A Boy at War

I have been going over my life as a young boy just prior to and during the last world war. I was ten years old when the war came. We lived by the water on the South Coast of England in perhaps the worst place to be if Hitler was to have his way. My father had moved the family south from Yorkshire after his many years of unemployment during the 1930's Great Depression. Dad had obtained work as a tool and die maker in the expanding aircraft industry. This was during the period leading up to World War II.

My three-year-old sister, Shirley, and I lived in a small picture-perfect English village called Hamble which dates back to the eighth century (circa 730). The village is just seven miles from the great seaport of Southampton in Hampshire. Our older brother. Donald, had stayed in the north with our grandmother to finish accounting school. The village was only five miles from the Supermarine works where the Spitfire was designed and built. I was very interested in anything to do with aeroplanes so it was an exciting time, and place for a young boy to live. To this day, I consider myself to be a Spitfire freak.

On one side of Hamble was the water leading to the port of Southampton. On the other side was the Hamble River, which was (and still is) the biggest yachting Mecca in England. Hence, we were situated on a peninsula with the only road access to the village from one direction. We did not think about it then but the location of the village was a very easy place for aircraft to spot from the air. The main shipping artery to Southampton was right by our house. As children we would run to see the Queen Mary and the all the other great ships of the day just as soon as we heard their sirens blast, announcing another return trip from New York after a five-day crossing of the Atlantic Ocean.

Just across the water was the new flying boat passenger terminal at Hythe. The big Pan American Clippers were just beginning their regular flight service from America. What dreams, for a young boy growing up where world travel history was being made. To this day I think how lucky I was to be witness to all this. Such travel was not for the likes of us, so it never crossed my mind that one day I would be a passenger on the Queen Mary and settle in America. The great ship was of interest to us boys only because of the big waves she caused as she sailed by our swimming beach.

Our village was home to three aircraft factories: Armstrong Whitworth, Folland Aircraft and Fairey Aviation. All of these companies played significant roles in the early history of aviation. There was an airfield just a half-mile from home, where many of the pilots for the RAF and British Commonwealth air forces were trained. Even foreign pilots were trained at Air Service Training (AST), including some of the German pilots who as events unfolded were soon to be flying in the Luftwaffe. Additionally, we had a Shell Oil storage facility and tanker dock. What targets we were! and war was approaching. Soon these boyish areas of intrigue would become of strategic interest to the Germans, or so we thought. As it turned out the

German pilots who trained to fly in our village may have had other things in mind, as I will return to later in my story.

For the British, World War II was declared on Sunday morning, September 3, 1939, at 11 o'clock, remember it as if it were yesterday. Dad was getting ready to go to the local pub, where he went every Sunday at that time. Mother was busy cooking Sunday dinner (really lunch), a scrumptious meal of roast beef with Yorkshire puddings and all the trimmings. It all had to be on the table when Dad got back from the pub at 2 p.m. He might be bringing someone he had met at the pub to partake with us. He often did. I remember it so well because it was an ideal day, an English Indian summer. Everyone had their windows open and the radios were playing the usual Sunday church music. The war announcement came over the BBC radio at exactly at 11 o'clock, and it was as if everyone had stopped breathing to listen to the news that we were at war with Germany. I remember thinking how exciting it all would be, that soon there would be aeroplanes in our sky and I would get to see my beloved Spitfires in action.

However, there was worry in my mother's eyes and the other adults were beginning to gather and talk about the bad things that would lie ahead. These were things that a young boy could not relate to for the adults knew of the hardships in the First World War, and many, like my parents, had been through that. They also realized that we lived in a dangerous location, surrounded as we were by targets! Mother talked about how difficult it would be to get the food she loved to cook for us. She told stories of World War I when they only had jam and bread to eat and used to look at a picture of a roast chicken dinner to help it go down!

The day is indelibly etched in my memory, and to my young mind, it was exciting to think that soon the German aircraft would come and the antiaircraft guns that were beginning to appear in the fields around us would be in action.

Balloon barrages were a particular attraction. These great big hydrogen gasbags were winched into the skies around us on steel cables to deter low flying aircraft and dive-bombers. It was a wondrous sight. Sometimes they would get tangled up in their own lines and flop all over the place. We would see them shot down so easily, like sitting ducks, with their heavy cables doing more damage to our roofs than the Germans ever did.

The mobility preparations were moving fast, but the days and weeks went by with no sight or sound of the German aircraft we were expecting. Dad was busy at work at the aircraft factory and had joined the British Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) organization, dubbed "Look, Duck, and Vanish!" This was early 1940, and I had moved up to the senior school which bordered on the edge of the airfield. We could see the planes taking off and landing from our classroom windows. Spitfires would come in and stay, as the field was now a major fighter repair facility where the fighters returned directly from the air battle to be repaired to fight again.

I had become an avid aircraft spotter, studying the silhouettes of allied and enemy aircraft so that I could instantly recognize them. This capability was to cost me dearly in lost education, as I will soon relate.

We started to get occasional air activity and German aircraft sightings. The ack-ack guns would come into action and remind us that we were at war. At night, the searchlights would sweep the sky and the adults seemed to be more on edge as the activities increased. They issued us gas masks that we had to take everywhere we went. At school, we practised putting them on several times a day.

My youngest sister, Wendy, was born at this time: February 1940. She was born at home during the night and I remember being awakened to a baby's cry. Mother had never mentioned to me that we were to have an addition to the family. I had no idea. Such is the naivete of a young lad with his head in the clouds! So now there was me and my two sisters at home, with older brother Don still in the north.

Dad was working all hours, and when not working, was at the local pub. This was the way of relaxation at that time. One day he took me into his work and let me sit in the cockpit of a lend-lease American Aerocobra (P-37). He pointed out the long propeller shaft that passed between the pilot's legs connecting the rear-mounted to the propeller. I thought the Aerocobra was a wonderful aircraft, but it turned out not to be, and anyway I still liked the Spitfire best!

And then it started. The hot (for England) summer of 1940, which was soon to be known in history as the "Battle of Britain." Now, at last, I could use my aircraft recognition skills and watch the dog fights above us each day. How I loved those Spitfires and their pilots, and wished that I was older so that I could take part. Each night we spent several hours in the air raid shelter in the field next to our housing development. The shelter was nothing but a big trench cut into the ground and covered with corrugated iron sheets and earth; dark, damp, and filled with steel bunks-bring your own mattress and blankets. As if anyone could actually sleep with all the ack-ack noise going on!

At the time, I had a small hand-cranked projector that was battery-powered and would project flickering Mickey Mouse and Popeye films onto a bed sheet. Each night, I would project these films for the other kids in the shelter, and we thought it was wonderful, in spite of the racket going on outside. We kids had no sense of the gravity and danger in our situation; it was all excitement to us.

As soon as the raids were over, the kids would dash out into the streets and look for shrapnel for our war stuff collections. These sharp, jagged reminders of the spent ack-ack shell cases were often still hot. They hit the tile roofs on the houses with a big thud and ricocheted onto the streets where they were easy to find. I had a great collection of shrapnel and other stuff, including a French gas mask that had washed up on the nearby beach. Later I found a German one-pound incendiary bomb, which I took home and stored in the cupboard with my collection. It was there in the house for several days before Dad found it and blew his top. Not unlike a bomb going off! It was a live incendiary bomb that had not detonated, and was the very last bomb that I brought home! Actually, not for this story, but later on, I brought live bombs home when I was a flight engineer in the RAF and bombs had come loose in the bomb bay-but that's another place, and another time.

All manners of interesting things would wash up on the local beaches as evidence of the ships that were sank in the English Channel. A daily trip to comb the beach was a routine thing for us kids. The family just up the road from where we lived came up with a washed-up crate of cheese. There must have been about 100 pounds of the precious rationed stuff and the people sold it for several weeks to the locals in a quarter pound packages. A real bonanza!

Every day at our school on the airfield there would be at least three or four alerts and all the students would move from the classrooms to the shelters in the field across from the school. By the middle of 1940, we were losing so much learning time due to air raids that a new school air raid policy was established. The plan was to have the students move to the shelter only after enemy aircraft were actually in the local area.

This new approach needed aircraft spotters, and a competition was held to find the best-qualified students at aircraft recognition. At last my time had come! Two other boys and I were selected as "School aircraft spotters."

It was our task to leave class as soon as the air raid siren sounded and stand on the top of the shelters with a bell in our hand. Only when we sighted a German aircraft, or the local ack-ack announced their arrival, would we ring the hand bells for the other kids to come to the shelter. As soon as it quieted down, the kids would go back to their lessons leaving us three "super spotters" to scan the sky for the next attack. When the final all clear was sounded, we could return to class. Wow! We thought we were so important to the war effort! It never for one moment dawned on us that we were the ones losing out on our education. But what's education if you are "a boy at war?"

Things remained very active in our area throughout the hot summer of 1940. Days at school spotting for German aircraft, nights showing Mickey Mouse movies in the shelter. One morning just as I was preparing to leave for school, all hell broke lose. The local antiaircraft guns opened up with an ear-splitting noise. There was the unmistakable sound of a low-flying German aircraft heading our way. Mother told me to grab my baby sister, Wendy, in her carrycot and run to the shelter in the field. She would get Sister Shirley up and follow me. As I ran up the street with my four-month old baby sister amid all the racket going on, I saw a Heinkel III coming straight towards me, flying at about 500 ft. The Heinkel's nose guns were blasting away and for all the world, he was firing at me and my baby sister. I dived into the hedge on the top of the carrycot. After what seemed to be an eternity, but really just econds, the black swastikas flew over the top of us with guns still blazing. Later, the newspaper reported that the low-firing German aircraft was firing at the airfield, just a few hundred yards from where my sister and I were lying in the hedge. A man was killed on the airfield from the Heinkel's gun fire.

It was over in seconds, but as long as I live, I will see the unmistakable shape of the Heinkel III coming straight at me that morning. The man who was killed on the airfield during that brief attack was the only casualty in our village during the whole war. But at that time, we didn't know that we would get to be so lucky. That night, the news reported that the Heinkel crew of five had died too. It seemed that within seconds of passing over me, the Heinkel had turned to fly up the local rail line, perhaps to find trains to strike, and had been pounced on by a Spitfire and shot down. It seems odd to think that in a

very short space of time the German crew who had scared the life out of me, had come to the end of their war.

I think that the realities and dangers of the war came to me that morning. Up until then it had just been like a game with some new excitement each day. The night bombing went on, and nights in the shelter became routine. The nearby port of Southampton was destroyed along with a good part of the old city. The Spitfire factory was bombed out and many people killed in the houses around it. Our village and all its targets were still being spared from the bombing and no one knew why, since it was such an easy target to find from the air because of its position as a peninsula.

The fifteenth of September 1940 is recognized in history as the official end of the intensive air war, and is known as "Battle of Britain Day". It has another significance for me because on Battle of Britain Day 1951 I took part in the annual formation flight over London with my RAF bomber crew. Later that day at my air base celebration dance I met my wife, June, the mother of our four boys for whom these notes are written.

Another incident occurred in late 1940, one that got the quick attention of my parents who understood the dangers we were in much better than I did. The weather had changed and it rained for several days. This was welcome since the bombing stopped and we got to sleep the whole night in our beds at home. When the weather cleared, the night raiders came back but our air raid shelter in the field was flooded with about four feet of water. We stayed at home that night spending a lot of the time crouched under the stairs. No one had been able to go to the shelter in the field. The next morning after all the air activity, we found that our safe haven shelter had sustained a direct hit, with a bomb going right through the entrance.

This was the very last time in the war that we left our home on an air raid and the shelter bombing is one of the things you really think about - even "a boy at war". The only other activity in the village was a stray sea mine which had missed the shipping channel and exploded in the back of a large house about three hundred yards from our home. The house was badly damaged and abandoned. It was still standing but all the windows were out and half of the roof blown off.

We boys took care of the rest of the house demolition! We held many roof-slate fights, throwing the heavy slates like Frisbees at each other and finally, we leveled the house completely. Boys will be boys, but thinking back I probably came closer to being badly wounded or worse during the slate fights than by any action the Germans took against us.

As things did not seem to be getting any better towards the end of 1940, Dad decided it was time to pack mother and us kids off to relatives in Yorkshire where we would be safe. Dad stayed in the village to work and "hold the fort", and came very close to getting killed in later raids on the city of Southampton.

He was lucky one time to leave a pub to go to another just before the pub was bombed, and in fact, lost his brand new bike in that occurrence. One night Dad (Jack Armitage) borrowed a pub friend's car and managed in the blackout to hit the lamppost just down from our house. The lamppost was

tilted to about 30 degrees from vertical and remained that way for the rest of the war! The local electric company had no reason to fix it since the streetlights were out of use. It was with some pride that I told my young friends "my dad did that" and the locals referred to it as, "Jack's lamp post"!

So, we evacuated north to the industrial city of Leeds where mother and the two girls stayed with grandmother and I stayed with my Aunt Doris. As it turned out, the only air raid on Leeds occurred while we were there, but it was nothing like being in the south of England at that time.

We stayed in the north for about a year. My sister, Shirley, died during that time. She was only five years young. She was playing in the local schoolyard across from my grandmother's house and fell and cut her leg. Within forty-eight hours, she was dead from osteomyelitis. This happened just a year before penicillin was available. It would have saved her life.

In late 1941 we moved back to our home in the south as the air war subsided. Now there were just the two of us kids at home, but our older brother joined us not long after. Soon America would be in the war and bring its might to bear on the enemy. About the only things we had to deal with were the V-1 buzz bombs, which came droning over until they ran out of fuel and exploded wherever they crashed.

While we were away in the north, the authorities had replaced our bombed-out air raid shelter with twelve-bed surface shelters built in the back garden of every fourth house in our development. We were a 'fourth house' so this great, thick concrete structure with twelve bunks was in our back garden just a few feet from the house. No one ever used it. The neighbors who were assigned to it never came. Dad and mother used to stand in the shelter doorway at night when the V-1s came over. They used to call up to my brother and me sleeping in the back bedroom of our house, but we never joined them. As we lay in bed listening to the V-1s heading our way we had nothing but bad thoughts for Werner von Braun and his Peenemunde rocket research team. Much later as a NASA engineer I met and attended briefings with von Braun and found him to be a very charismatic and friendly man. Time and circumstances change things.

The V-1 buzz bombs largely fell in open fields with only the cows and sheep as victims. Of course, this was not the case in the large populated areas of London, where they proved to be disastrous. The no-sound V-2 rockets were even more frightening to those living on the East Coast of England, but they did not have the range reach us.

In 1944 the preparations for the D-Day landings in France were all around us. We were not allowed on the local beaches and the roads were full of military equipment waiting to be moved to the landing craft. The American Army Corps of Engineers had taken over the "hard" down by the Hamble River in our village and rebuilt it from a muddy area into a firm surface to handle their preparations. The 'new' hard is now a fine parking lot complete with a commemorative sign to the American solders who built it. D-day, to me, was waking up at about five in the morning to the constant noise of hundreds of low flying aircraft heading out across the English Channel to the beach heads in France. It went on for hours, and at first light we could see the distinctive

black and white striping on the aircraft wings and the DC-3's towing gliders full of troops. Many solders and airmen would die that day.

And so the war ended in our village with just about everything intact. Why the village of Hamble, with all its strategic targets, was never deliberately bombed was a mystery. There was a lot of speculation after the war, and even some documentation, that the German air force didn't bomb our village because many of the Luftwaffe leaders had learned to fly there before the war and had retained an affinity for the village and its people. I remember seeing a German aerial photograph that was taken in the war that showed the whole village with all its targets marked. So, they knew where everything was.

Perhaps we were just lucky. I know that I was fortunate to live through that "boy at war" experience. Later, I would become an aircraft and helicopter designer, an RAF bomber crew member, flight test engineer in Canada, have a long career with NASA and the US space program, and finish my career designing commercial space boosters. But nothing will stick in my mind as much as those early days of the war. They shaped my young boy's mind, steered my future, and perhaps played a large part in who I am today.

Peter Armitage