

BBC Peoples War Website

Contributed by

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People in story:

Henry (Harry) Hugh Thomas

Location of story:

Thornbury

Background to story:

Civilian

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I was a schoolboy living at Thornbury 10 miles outside Bristol when the Blitz occurred. At one stage the German bombers bombed Bristol night after night. I remember seeing the sky lit up with a fiery glow (10 miles away). The ack ack guns were firing and searchlights weaving the sky.

The sirens would wail and I remember the distinct sound of the German bombers (a high and low drone.)

At first I and my family went to an underground shelter across the road belonging to Mr. Watts who was registrar for the area of Thornbury, later we all went under the stairs and later still ignored the siren and stayed in bed.

There were several planes shot down and one night in particular I saw a Heinkel bomber in flames, with engines screaming, plummet to the ground. After it had crashed (still burning), the following bombers dropped incendiary bombs on and around the wreck thinking it was property on fire. In the morning a group of us lads cycled to the crash site at Falfield where all the crew had been killed. One poor chap had tried to parachute but was too late and was hanging in a tree. We used to collect momentos from these crash sites.

I was having dinner one day and was looking out of our front window towards Grovesend and actually saw two Gloster Gladiators collide and crash. They finished up in a field between Grovesend and Alveston.

At all these crashes of German or British planes there was a distinct horrible smell of burning flesh.

Another day I was with my Mum blackberry picking at a hill overlooking the Knapp when we witnessed the sky full of German planes attacking Filton Aerodrome in the daylight. There was a terrific dogfight with our fighters shooting down a number of

Germans. We were later told it was a Polish squadron putting up this brave fight. Also at an air-raid shelter at Filton, numerous people had been killed by a bomb blast.

Once whilst at school at Gillingstool a German plane, with the crew visible through its perspex front, flew very low over the playground and we all waved thinking it was British until we saw the cross.

Another night a sea mine was dropped (on a parachute). It landed on an old couple's detached cottage at Oldbury Naite and completely destroyed both house and occupants leaving just a massive hole. Apparently the Germans were trying to mine the River Severn 2 miles away but missed their target. I went on my bike to see this massive hole and afterwards always had a dread that a mine would hit our house without us knowing anything about it.

I went out one morning and saw a piece of shrapnel embedded in a five bar gate, which had come from an AA gun. We were unaware of the danger of falling shrapnel.

I also went with numerous people to Thornbury railway station to watch the soldiers returning from Dunkirk en route to convalescent billets. They were dirty and wounded and in a terrible state.

The maritime ack ack (soldier at sea with a red and blue square with an anchor insignia) were based around Thornbury in nissen huts below Thornbury castle. They served on convoys to Russia and after being torpedoed they returned here to convalesce. We were allowed to visit their cinema and shows free at Cossham hall. I always remember seeing the 49th Parrallel, George Formby and the play Journeys end.

Several of my older friends were killed. One friend in particular, Corporal Jeff Boyt of the Royal Tank Regiment, was killed at Mabeth in Tunisia on 22/3/43 aged 23 years. Jeff gave me his pair of football boots before joining the army. There was a tree planted in his memory, and one for Sergeant Dave Garret (pilot), at the Methodist church entrance.

Later I was called up to join the army between VE and VJ days. I went from Bristol to Carlisle and finished up at Ballykinler Camp in County Down, Northern Ireland. The atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima so luckily I never saw active service, but I did take part in the victory parade in Nottingham. I remained in the army for another three years before joining the police force.

One very strange incident happened while in the police force. I attended an accident at Staverton near Cheltenham where Sir Gilbert McQuillicam's chauffeur Mr. Hill was involved. I had to call a breakdown vehicle and it turned out that the breakdown driver was Mr. Hill's son's Sergeant in the army and he had witnessed his son's death. As a result their two families became great friends.