodstuffs and materials vital to the war effort. Within minutes the huge warehouses and factories lining the river on both sides from North Woolwich to Tower Bridge were on fire. Two hundred acres of timber stacks, recently arrived from North America and the Baltic, burned out of control along the Surrey Commercial Docks, the main timber-importing centre in Britain: within twenty-four hours only about a fifth of the two and a half million tons was left. Burning spirits gushed out of the rum quay warehouses at West India Dock, a tar distillery flooded North Woolwich Road with molten pitch, and rats swarmed out of a nearby soapworks. A rubber factory was hit, and the acrid black smoke rolling through the narrow streets of Silvertown mingled with the escaping fumes from the damaged Beckton gasworks and started a rumour that the Germans were dropping canisters of poison gas as well as bombs. Fire burned through the ropes of barges tethered along the quayside and the burning boats drifted downstream, only to return several hours later on the incoming tide, still smouldering, while the intense heat blistered the paint on buildings in areas untouched by the bombs.

A fireman stationed at Pageant's Wharf Fire Station stared in horror as magnesium incendiaries lodged in the wood stacks and oil bombs ignited the timber like kindling on a bone-dry bonfire. It seemed as if 'the whole bloody world's on fire' to Station Officer Gerry Knight as he yelled to the fire station telephonists to call for urgent reinforcements. The regular London firemen were joined by men from the four wartime Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) substations on the docks, their trailer pumps drawn by vans, taxi cabs – 2,000 had been hired by the start of the war, often with their drivers coming along as part of the deal – or anything that could be pressed into service to get to the blaze.

The AFS, an adjunct of the fire brigade, had started recruiting in March 1938, and had expanded after the Munich crisis, when large posters had appeared on walls and on the sides of fire engines urging: 'Keep the home fires *from* burning'. By the time war broke out, for every regular fireman there were fifteen auxiliaries, and 'it was quite a big job getting them all trained'. AFS members had received sixty hours of basic training, but most had never been called to a major fire before. Now it seemed that all the drill they had carefully learned was for another world: as soon as they trained

their hoses on one outbreak, another flared up feet away. Damped down by the water jets, a pile of wood would sizzle in the heat, then burst into flame again. The firemen worked fast to screw together the sections of hose and run them into the river so there was no shortage of water, but soon telegraph poles all around the dock were combusting in the heat, and even the wooden blocks that surfaced the roads were igniting. Grain spilling out of the warehouses made a sticky mess that stuck to the firemen's boots, bogging them down as if they were walking through treacle in some sort of nightmare. Gerry Knight realised that the inferno was burning out of control, impossible to put out, and that if he didn't withdraw his men were in real danger of being trapped by the sheets of flame.

Peter Blackmore was a successful playwright who had become a volunteer fireman after seeing a 'Join the AFS' poster in the London Underground, showing 'a firelit fireman holding the branch of a hose, an exciting picture which stirred the imagination and at the same time in small print set out the glorious benefits of such service, the exceptional wages, the food allowance, the uniform and the leave days'. He had grown used to the sound of the siren, 'more popularly known as the "sighreen". In those days this was the signal for us to rig fully in helmets, boots, leggings, belts, axes and spanners, tear to the appliance-room and man the pumps, there to sit and grumble until the "All Clear" sounded and we could return to an overcooked or cold meal. This seemed to occur many times day and night. We were certainly always ready. Still no blitz came.' But on the night of 7 September 1940 Blackmore was wondering what to make of the 'ominous red glow in the sky, which, had it not been in the east, could have passed for an indifferent sunset' when a colleague came to tell him, 'They're bombing the docks.' 'Down went the bells,' and Blackmore and his colleagues set off eastwards.

As they approached the docks they joined 'an endless queue of appliances, all steadily moving and being detailed to their exact positions. Bombs were falling fast and heavy. We did a great deal of ducking . . . and my heart was in my mouth. The journey towards a blitz, like most apprehension, can be the worst part of it . . . Eventually we came to a standstill at the wharf where we were to spend the endless night. Everything seemed to be on fire in every direction, even some barrage balloons in the sky [winched up in the hope that low-flying enemy aircraft would become entangled in their metal ropes] were exploding. The cinder-laden smoke which drifted all around made us think of the destruction of Pompeii.'

Cyril Demarne, a regular fireman stationed at Abbey Road School in

West Ham in London's East End, was in the school yard when soon after the alert had sounded he heard 'the drone of approaching aircraft rapidly swelling to a roar. Suddenly squadrons of bombers appeared all over the eastern sky, flying very high and escorted by hundreds of fighter planes glinting in the sunlight as they weaved and turned over the bomber formation . . . I dived for the safety of the Control Room, where calls for assistance were already flowing in from Dagenham, Barking, East and West Ham. The electricity mains were damaged in the first minutes of the raid and [as it grew dark] the fire control had to operate by the light of candles set in jam jars.'

'I was frightened out of my life. Bombs coming down, screaming – the row they make, it's a sort of warning saying, "Look out, here comes death." And when they landed they went off with a terrific roar – not one but dozens of them – bang, bang, bang, bang, all the time, everywhere. And then there was the drone of aircraft . . . the noise was the sort of thing that got to me. It . . . dulled the senses . . . you couldn't think clearly.'

'That day stands out like a flaming wound in my memory,' wrote Bernard Kops, a London schoolboy who would grow up to be a playwright.

> Imagine a ground floor flat [in Stepney Green Buildings], crowded with hysterical women, crying babies and great crashes in the sky and the whole earth shaking. Someone rushed in, 'The docks are alight. All the docks are alight.' I could smell burning . . . The men started to play cards and the women tried a little sing song, singing 'I saw the old homestead and faces I loved' or 'Don't go down the mine, Daddy, dreams very often come true' or 'Yiddle mit his fiddle'. But every so often twenty women's fists shook at the ceiling cursing the explosions, Germany, Hitler . . . Yet cursing got my mother and my aunts through those early days. I sat under the table where above the men were playing cards, screwing my eyes up and covering my ears, counting explosions.
>
> 'We're all gonna get killed, we're finished,' one of my aunts became hysterical.
>
> 'Churchill will get us through, he's a friend of the Yiddisher people.' With these words she was soothed.

Len Jones, an eighteen-year-old Poplar resident, went outside when he heard the first German planes overhead. 'It was very exciting because the first formations were coming over without any bombs dropping, but very, very

majestic, terrific. And I had no thought that they were actual bombers. Then . . . the bombs began to fall, and shrapnel was going along King Street, dancing off the cobbles. Then the real impetus came . . . the suction and the compression from the high-explosive bombs just pushed you and pulled you, and the whole of the atmosphere was turbulating so hard that, after an explosion of a nearby bomb, you could actually feel your eyeballs being [almost] sucked out . . . and the suction was so vast, it ripped my shirt away, and ripped my trousers. Then I couldn't get my breath, the smoke was like acid and everything round me was black and yellow. And these bombers kept on and on, the whole road was moving, rising and falling.'

By 6.30 the planes – Dornier and Heinkel bombers escorted by Messerschmitt fighters – had turned back and wheeled across the Kent countryside, flying over Romney Marsh and back across the Channel to their bases in France. The All Clear sounded, and East Enders emerged from their homes and public shelters and peered about them at the raging fires, the broken glass, the destroyed and damaged houses, debris everywhere, a pall of greasy black smoke enveloping the scene as firemen desperately tackled massive fires with tangles of hoses snaking across the roads and water sloshing into the gutters.

But this was just a lull. 'Black Saturday' would set the pattern for the next eight harrowing months. First the Luftwaffe would drop showers of incendiary bombs that would start fires. The blazes would both act as a beacon to guide the subsequent formations of bombers with their loads of high-explosive (HE) bombs to their target, and also occupy the Civil Defence services – fire, rescue, medical – so they would not be standing by ready to engage immediately with the crisis when the heavy bombs began to fall.

Just over two hours later, at 8.30 p.m., the siren wailed again. This time the raid would continue relentlessly until dawn, adding further chaos and devastation to the already stricken East End, and widening out to other parts of London. Chelsea and Victoria were hit that night too, but it was the area of the tidal basin around the docks – the Isle of Dogs, Silvertown and Rotherhithe – that took the brunt of the devastation. Bermondsey, Canning Town, Woolwich, Deptford – fanning out to West Ham, Plaistow, Bow, Whitechapel, Stepney and Poplar – also suffered heavy loads of bombs.

Squadrons of Heinkels and Dorniers – 250 in all – came in waves to drop high-explosive bombs onto the still-blazing wharves, the ruined houses, the cratered streets, the terrified east Londoners. AFS despatch riders on motorcycles made their way through the chaos and rubble to report the immen-

sity of the situation to local fire controls. Columns of fire engines raced east, their bells clanging, men called on duty fastening their helmets and doing up their jackets as the engines sped to answer the urgent calls from the East End. When they arrived there was often nobody in charge to be found, and men were simply deployed to fight the nearest fire to hand. Five hundred engines converged on West Ham alone after a request to the London Regional Fire Control Headquarters at Lambeth, where the map of London pinned on the wall, usually dense with markers indicating the availability of fire engines, was ominously clear. There were already nine fires designated as 'conflagrations' (when fires coalesce, burn out of control and spread rapidly), nineteen requiring thirty pumps, forty needing ten, and over a thousand smaller incidents.

By now Surrey Docks was a square mile of fire. The paint on the fireboats attempting to douse the flames blistered in the intense heat, as cranes buckled and crashed into the river. At the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich many of the buildings on fire contained live ammunition and highly flammable nitroglycerine. Water mains had been damaged, and when the hydrants ran dry water had to be pumped from the Thames, reservoirs, even ponds and ditches. At Woolwich a fireman aboard one of six fireboats which had been ordered to return to London from a fire at the Shell-Mex Thameshaven oil refinery on Canvey Island at the mouth of the Thames, its 2,000-ton-capacity tanks ablaze after a bomb attack on 5 September, saw 'an extraordinary spectacle. There was nothing but fire ahead, apparently stretching right across the river and burning on both of its banks. We seemed to be entering a tunnel of fire – no break in it anywhere. All the usual landmarks were obliterated by walls of flame. Burning barges drifted past. For many hours no contact with the shore was possible. We did what we could where we could. At one time we were just getting into position to fight a fire in a large warehouse when the whole of the riverside front collapsed into the water with a mighty splash. The contents of the building, bags of beans, pouring into the river made a sound like a tropical rain storm. Soon after, we were surprised to see two firemen and three firewomen picking their way along the shore in the direction of Southwark Bridge; they told us they had been cut off in a control room for several hours' by the fires.

During the raid, that lasted for over eight hours, 250 German planes had dropped 625 tons of high-explosive bombs and at least eight hundred incendiary bomb canisters, each containing 795 pounds of explosive. A thousand fire pumps were fighting the blaze at the Surrey Docks, with three hundred

pumps and over a thousand men trying to contain just one of the largest fires. The firemen wrestled to control their heavy hoses, sending arcs of water through flames that seemed scornful of their efforts, their faces blackened by smoke and soot, their eyes pricking from the heat, their throats and lungs irritated by the smoke and the dust of falling masonry, their uniforms scorched and singed by flying sparks and heavy with the water from the hoses, hungry, thirsty, exhausted.

F.W. Hurd, a member of the AFS stationed at East Ham fire station, was ordered to a fire at Beckton gasworks at nine o'clock that night.

> Chaos met our eyes. Gasometers were punctured and were blazing away, a power house had been struck rendering useless the hydraulic hydrant supply (the only source of water there). An overhead gantry bearing lines of trucks communicating with the railway siding was also . . . alight. And then overhead we heard [the German planes], the searchlights searching the sky in a vain effort to locate them. Guns started firing, and then I had my first experience of a bomb explosion. A weird whistling sound and I ducked behind the pump with two other members of the crew. The others, scattered as we were, had thrown themselves down wherever they happened to be. Then a vivid flash of flame, a column of earth and debris flying into the air and the ground heaved. I was thrown violently against the side of the appliance.
>
> . . . After a time things quietened down and we went out again. It was now about 10 o'clock and the fire had been burning unattacked by us for lack of water [when] a local Fire Officer arrived and informed us that he knew where we could obtain a supply! Our 'heavy' was sent about half a mile from the fire to 'pick up' water from three other pumps which were being supplied from hydrants. We relayed the water thro' a chain of pumps to the fire. And then there was nothing to do except watch the hose and guard it where it crossed an arterial road (from being burst by cars proceeding at speed across it), so we had time to look round. What a sight. About a mile to our right was the riverfront. The whole horizon on that side was a sheet of flame. The entire docks were on fire! On all other sides it was much the same. Fire everywhere. The sky was a vivid orange glow . . . And all the time the whole area was being mercilessly bombed. The road shuddered with the explosions. AA [anti-aircraft] shells were bursting overhead. A Royal Navy Destroyer berthed in one of the docks was firing her AA equipment, as were other ships. The shrapnel literally rained down. It was now about midnight and still the racket kept on. It surprised me how quickly one got used to

> sensing whether a bomb was coming our way or not. At first we all lay flat every time we heard anything, but after an hour or so we only dived for it if one came particularly close . . . At 3am a canteen van arrived and served us tea and sandwiches. It was the first 'bite' any of us had had since mid day the day before, 14½ hours ago.
>
> Just then the bombing became more severe and localised. A brighter glow in the sky immediately over us, then we saw the flames. Another fire had started in the gas works, which by now after 6 hours concentrated work by us, had been got well under control. Then a huge mushroom of flame shot into the air from the docks followed by a dull rolling roar. An oil container had exploded. The whole atmosphere became terrible again with the noise of gunfire. Afterwards when London established its famous [AA] barrage we got used to it, but on that first night it was just Hell.

Water mains had been fractured all over the East End, as had gas pipes and electrical and telephone cables. With no radio communication between the crews and control, messages had to be relayed by AFS and London Fire Brigade messengers, most of them teenaged boys with tin hats, riding motorbikes or yellow-painted bicycles. Sixteen was the statutory minimum age for such work, but checks were cursory, and many of those undertaking this hazardous and courageous work were younger. They set out to apprise District Control of the situation on the ground, to report the progress of the firefighting and request reinforcements, skidding through wet and cratered streets as the bombs fell, narrowly missing being hit, falling from their machines as girders fell in their path, negotiating piles of rubble, accelerating away to escape walls of fire, disorientated by the noise, the smoke, the confusion.

One of 'Gillman's Devils', teenaged boys organised by Bill Gillman, Assistant Controller of Operations at West Ham, found himself riding through 'a patch of burning paint on the roadway in Silvertown from the burning paint works on the corner. Paint stuck to my tyres and set them alight but I rode on the pavement until the flames were out.' 'You'd go round a corner and there'd be a great big hole in the road where a bomb had fallen, or half a house had fallen and the debris was blocking the road, or there might be an unexploded bomb,' remembers Stan Durling, an AFS despatch rider. 'But that night when I reported for duty at Millwall, you just didn't know where to look. The chemical works had been hit. Everywhere you looked was fire. Across the water, north, south, east and west, every-

where. It seemed as if the whole East End docks were on fire. It was unbelievable.' Sixteen-year-old Stan Hook was in the bath when the bombs started to fall. 'They scream through the air, and then crump, crump, and the bath shook and I thought Christ, bombs. I don't remember drying myself. I don't remember getting dressed. But I was on my bike and back to the [fire] station [on the Isle of Dogs] and that's when I came to. That was the beginning at five o'clock and from then until five o'clock the next day I just lived in a daze. A smoke-filled haze covered everything and orders were flying around in all directions, and you were charging around, and bombs were falling and fires were starting, and it wasn't until the next morning that I really thought, well this is war.'

Uncontrollable by any blackout regulations, the river Thames served to guide enemy aircraft to their targets night after night during the blitz. A.P. Herbert, the lawyer, humorist and Independent MP for Oxford University, who had seen active service with the Royal Naval Reserve in France and at Gallipoli in the First World War, joined the River Emergency Service in the Second. This in effect mobilised the Thames as part of London's defences. On the night of 7 September, Herbert was detailed to take his converted canal boat *Water Gipsy* from its mooring at Tower Bridge to pick up some wire from a Port of London Authority wreck lighter and take it to North Woolwich. Rounding Limehouse corner, he and his crew

> saw an astonishing picture. Half a mile of Surrey shore . . . was ablaze – warehouses, wharves, piers, dolphins, barges.
>
> The wind was westerly and there was a wall of smoke and sparks across the river. Burning barges were drifting everywhere but there was not a soul in sight – the small police boat ahead of us had turned back to report – and we had been ordered to Woolwich. [As ours was] a wooden ship and petrol driven, we didn't like the look of it much; but we put wet towels round our faces and steamed at half speed into the torrid cloud. Inside, the scene was like a lake in Hell. We could hear the hiss and roar of the conflagration ashore, but could not see it, only the burning barges and the crimson water that reflected them. It was not as alarming as it had looked outside, the main whirl of sparks and smoke went over us. We took off our towels and felt quite happy. It was something to be the only boat in Hell. We steamed on slowly, using the compass and dodging the barges, and at last the Water Gipsy came out safe, but sooty, the White Ensign [of the Royal Navy] nearly black, the

other side. After that, all the other fires we passed seemed no more than night-lights, though there were some brave ones.

I now had the feeling that nothing could touch us – a thing I never felt in a house. At the top of Blackwall Reach a bomb fell fifty yards ahead of us. I ducked down behind the wheel, I know, but truly I felt no fear and this delighted me. We delivered our wire at Woolwich – I hope it was some use – and came back through the smoke to Westminster.

On the shore of North Woolwich adjoining King George V Dock, residents had the terrifying ordeal of being trapped between the dock fires on one side and a row of factories ablaze on the other. Debris spilled from burning buildings, impeding the passage of fire engines and rescue vehicles. There seemed no escape as families rushed through the streets, found their way blocked and agitatedly ran back again. Some sought cover in the public shelter at the Oriental baths – until that was hit by a bomb. The entire population of the area had to be got away as quickly as possible before they were engulfed by the flames. No vehicles could get to them, so, coughing and spluttering in the smoke, and in terror of the fire and the bombs, they groped their way on foot to Woolwich Pier, where they scrambled into small boats and were rowed to safety along the Thames. It was much the same for the inhabitants of Rotherhithe, trapped between walls of flame that were engulfing their houses by the dock walls and the river. While some managed to get to safety by road, others were evacuated by boat.

Kathleen Rylatt was a member of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), started by Stella, Marchioness of Reading at the request of the then Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, in May 1938. Its original purpose was to recruit more women into the ARP service, but it was now called upon to help in almost any home front situation, no matter how hazardous. On the night of 7 September Rylatt was helping with the evacuation of residents of the flame-engulfed areas around the Surrey Docks. Five people had been found in the midst of the blazing buildings, unable to get out of their shelter as sandbags had fallen in on top of them during the raid. 'The [residents] were horror-struck at the idea of leaving their homes. The road was literally burning and many of them had to be treated for badly-scorched feet.' Rylatt led the terrified people to St Olave's Hospital in Rotherhithe, where those who needed it were given first aid and everyone was comforted with blankets and cups of tea. The leader of a stretcher party who watched the

procession streaming out of docklands was 'absolutely amazed. They seemed to come like an army marching and running . . . they looked in a very bad state . . . dirty and dishevelled. Many had superficial cuts and their skin was pitted with tiny slivers of glass from blown out windows . . . and all had a "ghostly pallor" since they were covered in plaster dust from falling walls.'

Bert Purdy, an ambulance driver stationed at Moorgate, was just about to start his meal of tinned salmon and a cup of tea when the raids started. He abandoned his food and set off with the rest of his crew. 'It was chaos, buildings, houses all in a collapsed condition. At times my driving was erratic, I was driving up and down the bomb craters. We saw several mutilated bodies lying in the road. At one point we stopped and moved several limbs and two bodies to a point off the road, covered them with sheets of corrugated iron, intending to remove them later. It was terrible – people trapped, severely injured. People were lying about everywhere. We began to collect the people, render first aid if and when possible; take them to Poplar Hospital. Private cars were waiting outside the hospital for attention. We saw patients with severe head injuries lying on the roof of the cars, blood running down the back window . . . We worked hours; removed patients to Poplar, Mile End and London Hospitals. It was terrible . . . so unexpected and tragic.'

At one point in that terrible night the brother of Gladys Strelitz, who lived in East Ham, urged his sisters, ' "Come on girls, get all the children's clothes in a bag, and we've got to get out of London, there's a lull." And so we got in this bus, and we went to Bow. And when we got to Bow the bombing was going so badly that the conductor pulled the bell and said we wouldn't go any further. So the only place to go was to run into the crypt under this big church. And there the sight that met my eyes, it overcame me. Because there was people praying, and crying and asking God to help us, because there was bombs going on and the crypt . . . was actually shuddering . . . It was too much for me, I just passed out.'

The Communist journalist and typographer Alan Hutt, at the time assistant to the editor of the cooperatively-owned *Reynolds' News* (he later rejoined the *Daily Worker,* which had employed him at its inception in 1930), had been sent down to the shelter at 4.30 that afternoon, as he and his colleagues were arguing about whether the caption to a photograph of roadblocks damaged by an attack in south London the previous day – 'Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road' – was insensitive. 'Not funny when people've been killed,' one objected. All that night as the journalists were

trying to put the paper to bed, they were sent down to the shelter again and again. 'Damned nuisance,' thought Hutt, until he saw the cause of the alarm from the roof.

> I can see the fire along the waterfront and a rolling bank of grey smoke twice as high as the barrage balloons. Estimate distance and plot it out on the map which indicates Millwall, Surrey Docks as the beginning (infinite arguments in the office, but it turns out that this is right). Both sides of the river were plastered as far as Woolwich and the fire stretched for miles – eight or nine I shd. say. As dusk fell about 9 o'clock, the sight from our roof was incredible, a fantastic Gustav Doré piece, a gold and grey smoke-canopied flaming glow stretching thickly as far as one cd. see, the skyline silhouetted sharply black against this infernal Technicolor piece. Blackout was dead for the rest of the night and the bombers came back by the light of the fire to blast the East End . . . David has got a magnificent shot of the fire from London Bridge but the censor refuses to pass any pictures – 'nothing that will confirm the enemy's claims' . . . Jenkins goes to the Borough and gets an awe-inspiring view, also seeing the folks trooping to the Southwark tunnel in their thousands. We have to fight to get his stuff in the paper, for the new editor, jittery and helpless as usual says we've no way of getting this to the censor; but then he doesn't want to send anyone out in this – leave it to the agencies – they've got special passes blah blah. O God O Fleet Street . . .
>
> The fire, which has gone down a bit, picks up fiercely and at 1am towards the east there is a leap of flame and . . . clouds of black smoke. A big fire . . . We've all had a scornful sneer over the Private & Confidential Memo to eds [editors] giving a MoI [Ministry of Information] interview with the PM – optimistic stuff . . . 'this has been expected . . . damage may be somewhat serious from a local viewpoint, but seen on the background of our general war effort &c &c . . . '
>
> All Clear at 4.50; a coffee at the milk bar, a taxi to Kentish Town, & a rambling walk home through the dawn, the fire glow melting strangely into the light of day.

A young woman, Ida Naish, was caught in the raid on her way home to East Ham from visiting a friend. When she had arrived at Euston after hours of delays and detours, the station was deserted. 'I came out into the street and there was no sign of [her mother, who was supposed to be meeting her]. The fire was getting steadily brighter, and overhead there

were sounds of gunfire with an occasional dull thud in the distance as the bombs dropped. I have never felt so alone in my life.' She managed to get to Aldgate, but

> they wouldn't let me book through to East Ham as Bow Road station was no more and Stepney Green had been heavily bombed. I came up to the bus stop and waited with about twenty other people, but it was hopeless. A few taxis came by and we tried hailing them but of course we had no luck . . . I suppose I'd been standing there about forty minutes when providentially my mother walked by right in front of me. She, poor soul, had been turned away from Euston at 8.30 and as the raid was still in progress had started to walk home. She'd already come all that way on foot when I met her but despite that suggested that we should walk on . . . I think if we'd both been feeling hale and hearty, we wouldn't have gone but we seemed so numbed that nothing much mattered.
>
> . . . The whole of Thameside from London Bridge to Woolwich was a raging inferno. You could have seen to read by the light – if you'd felt inclined – and unfortunately for us we had to go by the East India Docks. Commercial Road was the only route open to the East because owing to the damage done to Bow Road, traffic was being diverted . . . And just before we got to Burdett Road, the bombs started falling. The shelters seemed to be absolutely non existent so we just went on . . . At one time we were made to go round back turnings because a delayed action bomb had fallen in the main road and nothing could pass. What was so maddening was the persistent drone of enemy planes which, I might mention, are easily distinguishable from our own. We couldn't get away from it, and felt so completely helpless.
>
> Fires were breaking out everywhere . . . a chapel that lay back about thirty yards from us suddenly burst into flames. It was dreadful. The streets were littered with glass and the pavements pitted with shrapnel from the raid [that afternoon]. Far away down the Barking Road we could see the glare of an incendiary bomb that had landed in the roadway and we decided to take to the back streets. A pale flickering light over towards Barking turned out (so we found later) to be the power station which had been hit. I think something must have hit the gas works, too, because we still haven't got any gas and at the moment [the next day, Sunday, 8 September] our Sunday joint is swinging on an improvised spit in front of the fire.
>
> . . . We were going down one turning when [an ARP] warden stopped us from going on and insisted that we stayed in his house. We were really very grateful and from 11pm to 5am we sat on the stairs in the dark gazing out

through the open door to the street which was incessantly lit up with explosions. And how those bombs fell! Canning Town library was hit, Forest Gate got it too, and all around us seemed to be shaking. Dante had nothing on Hitler, believe me.

. . . At last, at 5 o/c, the All Clear went and we finally reached home to find some windows out and the ceiling down in Mummy's room . . .

When I looked from my window I could see that one of the fires on Thames side was still burning and great clouds of black smoke were covering quite a large area.

'Then quite suddenly it ceased,' recalled Fireman Hurd, fighting a fire amidst the noise of screaming bombs and droning aircraft. 'The silence was almost overpowering for a time. At about 5 o/c am the "All Clear" went. We had been subjected, without any real cover, to 8 hours of continual bombing! . . . Relief crews began to arrive (they came from Enfield) . . . we stayed there until 10 o/c on Sunday morning when our Sub Officer handed over to another officer. This officer and his ten pumps . . . had come from Brighton! Our crew proceeded home [then] and what a scene of desolation we passed through. Debris everywhere, confined to the East End though, but I was too tired to care much about what I saw then. We had been on our feet since 6.15 pm on Saturday until 10 am on Sunday, with only one snack in 21 hours.'

The All Clear 'sounded a beautiful symphony' in Bernard Kops' ears:

everyone relaxed, the men arguing politics and the women talking about food, But the younger people wandered out to see the fires and I went with them along the Commercial Road. The closer I got the more black and red it became with flames shooting higher than the cranes along the dockside. Sparks were spitting everywhere and tongues of flames consumed the great warehouses along the black and orange waters of the Thames. Everything was chaos except the fire which was like a living monster with an insatiable appetite. And I was afraid of being devoured . . . so I left and wandered back towards Stepney Green where black smoke covered the sky.

Yet, with all this, there was a feeling of unreality. I couldn't believe it, it was like a film being shown before our eyes, Men were rushing around selling newspapers, screaming about the amount of German planes that were brought down, and there had been a family wiped out where I had been standing . . .

That first night of the blitz, 436 people were killed and 1,600 seriously injured.* Among the dead were seven firemen. Thirteen men were killed when the corporation depot in Abbey Road, West Ham, which was being used as an ARP Cleansing and Ambulance station, received a direct hit. Cyril Demarne, who was nearby, hurried round to find a hand he recognised as that of his friend Wally Turley sticking out from under a huge slab of concrete. Turley, a fireman, had been attempting to put out a fire at the station when it collapsed, burying him, his fellow firefighters and other ARP workers stationed there. It was impossible to move the concrete to free the bodies until heavy lifting gear arrived, so Fireman Turley's arm remained sticking out of the debris, a tragic signpost to one of the many instant burial grounds that night.

Soon after the first raid of the blitz had begun the previous afternoon, the manager of Robert Baltrop's Sainsbury's had decided to close the shop and send all his staff home. Baltrop set out to keep his date with a girl.

> She turned up – it sounds daft but perhaps we all thought it was a bit romantic meeting in an air raid, all this was going on very close to us. We could smell the smoke and hear the bombs, but she had orders to take me home immediately if I turned up so we went to her home and they were all in the Anderson shelter in her back garden, her parents and the lady from upstairs, and we huddled in there, it was pretty awful all squashed in there together with the raid going on and her father talked in gloomy tones about H.G. Wells and how we should all have to live underground, and every time there was a thump her mother screamed . . . The man from upstairs came in straight from work, and he tumbled into the shelter breathless with these stories of roads blocked, streets in ruins, named places that I knew, and it was almost unbelievable to hear someone say, you know this place or that place, well, it's been bombed.

* 'Seriously injured' described those who were admitted to and kept in hospital; a person receiving first aid treatment at the time, or subsequently presenting at an outpatients' department or at their doctor's surgery, was categorised as 'slightly injured'. Of course many people sustained minor injuries for which they did not seek medical help, so they do not show up in the figures. Indeed, the Ministry of Home Security was concerned that reporting officers should be clear about what were 'regarded as casualties, or to classify them in some way so that our published figures may represent the true gravity of the situation (i.e. not old ladies removed to hospital from near an incident "for their own comfort")'.

Baltrop finally became 'fed up' with this talk and the confined space, and walked home. His father had been out, 'picking up what news he could about the East End, because we knew it so well, we knew people and places, and he's heard this place had been bombed and that place . . . and we sat and had a cup of tea and he talked grievingly about the East End and the people and how they must be suffering, and then we went to bed and the raid was still going on and we wondered, would we wake up in the morning? What would tomorrow be like? And when I did wake up it was a lovely, sunny Sunday morning, lovely except that I think that four hundred and fifty or more people had been killed in East London, and a huge number injured, terrible, terrible destruction, and the Germans were coming back again that night . . .'