

## New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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**00-00-00**

*Right Oh, please could you give me your name and your age at the start of the war and where you lived.*

Yes, my name is Anne Biffin and when World War II started, I was five years old in the July as the war started in September. I lived along the Salisbury Road, the A36, with my parents and my younger sister and brother.

*What did you parents do during the war?*

Well my father was in a reserved occupation. He was building aircraft hangers and he was working on the Mulberry Harbour at one time, but he also worked in the docks occasionally because he was a steel erector. My mother had three children from the age of five down to my baby brother who was born the year that the war started, so she didn't have to go to work in a factory like a lot of the other ladies did in the area.

*So what was home life like at the beginning of the war?*

Well, home life, we didn't really seem to go short of food because we had a large garden and my father used to grow vegetables and fruit, and we did keep hens at one time, but food like sugar and butter and cheese was very limited. Sometimes Dad used to bring home things from the docks that perhaps he acquired from somewhere. I remember he brought home a big tin of butter at one time and we made ourselves sick having it on toast. We weren't used to so much, and he also brought a box of Hershey chocolates, which were American chocolate bars, and that was a complete luxury 'cos sweets were completely off the record in those days. And many many years later when I went to America, the first thing I did was bought myself a Hershey bar and believe it or not, they had the same colour wrapping on as they did all those years ago.

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**00-02-23**

*Where did you go to school?*

I went to school initially to Lydlynch Road, which was the infant school. Nothing very much happened there at all. It was just a quiet period at the early days of the war. I wasn't aware of anything untoward happening. I then went to Ringwood Road School as it was called then. I think the name is changed now. That was the middle school. And of course we did have to take gasmasks right from the word go. They were worn in little boxes slung across our backs and it was just all part of going to school. We didn't sort of, think anything untoward of it, it was just what we had to do. But what I do remember is, as the war got underway, the class at the middle school – my class – was divided into groups, and we each had to write to a soldier. I suppose it was a sort of moral boosting exercise for them, and I remember this particular soldier, who unfortunately I can't remember his name now, but he wrote back on these air letters which seemed to be photographed and censored in a particular way, and he said that my name was rather like one of the coins, which was anna, so I imagine he must have been out in India or somewhere. I often wonder what happened to him.

**00-03-45**

*So tell me about moving up to Testwood School and when that happened.*

Right, so when I became old enough to move on to the next school, which happened to be Testwood 'cos unfortunately I didn't pass what was the equivalent of the eleven plus in those days, to go on to Brockenhurst College. We couldn't take over the school because the Fire Service was still in occupancy. I must have been about 10 or 11 years old then. They obviously hadn't moved on to their new quarters. So for some while, and I don't remember the time – the length of time, but we had to go to the Thistle Hall and be taught there, which was the local church hall at St Winifred's Church, and also the Testwood Club at one time. When we eventually moved to the school, we found that we were very badly fitted out. In fact virtually nothing in the way of books, and we had to read Greenmantle over and over again until I was sick of it. The teachers seemed to be brought out of retirement, a lot of them, and that's it really.

**00-05-00**

*So Anne, what do you remember about the bombing?*

There were air raid sirens when we were at school and it seemed that my education was very fragmented when I was in the sort of, probably the middle school I would think because that was when the war was at its height and we were in and out of air raid shelters all the time. One of the teachers used to tell stories to us to keep us occupied 'cos it could have been quite frightening. I mean, we could hear the planes going over and everything and it was very easy to distinguish the tones of the German planes. They were very – the engine noise was very different from the Spitfire and quite a common expression then was "Is it one of ours?" Afterwards, if there was an air raid, we used to go out and look for shrapnel, and one of the things we used to do was pick up bits of shrapnel, which was

these jagged bits of metal, "shrappy" as we called it, and take it back to school to compare with what the other children had picked up. (chuckle)

**00-06-06**

*And what personal experience did you have of bombs falling near your own house?*

Well there were quite a lot of air raids going on and especially as we were quite near Southampton and we sort of got the flak from that, but I remember the windows in the bay at the front of the house being blown out in their entirety. Not a single pane of glass was broken and my father just went out and picked them up and just stuck them back in again. We had an aunt staying with us and she was standing in the doorway at the front door, and when a bomb fell nearby, she was just blown to the top of the stairs. I think she went back to Aldershot after that, which I don't know which was the lesser of the two evils really. (chuckles)

**00-06-51**

*So what was Christmas like during the war?*

Well, Christmas went surprisingly well really, I mean, our parents worked very hard. My father used to be able to find somebody that he worked with that was handy with a saw. In fact Dad was quite handy with a saw as well, or he perhaps had a mate whose son had outgrown his train set and he was able to get a Horby train set for my brother one year and laid it out in the front room and set it going when we came down Christmas morning. We were never without toys, but they were rag dolls and wooden cots and you know, sort of things that – they were sort of second hand. My aunt, the one that was blown up the stairs, she actually managed to get a very large dolls house for my sister and I from someone, second hand, and so, you know, that thrilled us to bits. We never felt deprived in any way at all. Thanks to the brave men of the merchant navy we managed to have our fruit rationing every year, sultanas and currants and so on for making cakes and my mother, just to make it a little bit more interesting, she used to put a little bit of red and green ink in the icing just to sort of make it look pretty. (chuckles) It didn't poison any of us.

**00-08-15**

*Did you have any experience if meeting prisoners of war Anne?*

We did have some prisoners of war working nearby. I mean, we had to make our own amusements during the war because there were no sort of televisions or phones, you know, sort of mobile phones and that sort of thing, so we used to go out and about quite a lot, and of course we met these prisoners. They were very friendly men, the Italians. They were always singing and laughing and they were working on the canal just up the road from us, sort of keeping it clear and also on the river Test just across the way. They loved having us children around and one of them made my sister a little signet ring out of a silver threepenny piece with the monarch's head being the actual signet. They wore special uniforms which could be seen from a distance because they had different coloured patches, either square or round, stitched onto them so you could actually see that he was a prisoner if he was walking along the road. But we seemed to fraternize with them in quite sort of

complete safety. There didn't seem to be an overseer around, but there must have been somewhere I suppose, but nobody chased us off. And the prisoners used to help – give us bits of their cake and sandwiches and so on. I think they lived better than we did at sometimes. And there was just one German who used to exercise the local farmer's hunter around the field, but he never mixed with anybody. (chuckles) Used to keep himself to himself and after the war he did actually marry a local girl, and as far as I know, his family are still here.

**00-10-09**

*Tell me what you remember about the build up to D-day.*

Well, nobody really knew D-day, what was going to happen, you know, before the event of course, because there was a terrific amount of activity going on in the area. As I lived on the A36 and we were not far from Salisbury, there were loads and loads – convoys of military vehicles going by. They would stop occasionally and the men would get out and sit along the ditches and my brother and sister and I would take them out jugs of tea, but of course, at the time nobody knew, not even the men themselves, what it was all about I don't think, they just knew that something big was about to happen. And of course we never knew whether any of them, sort of, came back alive.

**00-11-02**

*Tell me about meeting American troops for the first time.*

Now when the Americans came over after Pearl Harbour and just leading up to the build-up for D-day, I saw for the very first time, when I must have been about 9, a person of a different colour from myself. And I was fortunate enough to have a friend whose older sister met one at a dance, and she invited us up to meet him one day, 'cos he was taken home to meet Mom & Dad. And we went up to meet this man and we were so awestruck by him, because we'd never seen a black man before, and he was sitting there so quietly in his very smart GI uniform, and we played cards with him. His name was Austin, and I've often wondered whether he survived Omaha beach.

The other thing I remember about the Americans was when their trucks used to roll by they would always throw what they called "life savers" out to us which were like coloured polo sweets with the holes in the middle, and also slabs of chocolate. I remember one truck going by once when my brother and I were going off fishing, and a white American nudged his black colleague and the coloured American put his hand in his pocket and threw a great slab of chocolate out for us, which was a real bonus. (laughter)

**00-12-30**

*What do you remember about the bombing of Southampton, then?*

As for poor old Southampton being bombed, I can remember at one time going along Above Bar street and there seemed to be not a single building standing, or not many anyway and it just looked completely desolate. My father was working in the docks about the time, and when there was a bad blitz going on, my mother made us get down on our

knees and say a prayer for Dad when we were in our air raid shelter, because he was working there at the time. But he used to take a pie with him in an enamel pie dish, and once he'd eaten that, he would put the pie dish on his head when he cycled home from work and used it as a sort of helmet in case anything fell out of the skies on him. Don't know that it would have done much good but that's what he did. (chuckles)

**End: 00-13-24**

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