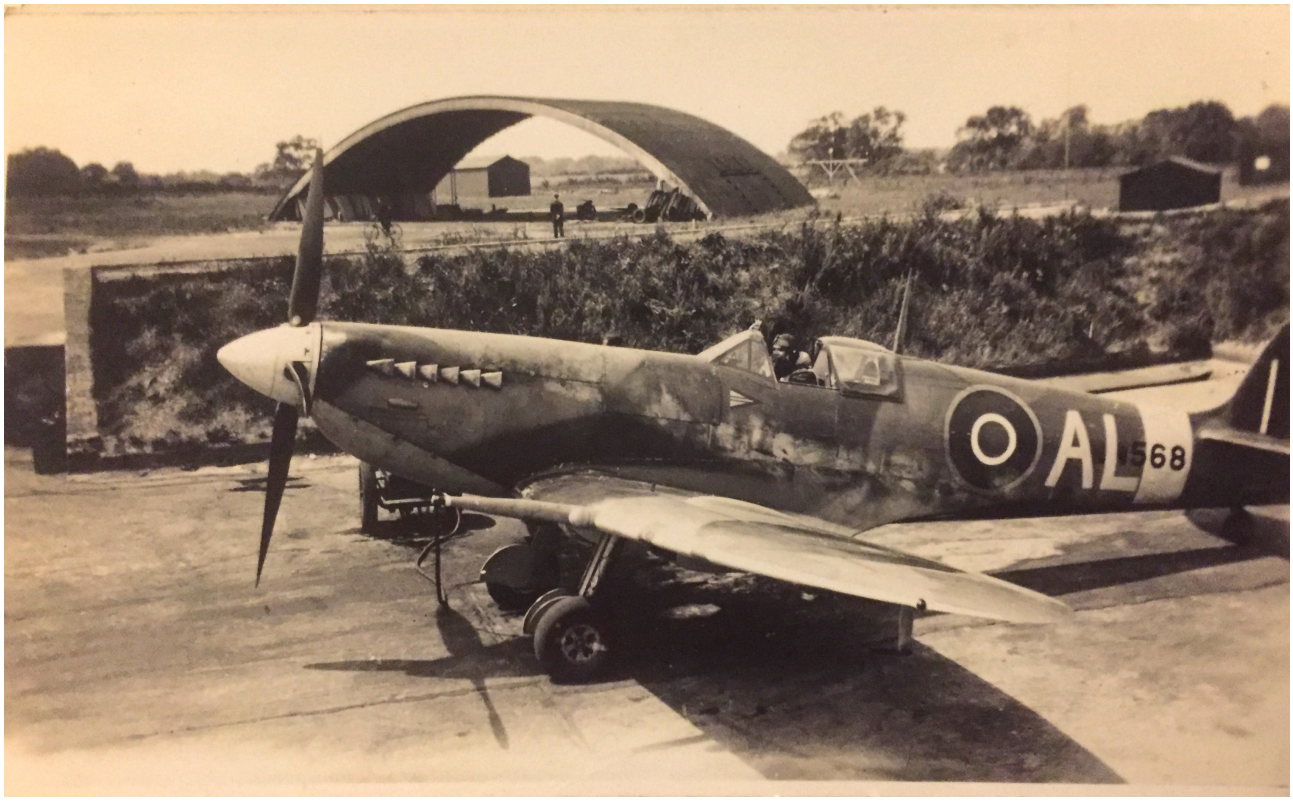
Chapter 10

The war



There were many dogfights over the farm, with Spitfires and Hurricanes versus the ME109's. Some fields were littered with empty gun cases and clips which were ejected after firing. Altogether 57 bombs and a landmine were dropped on the farm during the war, some of which didn't explode. We just filled the holes in.

Of course, many of the bombs that fell on us were probably intended for the aerodrome, which was only a short way across the valley. It didn't seem scary. I guess we just got used to it. The only time I felt really scared was when I was cultivating and came across a wire sticking out of the ground. This was at the time when there were dire warnings about personnel bombs in various shapes and sizes being dropped in large quantities. Bending down, I could hear the 'bomb' ticking so I got onto the chief warden. He came along and immediately pulled on the wire. I was sure the 'bomb',

was going off and this was going to be my last moment. However, it was not a bomb at all but part of an aircraft aerial. This shows what the imagination can do.

Biggin Hill was quite high, and although we were seventeen miles by road to London it was closer in a straight line, so we could see London burning during the war, and could even see the firemen outside St Pauls.

Some landmines were actually sea mines because, as the Germans were getting short of bombs, they had the brilliant idea of attaching them to parachutes and dropping them from aircrafts. The one which landed on the farm made quite a large crater and did a lot of damage to the buildings. It blew out windows, fetched the plaster down in the attic and moved the barn off its foundations. Yet nobody was hurt. The parachute was almost intact. It was made of some quite thick synthetic material with cords nearly an inch in diameter.

Many panes of glass were blown out of the cowshed. Some new glass was available and it was put in using putty made of fish oil, as linseed oil was in short supply. The glaziers were careless and dropped a quantity of putty, which was picked up by the cats and eaten and several of them died. At that time there were twelve cats on the farm and we lost about seven.

The Germans had an incendiary bomb based on a 40-gallon barrel which, when dropped from a height, would split and the used engine oil mixture would be set on fire by a detonator. One of these bombs was dropped in a field of oats. It didn't catch fire but spread black oil over a circle of about 50 feet in diameter, and we couldn't use the grain in that area.

The only human casualty of all those bombs was a bomb disposal officer who tried to defuse a 500 pounder in the dark. It had come down earlier that day and, after several attempts, it had been pulled out of its hole by a small truck. The officer said to the sergeant, "this one is tricky, get down into the hole", which he did. The officer then tried to defuse the bomb and it went off. Only about 1lb of his body was found. The sergeant was unscathed. They could have shot at the bomb from a distance as it was nowhere near any houses, and so the officer died needlessly. The Germans were clever as they changed the colours of the wires needed to detonate the bombs, to make it trickier for them to be defused.

A Spitfire and a Hurricane crash-landed on the farm, both shortly after take-off. Both pilots survived. We also had a Messerschmidt 109 nosedive into the woods after the pilot bailed out. The pilot's parachute failed to open, so he landed in a neighbouring farm, but unfortunately died. The tail had been shot off. These planes had a large piece of armour plating behind the pilot, which ours did not. This one made quite a hole. We had the tailwheel for some time but that is long since gone. One of the cottage occupants got the cannon from the 109 and made it into the front for his fire grate, not realising there was a live cannon shell in it. One night he had an extra good fire and the shell exploded, making a hole in the coal scuttle, the wall, and his wife's leg. When I returned to Biggin Hill in 2017 to fly in a Spitfire as a celebration of reaching my 90th year, I was told that there were still pieces of the Messerschmidt surviving in the woods.

All the planes carried spare fuel tanks. The British ones were flat and square, and would explode on landing. The Germans used cone shaped tanks, which would survive the impact. My father

found one, which had about five gallons of fuel in it. It must have been very good quality as he put it into his car and it went like the clappers!

We were lucky with the cattle, because often we would move them and then the field they had been in would be bombed the next day. I was friendly with the son of the Greenlees, who farmed just down the road from us. They had several cows killed or injured. They lost seven in one night. They were very unlucky.

Our farm workers didn't go to war. One chap went for a medical. He was ever so narrow. They said to him "You're the straightest man in Biggin Hill". He was the same width round his hips as his stomach and his chest. He was a general farm worker, but Father said he never did a day's work in his life; I can see why, he probably had consumption.

Some funny things happened during the war. One night there was a raid and a man's wig, which he had left on his bed, was blown out through the windows by a bomb. It landed half a mile away. On another occasion a man who lived in the valley was having his hair cut at the barber's when the siren went. The barber downed tools and went to the shelter leaving his customer with only one side of his hair cut.

We had our corn drill damaged by the British army. They were practising with live ammunition, one hiding behind an oak tree and the other shooting at him so he could get used to it. We were drilling corn and went home for our midday meal. On returning we found both the 5-gallon fuel can and the corn drill full of holes. We were lucky to be able to get spares fairly quickly to repair the drill. It was a good thing they didn't aim at the tractor.

Another thing the army did was to practice digging slit trenches on the edges of some of the fields. These were narrow, just wide enough for a man, and about 6 feet long and 3 feet deep. Although they dug them they didn't fill them in again and the trenches soon became overgrown with weeds. One day Ruth drove the front wheel of the tractor into one and we had a job to get the tractor out again.

My sister Ruth worked the night shift at the Red Cross station at Biggin Hill during the war. She would cycle across the fields to get there. As soon as her shift had finished she would cycle home and work on the farm until the afternoon. We seemed to need less sleep in those days! She could drive the tractor, but needed someone to help her to start it - usually my job.

The St Johns Nursing Division at Biggin Hill. Ruth is on the back row, 4th from right

Rod was an air raid warden during the war. He had been keen to join the forces as an air gunner (life expectancy almost nil) but was turned down because the farm was so short staffed. I started as a messenger with a job carrying messages between the warden posts using my bicycle. At eighteen I also became a warden.

One day Rod was asked to guard an unexploded bomb until the bomb disposal unit could arrive. He suddenly saw the ground moving, and dived down the nearby bank. The bomb went off but he was okay.
One day Rod decided to take a shortcut across the runway. This was strictly prohibited and he realised why when he found a Spitfire taxiing towards him. Although great in the air, the pilot could not see in front of him when on the ground. Rod tried to go to one side, but the engine of the van cut out, and the Spitfire

came nearer and nearer. Rod just managed to restart the van in time by swinging the starting handle and escaped.

A Spitfire at Biggin Hill - the pilot couldn't see anything in front of him on the ground

We supplied milk to the Biggin Hill airforce throughout the war. They had about half a churn of milk every day. Sometimes they'd say "Do you want any sausages" and they'd put them in the churn for us to take back. The forces had lots of food, and we also got extra rations for the farm workers, because they needed to be able to work efficiently.

We slept in the cellar during the war and, after months of this, the bedroom seemed like heaven. Rod and I shared a room at the back of the house. Winters were cold and this room was very cold. I used a ceramic gin bottle as a hot water bottle. We were getting to sleep one night when the siren went off. The sound of an air-raid siren is unforgettable. Rod got up to have a look around but I decided to stay in bed. After many days of working hard with disturbed sleep, it seemed the best option. The fact that a bomb could be exploding nearby seemed unimportant. But when Rod called out "Incendiaries!" I looked out and the whole of the valley was like fairyland. There must have been hundreds of them dropped. We put on our wardens outfits and went to see.

After putting out some minor fires we were going back up our hill when old Mrs Watts came to her gate saying she had a fire. She

was as casual as if telling us she had a kitten. We went to look. Sure enough, an incendiary bomb had come through the roof of this rather poorly constructed bungalow, fallen through the floor and was burning underneath. Mr Watts had urine trouble and was fitted with a bag. This was not always used and the floor was soaked in urine. The smell of this burning was unbelievable and I can still remember it. We always carried the stirrup pump so we were able to put out the fire with a few buckets of water. We were met by the fire service, who asked us “All okay boys?” To which we replied “All sorted”. If only they’d come ten minutes earlier they could have put it out themselves and we wouldn’t have had to put up with all that stink! The next morning we found three bombs that had missed the barn and burnt out in the grass behind.

On another occasion we were on patrol during an air raid. The electric wires had been bought down and a van was going along with a bare wire touching the roof. It was still live and sparks were coming off against the road. Someone got out of the van to move the cable and we shouted at him not to touch it. He took no notice, lifted the cable from the ground and, simultaneously, a fuse must have blown and so the cable was left safe. It must have been his lucky day.

In any war there are accidents. Two boys in Biggin Hill valley found a live mortar shell, used by the army on the range, that had been left in a rough field. The boys took it home, threw it into the air and ran round the corner of the house out of range. It didn't go off. They tried again and it still didn't go off. The third time they threw it up and decided to stay. This time it exploded and killed both of them. Their father was drunk and sleeping it off indoors.

I suppose there are many ways of learning about sex, and growing up on the farm in wartime was one of them. Sometimes people were discovered among the bushes wrapped in a blanket. The American soldiers had a great reputation for this sort of thing. ‘Overpaid, oversexed and over here!’ was a comment directed at them, but it appeared to apply to other servicemen equally, and indeed civilians.

To stop gliders landing, obstacles were put up in the most level fields. At Norheads these consisted of long poles like telegraph poles which were dug into a depth of about 4 feet in a tripod formation. To get these out at the end of the war we devised a method of pitching a chain to a spoke on the rear wheel of the tractor. On moving forward this pulled the post out of the ground. These obstacles in the field made it very difficult for mowing or any other fieldwork.

Another method to stop the gliders landing, which was used on Mr Okey's farm at Titsey, was to put old cars at intervals across the field. These were mostly drive-able and, looking back it seems an awful waste, as cars were very difficult to come by after the war, by which time these were beyond repair. But needs must when the devil drives.

There were two types of air raid shelters for homes: Morrison and Anderson shelters. These were supplied free by the government but had to be erected at the householder's cost. Anderson shelters were named after Sir John Anderson, who was then Home Secretary. We put up an Anderson shelter, built of heavy corrugated iron, at Norheads Nest where my grandmother and aunt Mary lived. It was partly in the ground and partly above. For two people they were just six feet by six, but longer for extra family members. They were always damp and horrible, as they were half in the ground and very damp and cold, but better than being blasted, and they would stand almost anything other than a direct hit. My grandmother and aunt never used theirs, as far as I can remember, preferring to use our back cellar.

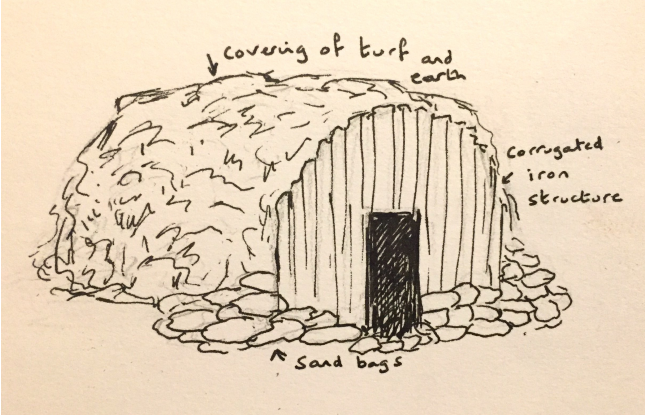
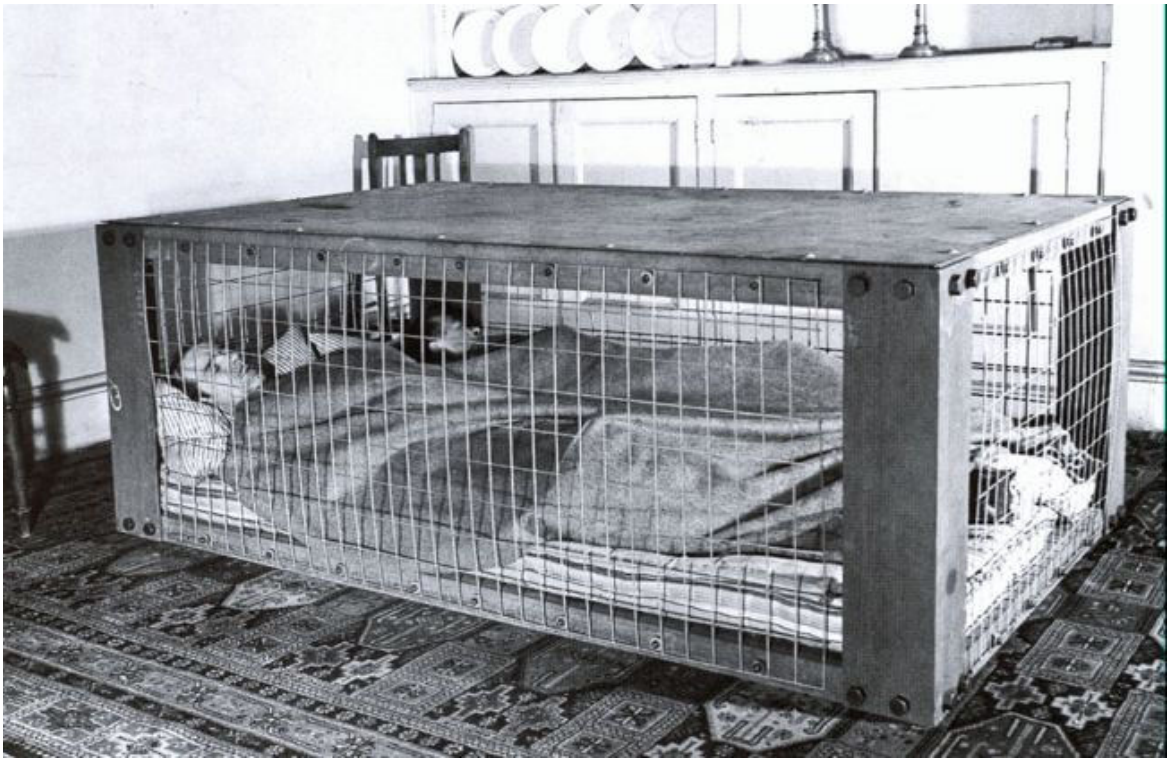


Diagram of an Anderson shelter



Morrison shelter

The other type of shelter was the Morrison[1], named after Herbert Morrison, who succeeded Anderson as Home Secretary. This consisted of four large pieces of angle iron which supported a heavy steel top and was joined at the bottom with smaller angle iron. It had a square mesh all round with about two-inch holes. My grandparents had one of these at Catford, but I don't know if they ever used it. It must have been very claustrophobic. Morrison shelters were extremely tough and many were used for years after the war for milk stands. We were still using one of the stands for our fuel tank until we moved to Herefordshire in 2002.

When Meteor jet fighters came to Biggin Hill they were extremely noisy. There were complaints that hospital patients in Farnborough were upset by the noise. This was rated a good news story by the BBC who sent down a television crew. The meteors took off and the pilots obviously decided to put on a good show. The squadron flew out over Croydon and came back flat-out at treetop height and dived onto the airfield. Unfortunately this coincided with Eva's return from hospital when William was born. We were taking time off to stroll round behind the farm in the stockyard when the planes

[1] Photo - Imperial War Museum stock, from Wikipedia

came over. They were going so fast that the engines were surrounded by vapour and the noise was terrifying. My father was interviewed by the BBC for inclusion in their program. It so happened that someone important died on the same day and all we saw on the television was his head and hat for about half a minute. Almost fame at last.

Towards the end of the war, doodlebugs (V1s) started coming over. The "V" was short for “Vergeltungswaffen”, which roughly translated into ‘vengeance weapons’.The first one we saw at night looked like a giant rocket and made a noise like an enormous blowlamp, with flames coming out of the back. It was especially frightening as we had known nothing of these weapons, until the following day when they said these flying bombs were coming. It was scary in town as we could hear them cut out and then waited for the bang.

Barrage balloons were put up and two were stationed on the farm. These were supposed to bring these flying bombs down as they flew fairly low. One of ours did bring one down and it crashed on the next farm without hurting anyone. This particular bomb had been fitted with cutters designed to sever the cables that held up the balloon, but in spite of this it still crashed. The balloons were pulled in if an electric storm was imminent as they were filled with hydrogen. The crew were pulling in the one near the cottages when it was struck by lightning and it went off in quite a dramatic fireball. We were in the front room when it happened and saw the flames through the window.

The other type of secret weapon was the V2, a true guided ballistic missile, which rose into the stratosphere before plunging down to the target. The only warning of an approaching V2 was the double boom as it broke the sound barrier shortly before impact, and the explosion on the ground. The anti-aircraft guns seemed quite ineffectual at the start of the war but improved with time. Probably the biggest improvement was the rocket propelled type which fired a lot at once, giving good coverage. The V2s did a lot of damage, but could have done more. Luckily the airforce discovered where their secret rocket base was at Peenemunda in Norway, and managed to bomb it.

Although there was quite severe rationing both of food and clothing, those working on farms had extra rations, and we could get hold of eggs, rabbits and the occasional pig. Clothes were in short supply; in fact I spent a lot of wartime dressed in ex-army uniform. You only hoped this did not come from soldiers who had been killed. Bread rationing carried on for some years after the war was over. Every so often extra rations would be allocated in the form of tinned salmon. One of the men would not take this as he said it was chopped up snakes.

Our van was serviced at the local garage. There was a very good mechanic working there. Unfortunately, one day the military police arrived and took him away because he was a deserter. A pity for him and also for us.

We had two land girls. One had seen pretty packets of seeds and thought that's what she would do. She lasted half a day. The other one was a Scottish girl called Agnes. She was really good. She was with us for years. We didn't provide accommodation; she lived in the valley somewhere.

We also had German prisoners of war, who came to help with the harvest. Rod went out with them hoeing mangolds and came back absolutely exhausted. They worked so hard! My father said they were the best workers he had had. A neighbouring farm had Italians POWs. They went running through the corn in chase of rabbits and flattened it, which did not go down well.

After the war a lot of army equipment was sold fairly cheaply. The army lorry we had was a three-ton Ford with a V8 engine, not very economical. It had four-wheel-drive and could go almost anywhere and it was fun to drive through mud. It also had run flat tyres so we never noticed a puncture even if we got one. Built into it was an air pump working off the engine, which could be turned on by a lever.

The other ex-army thing we bought was a four-wheel trailer. This had large tough tyres, but it was badly balanced and would tip over very easily. On one occasion we loaded it with thatching straw, which was in trusses. Overnight it rained. This didn't hurt the straw

because it was always wetted before use anyway. However, because the top layer of straw was heavier than the underneath layers, the whole thing became top-heavy. Halfway down to the stacks the trailer tipped over. As someone said, "Arse over tip!"

Another time we loaded this trailer with bean boughs in the wood. When we moved it one wheel became stuck in a rut and over it went. It was very annoying because it had taken some time to load.

Bean boughs were harvested from young hazel trees, which were cut about every seven years when they were eight feet high. They were complete with branches and tied up, either with wire or withies, in bundles of about 20. The withies were made by taking a long hazel stick and heating it in the fire. It could then be twisted at one end and made into a loop. The other end was put through the loop and tucked in. These were very quick to make and the advantage was that only wood was taken into the field and the withies were used as bean sticks. After the boughs were laid out and flattened they were all cut off to the same length with an axe. After the summer the bean boughs were taken up and used under corn stacks or for burning, as they were too brittle to use a second year.

After the war you had to write down what you had driven. So I put down van, car, motorbike, lorry, track laying vehicle. So I got a licence for all those things. The only thing I wasn’t allowed to drive was an invalid carriage!