

War was declared when I was twelve years old and living in the house where I was born in Croydon Lane, Banstead. The sirens sounded and we all expected a non stop aerial bombardment to begin, but it turned out to be a false alarm and things soon settled down to a calm period, sometimes called “the phoney war”.

I was at the Junior School in the village, where Waitrose’s is today, and was due to move up to the Boys’ Central school in Picquets way, but this was delayed while air raid shelters were



being constructed in the playing field. This meant extra holiday for us.

About the time of Dunkirk we had three or four Belgian boys come to join the school; they had come over on a fishing boat. A Canadian artillery unit was camped in Nork park near the school. The men were very generous with their “gum” and “candy” so we spent quite a lot of our spare time there.

They were sleeping “under canvas” but many of them were North American Indians and they built their own sleeping accommodation out of poles and branches, which we boys helped them with and thought was great.

Their guns were transported on trailers towed behind a tug vehicle. The Indians used to climb on the trailers and cling on to

the howitzer as the driver put it through its paces round the field. It was quite steep and on one occasion the whole thing overturned on a bend. I thought the Indians would be killed but they just rolled over where they landed and then got up quite unhurt.

When the daylight air raids began in 1940 we sometimes had to leave lessons and file down into the shelters. My friend and I were always the first down the shelter steps, then we ran along to the far end, up the escape ladder, out of the hatch and over the fence into the recreation ground. From there we could watch the dog fights going on overhead, and pick out the different types of bombers in the massed formations heading towards London. This was not easy as they flew very high and we did not have any binoculars.

I had watched the raid on Croydon Aerodrome from my home and seen the Junkers 87's (Stuka) dive bombers fly in through a circle of smoke that had been laid round the aerodrome by marker planes. They came down wailing and in an almost vertical dive to drop their bombs. They pulled out of their dives fairly low and climbed away slowly trying to regain formation again for the homeward journey before our fighters closed in. But some Hurricanes arrived and soon we could hear the growl of their machine guns. Suddenly there was a thudding noise as three machine gun bullets buried themselves in the roof of one of our sheds. I later dug them out and added them to my "war museum". (They were "ours".) Then a huge column of black smoke billowed up from the direction of Croydon. I guessed it was the aerodrome and so it proved to be.

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FAMILY PORTRAIT
A PHILLIPS ANTHOLOGY 1788-1998
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