

The Empty Chair

As I lay in bed on the Tuesday night in the early part of 1941, and heard the German bombers going over the house. My mother shouted up the stairs that I had better come down because the planes were getting too close. I was about 12 years old at the time and I can tell you now it did not take me long to heed the warning.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, there was a loud bang – I dived under the kitchen table – this was one of the safest places to be during a bombing raid. Where the bomb landed I had no idea, it was close enough for me !.

Much later in the night I was back in my bed when I heard my brother ‘Jim’ come home from the Home Guard duty. A few minutes later he was telling my mother that the bomb had hit a house about 200 yards away and killed a school pal Gerald Osmend. I hardly slept at all that night.

Next morning the local policeman told us all to clear out of our house as there was another bomb hung up in a tree and hadn’t exploded. This turned out to be a sea mine which had come down by parachute, and the one which scared me the night before was also a sea mine. I think the German bomber had been hit by anti aircraft fire and had ditched his load.

I went to live with my Grandma Barnfield in Staunton for a few days whilst the Army tried to defuse the unexploded mine. The Army gave up after a while and called in the Navy who knew more about sea mines, and a few days later they said it was safe to go home because they had removed some of the explosive powder. Someone who shall be nameless was reputed to have visited the sea mine hung up in the tree and chalked “send it back to Hitler”.

Church services were held in the afternoon during the war so that we could all get home before the dark, and on the next Sunday afternoon I went to church to pump the organ. However, before the service ended, Andrew Compton – the bakers son - came running in to the church and said “You all got to go home quick, they’re going to blow up the mine at 4 o’clock !”

At home my father made us all get into a deep ditch and waited for the big bang. We waited and waited and waited - and nothing happened. About an hour later father said “The things a dud-- come on out and lets have some tea”.

We were sitting round the big family table about 5o’clock having tea when all of a sudden there was a loud ‘BANG’ and at the same moment the ceiling fell down on to the table.

We were covered in dust, and looking at each other with scared faces, when my father (who had been wounded in WW1) suddenly burst out laughing. With tears in our eyes and running down our dusty faces- we all joined in, laughing and screaming with joy that none of us were hurt.

This was too close for comfort, and we were all glad it was over, ---- but was it really? Mother brought the merriment to a sharp end, “You can all laugh, but what about poor Gerald Osmend, he’s dead”.

Going to school the next day, I had to sit behind the empty chair which had belonged to my school pal. I just stared at it, remembering mother’s outburst - and I didn’t do a stroke of work that day.

I have never forgotten that ‘Empty Chair’

The area in Corse was called Newlands where there was a farm owned by Barnett. There was also a small holding by owned by Edwards and about 40 yards behind was the cottage where the family Osmend lived. There was another cottage close by where the Walsh family lived. Our house was in Straight Lane about 200-300 yards across the fields.

Jim Poole, my brother was on Home Guard duty that night and was first on the scene after the explosion and found poor Gerald dead in the ruined house.

The unexploded Mine was apparently hung up in a tree somewhere at the end of Corse School Crescent which gardens would have been a mere 100 yards away.

There were also other bombs dropped during WW2 in sleep Corse/Staunton :-

Early in the war a 'stick' of small bombs (28 pounders) were dropped in Staunton near the end of Ledbury Crescent. No damage was done and it was believed that the bomber saw heaps of Lime slag in nearby fields and thought it was an army camp. (Didn't hit any of them!!)

I do recall that another bomb was dropped in the Lowbands area- perhaps this is one referred to as in Eldersfield.

Ivor Poole

