



LORNA LINCOLN volunteered 1939

LORNA LINCOLN, born 1921, lived in Suffolk, retired to Lincolnshire

From 1938 into early 1939, as I was leaving school, it was evident war was in the air and everyone was expected to take up some activity to train towards helping fight to save life and defend strategic installations. My friend and I were reeling out hoses and being trained to fight fires.

April 1939 this school friend one evening announced she had found something possibly more interesting for us to do, so I followed her lead and we – tentatively – made our way to what appeared to be a drill hall where we were quizzed as to what we could do. All we had to offer was our ability to contribute shorthand/typing skills. (I ventured I'd like to drive an ambulance, but that was ignored!)

We were IN – exactly what, we did not know.....

Gradually we were tossed oddments of khaki clothing. Long after war had commenced, I had but a pair of lisle stockings and a fetching pair of elasticated lisle knickers, complete with pocket, with matching cap and gaberdine mac.

In June we were sent to Canterbury to an Army Camp. It was like being back in the Guides. Marched down into Canterbury itself we were accompanied by youngsters shouting: "England's last hope!"

Saturday September 2 we were told to be on Ipswich Railway Station at 8.00 am next morning. We were not told where we were going. (My father, as was usual, came that morning to take me home, fifteen miles out in the country, for the weekend. Frantic packing of my few effects and saying my brief farewells...) He dutifully brought me back to Ipswich the following morning....I often wonder what his thoughts were on his return home.

Eleven am that fateful Sunday September 3 1939 found those of us in the "First Suffolk" ATS (Army Territorial Service) contingent on Fenchurch Street Station.

Strangely the air-raid sirens screamed their baleful wail and it was assumed the German Luftwaffe was already overhead, so we were hurriedly ushered down the Underground. (Later, of course, it was revealed the powers that then were, in their wisdom, had so marked the "Declaration of War".)

When our intriguing journey resumed we eventually found we had "fetched up" in Southend - having thought we were at least en route for France.

Our accommodation for the first few nights was in hastily vacated orphanages. Naturally, our legs dangled over the ends of the cots. The absence of hot water was not surprising, but the bed bugs were!

At first I was put to work with the 22nd "Ack, Ack" (Anti-Aircraft) Battery stationed on the shore in Shoeburyness.

Later, I was sent to the Experimental Establishment in Shoeburyness. Their experiments consisted of great sheets of armour plating being trundled at low tide on to the mud flats of the estuary and being fired at by guns of various calibre, up to those firing eighteen pounder shells, (put on your ear-muffs!) in order to assess the shells' penetration. This information would then be fed to those in the War Office.

On a lighter note, at this time I shared an office with one Frankie Howerd, who in the evenings could be found entertaining in the Garrison Theatre....

When the air raids on London commenced in the summer of 1941, we, stationed along the banks of the Thames, watched the German fighters progress upriver to the capital with trepidation.

Some of my night duties were spent in a "PAD Centre" (Passive Air Defence Centre) where we first of all lit fires in boilers to have plenty of hot water for showers. This in preparation so we could decontaminate anyone who might have encountered poison gas. These duties suited us fine as we could have a HOT shower, and wash our hair. Hot water normally came only by the kettleful from a coal fire back in our quarter and then only if it happened to be one's turn. Since we were only paid fourteen shillings a week, going to the hairdresser or any such luxury was "out".

Later, as the war progressed, flying bombs zoomed ominously low over the coast to deliver their explosive horrors inland.

As I had signed on for four years in April 1939, came April 1943 I was invited to sign on again. Having married in 1941, I refused. Then I was offered a Civil Service job in the Pay Office. Pay-as-you-earn came in around that time. My gratuity on completion of service with the ATS was the handsome sum of £16 for the four years.

As the war was ending, people were needed for the Control Commission in Germany. Those of us willing to go gathered in hotels bordering London's Green Park. The first contingents were stationed in Herchst, but almost immediately were sent on to Berlin. Our unit was seconded to the Finance Division under Col Jack Kelham from the Bank of England. (Incidentally he has just clocked up his one hundredth birthday. We who survive keep closely in touch.)

The purpose of the "Fin.Div." was to help sort out Germany's disastrous – nay, collapsed – monetary system and help those who had somehow survived the air raids and Russia's invasion, out of the shell holes and rubble, bring them some physical relief, then commence the work of rebuilding.

I went in fear and trembling, expecting the Germans to hate us. They didn't. One might encounter the odd Nazi, but that was understandable.

Naturally, there were many horrors in Germany during the first weeks and months following the cessation of hostilities. Maybe I am criticised for commiserating with our one-time adversary but I was sent to Berlin as the war ended and experienced their privations. In our country all was not chaotic as there. Our monetary system was well managed; we were – and had been throughout the war – adequately fed and had fuel, thanks to very efficient rationing. When the bombing commenced here, those

poor souls whose homes were damaged were swiftly helped out of the debris and the gaping holes patched and soon made good.

Not so in Berlin. We found the people endeavouring to exist in what might be left of their basements under the heaps of rubble which once had been their homes. Add to that, 1946 was one of the coldest winters on record. They had no food and no fuel. One can only imagine the human misery.

Difficult to know where to begin.... The Germans are a resourceful race and, gradually, with the help of wisely distributed Marshall Aid, applied themselves to reconstruction.

Among the ruins when we arrived in Berlin were those of Hitler's Reichkanzlei, his Headquarters. The Russians ransacked it and left a once exotic building literally gutted. There had been magnificent crystal chandeliers, now in fragments on the floor. In panels on the walls had been mosaics, now tesserae in sad little heaps. Whatever had covered those floors must have been collectable as there was now but earth – and, incongruously – strewn around were iron crosses. I hoped the Berliners had 'recycled' the flooring in their need to rebuild.

Way behind the once spectacular ceremonial chambers of the Reichkanzlei were the offices and living quarters (latterly, of course, in a warren underground) of Hitler's Nazi War machine. It was widely reported at the time that Hitler committed suicide in his bunker with Eva Braun and their bodies were then put on a funeral pyre.

There was, in a small enclosed area above ground, indeed a heap of earth with evidence of burned material thinly spread on the surface, as though someone had been burning sensitive documents.

As time went by one found on the Berlin streets those remnants of the German fighting forces who had – heaven knows how – managed to survive and WALK back from the Russian theatre of operations. None had footwear, but straw tied round their feet.

July 1948 and it wasn't the Germans we had to fear but the Russians. They had shown belligerent tendencies toward us long before and closed off all their border crossings to us. People disappeared. A German couple were friends of ours. The husband, Karl-Heinz, was an architect and returned from the war to his job in Dresden. This entailed his travelling each day through the Russian Sector and into their Zone. As a former prisoner of war in Canada he thought he would be safer wearing his prison uniform for the journey. He was so wrong!

His wife, Claire, was pregnant and came to us for help. Sadly, we were powerless. Being English, we would have only made matters worse. Claire went to the Russians to plead for her husband's return, to no avail. Eventually, he did return, but was traumatised beyond belief. He never spoke of what had happened to him while in Russian hands.

We – and the native inhabitants of our Sector in Berlin – will be for ever indebted to those pilots who flew Dakotas to and fro over Russian occupied territory to bring us food supplies (albeit dehydrated) and fuel while "The Blockade" persisted.