

Wartime West Sussex 1939 - 1945
WOMEN AT WAR - VOLUNTEER WORK

WVS war work in West Wittering [Six pages]

From the *West Wittering Women's Institute Village Scrapbook*.

By L. F. Ramsey.

1939

WEST WITTERING IN THE FRONT LINE.

by L.F.Ramsey. From the Sussex County Magazine. 1946.

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When the plans for the German invasion of England were discovered, West Wittering was named as one of the beaches on which the landing of barges would be made. But it did not seem to occur to the enemy that the reverse might very well happen and that landing craft for the invasion of Normandy might start from West Wittering....

Everyone knows that Sussex folk 'w'unt be druv' and when Chamberlain arrived in London waving Hitler's promise never to go to war with us, while crowds cheered and women wept, what the village thought about it was shown by the large attendance at first-aid lectures. All the winter there was an uneasy feeling and when, in January 1939, we canvassed everyone for billeting purposes I found in every cottage co-operation and courtesy.

All that summer was spent in setting up first-aid points, practising bandaging, organising messenger service, transport for billeted children, what to do if bombs fell. When August came, the tension increased. Though week-enders streamed down to the shore in their thousands, we felt uneasily that the storm might break at any moment. Things happened. For instance, a King's messenger living in the village came to say goodbye. He was off for destination unknown. The same day, we watched the Aquitania pass the Nab, ostensibly going to New York. But she was manned with guns and naval ratings and bound for Hong Kong.

On the last day of August, my doorbell rang from morning till night. Vanloads of food arrived at the Memorial Hall where, on the first of September, sixty-five school children arrived during the morning. We had a fleet of cars waiting in the lane to take the children to their foster parents and they were all accommodated by two o'clock.

That night we blacked out our windows, little dreaming that five-and-a-half years would pass before we should see lights in the village again.

Next day, 'bus loads of mothers and babies arrived. Some of them had started at 5 a.m. and though the infants had slept, the toddlers were worn out. We had much more difficulty in billeting that day and even had to send the policeman with some of the mothers. But we had our heroines. One householder took a mother and five children under five and this was one of our outstanding successes.

The G.F.S. camp was opened as a temporary hospital, for some of the children were suffering from scabies and other troubles. For a week, the billeting officer and I were at the hall each day, re-billeting, dealing with all sorts of difficulties. Several of the mothers went home.

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1939 - 1940

Most of the school children settled down with their foster parents. The work entailed was considerable. There was no day without its problem...dirty heads, impetigo, bed-wetting, mothers and babies who gave trouble in their billets.

The first eight months of the war were occupied chiefly with evacuation problems. The billeting officer, Mr. George Kewell, co-operated with me in every possible way and was the greatest help but he had a difficult task.

We had a second evacuation when children were passed on to us from Littlehampton, but it was not till May 1940 when Holland and Belgium were overrun and the news from France became so disquieting that we realised West Wittering was probably going to have a hot time.

On the eve of the day of prayer, (26th May,) we heard sounds of explosions most of the night. Those who looked out over the sea saw sheets of flame shooting up into the sky. Never had the church been so packed as on that Sunday.

That was our first experience of noises in the night. Much worse was to come. Some West Wittering people owned little ships at Itchenor and took these to Dunkirk. All the local men joined the Home Guard or L.D.V. as it was called at first or were enrolled as special constables. The faint-hearted left the village: and not only the faint-hearted, but everyone who lived on the front had eventually to leave, for no one was allowed on the shore. The first convoy of soldiers arrived, men of the East Surreys, and sentries were posted on the road to the beach. By July the Air Ministry had put up Air Raid shelters and on the 10th of July the W.V.S. canteen was opened on the front.

The following day, I saw the first air battle over West Wittering...The Battle of Britain was on...The first bomb that fell here was at Cloverfield, where the gardener was at work. He refused to go indoors till the bomb actually fell a few yards away from him, uprooting three trees, but he was unhurt.

Two days later, many bombs fell, but most of them fell in the mud of the harbour. One plane came down low and the gunner machine-gunned a fisherman who was just coming in. He threw himself down in the mud and escaped injury...

The soldiers had been with us only a fortnight when a plane flew low over the men at Cattlegate, machine-gunning them as they sat at breakfast...

One of our pilots came down by parachute at Cloverfield and Mrs. Fremantle drove him to hospital.

By August, we had a thousand men billeted on the front, men of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. On the 18th, we had a terrific raid, dive bombers presumably attempting to attack Thorney. It was Sunday and I had to go to the police station to get passes for workers at the canteen....I examined a wallet taken from the body of a German airman. It was full of notes, English, German and French. 140 planes were shot down that day...

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1940

The D.C.L.I. were in high spirits, especially a corporal who had captured a German officer. We had lifeboatmen stationed off the shore to pick up bodies from the sea. On the 24th, 800 planes came over and there were some fierce battles. One of our Spitfires shot down a Heinkel. First one wing came off, then another and finally the plane crashed into the sea in flames and a great geyser spouted up as the bombs exploded. The lifeboat went out but nobody was picked up alive.

On August 26th, I saw a battle overhead and a bomber crashed by the old Barn...On the 27th, we heard our first screaming bomb. On August 30th, a time bomb exploded in the car park...One of the worst nights of the war was August 31st. Bombs kept dropping all night till 3.30.a.m. when we got our first sleep.

For the next three nights there was fog so we got some peace. But not for long. At the end of the first week of September, air battles went on all day and often at night as well...

It was then we started the Housewives' Service...It just meant something more to do, more people to interview, more books to be kept. The canteen was open morning and evening and the workers there were the only people allowed on the front. They had to show their passes each time they went down Berry Barn Lane.

On September 22nd, the canteen was suddenly closed early and the men had to stand to. The German invasion was expected...All night the guns fired. And the following evening, as the helpers came up Berry Barn Lane, bombs dropped in the field by the side of the road. So they sat in the hedge and put on their heads the meat tins they were carrying back.

A queer thing was noticed along the roads, quantities of new nails. They were supposed to be dropped from German planes in the hope of causing punctures. One woman picked up about a pound....

On the last day of September, we got a real thrill. At 3.45.a.m. we were wakened by the noise of tanks and troops going past incessantly. As soon as it was light, I looked out of the window. A gun had been set up on the village green. The fields were full of soldiers and there was a cordon across the road....Every house was being searched. All day long, we were carrying out cups of tea and sandwiches to the men on the village green.(From which it can be deduced that the food situation in 1940 was nothing like as bad as it is seven years later.)

At four o'clock, the police came in and said it was all over. (Four spies had been caught.)

By this time, we were getting used to air raid warnings and bombs. There were some marvellous escapes. In October, a bomb fell twenty feet away from two helpers on their way home. On the 8th of that month, we had our first experience of machine gunning in the village itself. An ME flew low over the village street, machine-gunning all the way. One bullet went through a wardrobe at Elm View and out the other side....

In spite of the fact that ours was not exactly a health resort at this time, London was so much worse that families kept on drifting down here and I never had a moment to myself.

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1940 - 1941

Accommodation had to be found for the homeless and all the time food had to be bought for the canteen which was the only resort of more than a thousand men who had come straight from Dunkirk. One night in October the house was badly shaken by the blast of a bomb. It was a time bomb which had been found by an officer just outside his billet, so he threw it into the sea where it exploded.

We found we could laugh over things like this and other happenings. For instance, Miss G. Combes found a bullet hole through one of her beehives. Not a single bee was a casualty.

On All Saints Day, we had seven air raid alarms and a German plane was brought down. On the 3rd of November we heard the biggest explosion so far. It was caused by a bomb falling on a land mine and blew windows out of the soldiers' billets and slates off their roofs. Ten windows at Jordans were blown in. The Queens had replaced the D.C.L.I.'s then.

On November 19th a Junkers 88 crashed and burnt for two hours. Two of the men got away. One gave himself up at Cattlegate. The other was caught at Birdham.

The night of December 5th was never to be forgotten. The fires at Portsmouth were appalling to watch. During the next weeks, the homeless were coming here to find somewhere to live.

Our orderly, Collingridge, used to practise his violin whenever he had any free time and the sound of his scales and exercises seemed to sound a note of normal life in a crazy world. Another interesting soldier who was here at the time was Marius Goring. He was in the canteen every night.

Just before Christmas, a Wellington bomber crashed into the sea off East Head. Four of our men were rescued.

At Christmas, the Home Guard had a party and a very jolly affair it was. The late Colonel Smith, D.S.O. handed a bouquet to the women of Wittering for the way they had stood up to everything and the Home Guard gave them musical honours.

The W.V.S. party had to be held on Christmas Day and Boxing Day as there was not room in the canteen for all of them at once. 1940 ended with several of us down with flu, and some nasty air raids.

1941 opened with bitter weather. On the 10th January, the electricity was put out of action and this caused a tragedy to one of our bombers. The car park was a landing ground on which a red light burned to guide our bombers home. This light was supplied by the mains and when the electricity failed, one of our bombers coming home circled round and round, trying to find the position. Finally it crashed into the sea. A young airman, Colin Ansell, swam out and rescued some of the crew.

By this time, the beach was all mined. We had frequent tragedies with dogs and even ponies that strayed on to the shore and before Christmas, some soldiers were killed, others injured. In January, two young airmen were killed by a mine.

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1941 - 1942

In February, we were all thinking of fire precautions and stirrup pumps and on the first Sunday in the month the curious sight was seen of middle-aged and elderly women crawling through a smoke-filled garage on the green and putting out the fire by means of stirrup pumps.

The same month, the first anti-invasion practice was held. On the 21st, the police ordered us to open all doors and windows and about 11.30. there was a terrific explosion and tanks and Royal Marines went through the village. The Royal Fusiliers had then taken the place of the Queen's.

No tradesmen delivered at the canteen, half a mile from the village so the helpers wheeled the rations down in a pram and later, in the Scouts' truck...

In March, Portsmouth got another blitz and we got some of the bombs and more evacuees. On April 11th. just as the helpers were coming away from the canteen, a 1000 lb bombs fell just outside. Captain Virtue was standing close by, but although he was covered in mud, he was not hurt.

On the 17th April, a land mine fell in a field about 200 yds from the White Cottage. The crater is such a depth that it is unlikely it will ever be filled in.

May 1941 brought War Weapons week. On the 18th, a mine field exploded and the whole village was filled with sulphurous smoke.

Also in May, we began storing up food in case of invasion.

In June the War-time Nursery was opened in Shore Road.

The South Wales Borderers replaced the Royal Fusiliers, and bombs and land mines fell continually. Sometimes soldiers were killed...

In August, the Ensham School from Tooting which had been with us since September 1939 was moved to Chichester.

In September there were further anti-invasion practices. During the night of the 12th loud-speakers proclaimed: "Bombs falling on Memorial Hall." "Germans landing on air field." There was a gas alarm next day and I walked up from the canteen wearing my gas mask.

In November, we had the Royal Canadian Regiment here. On Christmas Day we got the news of the fall of Hong Kong and the Canadians whose casualties were given on the 9 p.m. news as 50% were rather bitter about it. The Canadians had their party in the Memorial Hall. On the 30th we heard Churchill's famous speech from Ottawa: "Some chicken, some neck!"

In January 1942, the Glengarries came. We had heavy snow and even lost our way coming up from the canteen.

In February, Singapore fell and soap rationing began. The free distribution of orange juice and cod liver oil began.

In March, the Nova Scotians came. In April, we had the disastrous fire on Roman Landing when five houses were burnt. In May, we had one of the worst raids of the war and seven bombers were brought down. A D-boat bringing mail from Portsmouth for the marines stationed on East Head capsized and two men were drowned.

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1942 - 1945

In June we had bombs in Marine Drive. In July we were instructed what to do in case of invasion. Water was stored in containers at the Memorial Hall and a Rest Centre practice was held with bomb incidents, first aid practice and so on.

In July seven bombers were brought down in a raid.

On August 15th, a German bomber was shot down into the sea close to the canteen.

The W.V.S. Clothing depot sent out masses of clothing for use in case we were bombed out of our homes. Wool was given out for knitting into children's garments as well as socks, gloves, helmets, pullovers for the forces.

In October the Canadian Black Watch arrived and one of the first things they did was to make a good tarmac road outside the canteen. All this time we had waded through mud and water during rainy spells.

In November, the last of our evacuee mothers of 1939 went back to London.

In February 1943, one of the Canadian officers, Captain Stewart was married and pipers played the bride into the church to the music of The Road to the Isles.

In May we saw a naval battle. On the 29th, there were about 50 fighters up chasing four bombers, one of which was brought down. The Canadians left and all through June, bombers went over in endless succession every night.

In August 300 gunners arrived. Phosphorus bombs fell. In October, the Sherwood Foresters came, among them Jack Payne's pianist, Sergeant Warren, who often played the piano in the canteen.

Again we had 1000 men to look after in the canteen. The unit was called Bow Bells and was made up of units of the London Scottish, London Rifle Brigade, Royal Fusiliers. They had their party at the Memorial Hall and next day gave the children a marvellous party for which they had given up their sugar and sweet rations for a fortnight.

1944 began with more air raids. 14 bombers were shot down. In February, coloured Americans arrived. In March we had bad raids and invasion barges were constantly off the shore.

General Eisenhower and General Montgomery inspected the units along the coast.

In April the Royal Berkshires came. Bombs fell at Nunnington. Every day invasion barges were out and smoke screens over the sea. Heavy vehicles passed along all day, tanks and ducks and guns.

On 16th May we had one of the worst raids of the war. We were allowed to keep the canteen open right up to the eve of D-day when we saw the sea crowded with shipping and invasion barges and 'mulberries.'

Then the robots started. Our gunners shot dozens of them down into the sea.

Our last unit, the Pioneers, left on 17th March and life became normal once more. (Or did it?)