

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

AIR RAIDS

Air raids on Worthing

Extracts from *Despatches from the Home Front, The War Diaries of Joan Strange 1939-1945* (Monarch Publications, 1989)

1940

September 14th Worthing's been bombed – whoever would have imagined it? At 6.30am an aeroplane was heard circling about and suddenly all Worthing must have awakened to the sound of six bombs. We all got up and came downstairs and waited till the all clear. The postman came in good time and told us Mitchell's Bakery, Caffyn's Garage and Wells' Bird shop had all been badly hit – minor damage to the Town Hall. What the targets are we can only surmise – probably the Post Office and Town Hall and the Gas Works and Hospital. Well, well. It's happened at last.

September 17th Mother and I have slept downstairs for three nights but it is so uncomfortable! And now the invasion is off so we have decided to retire upwards again! We've decided the only difference would be that a direct hit would (if we were upstairs) dispose of us at once, and if we were down it would bury us!

September 19th The awful air attacks against London continue – famous buildings, businesses, hospitals, galleries and so on – all are damaged badly. The poor in the East End are getting the worst of it. Why should these poor people, innocent of any war-like feelings be subjected to such ghastly terror? Kit phoned to say she was alright – every night she spends in the public shelter and by day she tries to work between the raids. We sent her a paraffin cooking stove because London gas is a transitory commodity these days.

October 3rd At last rain all day. We got the first siren at five o'clock in the evening – nothing all day – a record! We have now had 120 siren warnings since May 9th. We get one every night at dusk which heralds the approach of German bombers en route for London – but London is holding its own in a most magnificent way. All the ARP services and others, such as the clergy etc are working magnificently. Some scarcely sleep at all during the twenty-four hours, Kit says. She helps at a "Rest Centre" one night a week, a place where those bombed out of house and home go temporarily.

October 5th Apart from the usual four (or is it five?) warnings we've had a fairly peaceful day. Langton Rd's fire-fighting volunteers made a tour of inspection of their houses' fighting apparatus. Some have really good ladders – all have their buckets of water and sand ready – and there are three stirrup pumps in the road!

1942

August 10th Just before 11pm we had an 'alert' and then firing and other ominous sounds. Two hit-and-run planes came over. It turned out that Dr Marjorie Davies' house in Homefield Rd, half a mile away, was hit but she was away at the time. Also some newly arrived Canadian soldiers lost their lives. The new phosphorous bombs were used and they burn the flesh badly. In Littlehampton a bomb hit the minister's manse and the Rev Hailstone and his wife and two friends who were staying with them died. The Rev Hailstone had

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been in the town little more than a year having lost his church in the raids on Southampton.

1943

February 9th There was a lot of damage done in Worthing yesterday by Nazi raiders. Mrs MacRae, eighty-eight years old and her invalid daughter were killed when a bomb flattened their house in Homefield Rd. Dorothy Macpherson was helping at the Woolton Restaurant in Lyndhurst Rd when it was hit; she cut her leg and was thoroughly frightened. It was extremely lucky that I changed a patient's appointment as otherwise I should have been exactly where a bomb fell at 2pm. Children at St Mary's Catholic School were machine gunned but only a few were injured.....We had an alert at 4.20pm followed by very loud gunfire and other sounds. Mother was at a Whist Drive and owing to the noise there did not hear the battle!

March 9th Very nasty tea-time raid. Twelve raiders flew in towards the coast at 'zero feet', just above sea level and so were not located by radio-location. Six attacked Worthing and the others flew over towards Brighton. Three people were killed, literally 'blown to bits', three are missing and twenty-five injured. There's masses of glass and corporation workmen everywhere.

March 27th We had an excitement here today. The 'alert' sounded at about two o'clock and as I was cycling along to the canteen terrific anti-aircraft gunfire sounded. As we are told to seek cover at once I hopped off my bike and was about to drop ignominiously down behind the wall of a previously bombed house in Lyndhurst Rd when a warden called to me to rush over to the shelter. It was all over soon and later the soldiers in the canteen told us a Nazi raider had been brought down in the sea at West Worthing before it even reached the coast.

1944

February 22nd A very unpleasant evening. I had just got in when the cuckoo (alarm) sounded. Uncle Bert departed to the sound of gunfire. We had diving planes and bombs for about an hour. I was on firewatching and went out to look for anything untoward from time to time; there was nothing except I heard shrapnel falling nearby. Mother sat in the passage working her drawn-threadwork trolley cloth. Had I been an artist I could have drawn a good picture of 'Life in 1944' with me in tin hat sitting on the stairs.

June 17th The dreaded 'pilotless aircraft' were over Southern England last night. Nothing landed on Worthing though several people saw the things and we certainly heard them.

June 23rd Dairy farmers in parts of Southern England are attributing a drop in milk yields to the flying bombs. During the day most animals are indifferent to the noise but night gunfire is another proposition. Owners of ducks also report that night firing at flying bombs reduces their egg output. Pilots have nicknamed these things 'doodle bugs'. One has wrecked a Worthing allotment holder's potato crop. Within an hour or two he was phlegmatically replacing it with winter greens.

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