

THE BUILD UP – 1939 – 1944 THE HOME FRONT

Many had seen war coming and plans made in the late 1930s were put into place as soon as it became clear that war was inevitable and eventually declared. However preparations were far from complete, British forces were not ready in sufficient numbers or with the right equipment and industry was not geared up for the production of the war materials required; the speed and effectiveness of the German Blitzkrieg across France had not been anticipated, the evacuation from Dunkirk, the blitz, the submarine war in the Atlantic were all unexpected and the ever present (in 1940 and 41) threat of invasion (the German Operation Sealion) seemed to be real and disconcerting and amongst many other measures the **Home Guard** was formed *[see separate post for history of the Herefordshire Home Guard]*.

The immediate and greatest threat came from **air raids**. Air raids meant both destruction and disruption. 60,595 civilians died as a result of enemy action in the UK homes, workplaces and public buildings were destroyed. Streets were subject to the 'blackout' – lighting restrictions – and the ban on street lighting and 'shaded' vehicle lights caused a huge rise in car accidents. Volunteers were needed to be trained in civil defence duties. These included fire-fighting, first aid and ambulance driving.

Civilians were instructed in how to protect themselves against poison gas attacks and issued with gas masks, which they were encouraged to carry on all journeys. Fortunately, poison gas was never used as a weapon in Britain. They were also given materials to build air raid shelters in the backyards. Strong buildings were also prepared for use as air raid shelters.



Evacuation plans for children from the perceived air raid target areas in the cities to the country had been in preparation well before the outbreak of war. Small-scale evacuation of women and children were carried out in September 1938 but the real evacuation began in September 1939. The government had planned to evacuate about three million people but in the end only one million left home. A few hours after the war was declared on 3 September 1939, almost all of them had been evacuated from the danger areas to the reception areas. Some evacuees returned during the phoney war of 1939, only to re-evacuate during the blitz but as the air raids lessened many evacuees returned again, only again to re-evacuate during the V1 and V2 campaigns. Evacuees also went to America, Canada and Australia. Considerable feeling was raised against the Germans when they torpedoed the Benares a ship carrying evacuees to Canada and over 70 children were killed.



As the War progressed the economy and population was put on a 'war footing'. There was no place for luxuries the **manufacturing** output was prioritized for war production and essentials.

The lives of most of the adult population changed with the outbreak of war. Men aged between 18 and 41 were conscripted to serve in Forces, and later to overcome a shortage of manpower in the coal mines as Bevin Boys. This took them away from their jobs in factories and farms. To fill the shortage, women were recruited for jobs previously done by men. Women worked in the factories, constructing weapons and many others joined the Land Army to work on farms, they also took up many other jobs left empty by the men including 'clippies' (conductors) on buses.



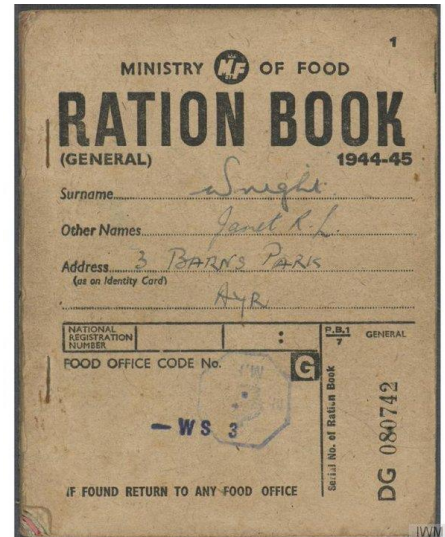
Imports were severely curtailed, shipping space was prioritized for war supplies and even so much was lost to submarines. Food was rationed and a campaign to grow more food 'at home' launched. The **Dig for Victory** campaign was launched, many families created an allotment, sports fields were turned over to cultivation and many families kept a pig. The Land Army was formed with females working on the land to make good the loss of the male farm labourers. Home grown production increased by 35% but it there were still shortages; rationing was introduced to reduce demand and allow capacity to be diverted to the production of war items.



The whole population, whilst suffering shortages and threats from bombing and the ever present invasion, rallied together – the ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ was born, the cry of ‘make and mend’ was heard loud and strong. Men and women joined the **Home Guard, Air Raid Precautions (ARP), The Auxiliary Fire Service, The Red Cross and The St John Ambulance; The Womens Royal Voluntary Service** manned Forces canteens providing the obligatory ‘Char & a wad’ (Tea and a sandwich); the Womens Institute was allowed additional sugar rations to make jam, and mothers and sisters knitted items for the troops. Boys scouts collected scrap metal and paper for the war effort.



The whole country had started in 1939 with high morale and spirit, but after a few years of a worsening standard of living, the country and population were tired, the seeming invincibility of the German might, the fall of Hong Kong and Singapore were additional body blows and the casualties – killed, wounded and prisoners were now impacting on almost every street and village. Mothers and wives were running households, worried about fathers, sons and brothers (and increasingly daughters now required to support the war effort – being conscripted to the forces, the land army and industry) and having to feed and clothe the family on reduced **rations** which often they had waited in long queues to get.



The tide of battle gradually changed – victory in North Africa, the entry of America into the war, the capitulation of Italy – but none changed the life on the Home Front – if anything things were even worse, with more shortages, more losses of men and women to directly support the war; in the words of the time life was ‘drab’.

The military presence was pervasive – uniforms, equipment, tented and hutted camps were everywhere, as the tide continued to turn and preparations for the invasion of Europe developed, Britain was ‘invaded’ by troops from **America**, the empire and ‘free forces’ from German occupied countries. They all needed support, accommodation, training areas and life support all impacting on the civilian population.



The stage was however being set for the launch of the second front – the invasion of the North West European mainland, through Normandy in France.