

The following are direct extracts from "It Happened Here" by Stanley Tiquet. Any explanatory notes are the editor's and in italics.

## THE GREAT ATTACK

### A Night of Fire

On the afternoon of Saturday, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1940, the massed forces of the Luftwaffe struck at London. They came just after 5 o'clock in the afternoon. The day was warm and sunny; the sky blue. Many people were out of doors. A monstrous monotonous droning proclaimed the coming of the bombers. They swept on south of the Borough. By 6 o'clock the skies were empty. But all Thameside blazed. Wanstead and Woodford, so far immune, awaited the night.

Soon after 8 o'clock the enemy struck again, the airmen flame-guided to their target of the afternoon;-the docks and the small homes of the East End. As the sun began to sink, the vast expanse of the red glow in the sky to west and southwest sent a chill to the heart. It seemed that all London was burning. And this time, the enemy, before his roaring procession had ended at 4.30 a.m., had set fires blazing in Wanstead and Woodford and some of our neighbours were dead or lay buried beneath the ruins of their shattered homes. Civil Defence faced its first real test and, without previous experience to guide it, came creditably through the ordeal. It dealt not only with local incidents, but also sent reinforcing parties to East Ham, West Ham and Poplar.

Wanstead High Street area suffered chiefly on that first night, and Post 35 was heavily involved. Three *High Explosive* (H.E.) bombs and about 500 incendiaries fell in the Post area. Nos.7 and 9, Grove Park collapsed, and four persons, trapped beneath the debris died. The central block of the Shrubbery flats, in Grove Road, also collapsed, and a row of shops in the High Street was badly damaged by the third bomb. Four major and twelve smaller fires and an outbreak at a garage were in progress at the same time, including a spectacular blaze in the roof of 30, High Street, a large house overlooking Christ Church Green. Except for the garage fire, all were dealt with by Wardens or by volunteers from among the public. Seven persons were killed that night and 50 injured.

A warden on duty at the Shrubbery was sitting at an entrance when the bomb fell only five yards or so away. A splinter fractured his ankle. Not knowing the fate of his wife, who was in the damaged block, the Warden struggled to the Post, gave a clear report of the incident, and then collapsed.

While rescue Squads were still at work, and housewives set about trying to cook the Sunday dinner without gas, strings of omnibuses and lorries bringing the first of the 2,000 evacuees from the East End (to whose coming reference has been previously made), began to arrive in the Borough,

Nightly, throughout September, the attack went on, and in the next two months there was little falling-off. The manner of life of the ordinary citizen in those days is illustrated by this extract from the diary of a local man:

"Night of September 11-12. Terrific A.A. barrage ended about 5 a.m. To bed at 5.40. At 6.10 phone call saying office hit and we were to work at xxxxxxxx. Left home at 7. Settled down

in strange building with difficulty, and grew so overwhelmingly sleepy that (having been awake for 5 nights), fell asleep standing up."

But two days later:

"Saturday - left office 2 o'clock and spent two hours gardening. Beautiful Autumn afternoon."

### ***What Fell from the Sky***

Many types of object fell on Wanstead and Woodford during the months of the Blitz. High explosive bombs (H.E.) varied in weight from 250 to 2,000 lbs.

### **The "Land Mine"**

The first paramine (parachute mine) fell early on the morning of September 21<sup>st</sup>. A plane carried two mines, one under each wing, and released them simultaneously. Controlled by its silken parachute, 20 feet in diameter, the mine, containing an explosive charge of one ton, drifted slowly down. If the first explosion was not followed quickly by another, it was fairly certain that not far away was an unexploded mine. Discovery, as of all unexploded bombs, was the job of the Warden - working, remember, in the blackout!

The area of damage caused by the tremendous blast effect of the paramine was considerable, extending about 650 yards from the point of explosion. The relative blast effects of the mine and of the long range rocket is still a subject of discussion.

### **Incendiaries**

Oil bombs, experienced in at least half a dozen local areas, were similar in size and shape to the ordinary dustbin, contained about 14 gallons of oil and other inflammable material, and usually exploded and ignited on impact

The thermite incendiary, generally about 18 inches long and weighing something over 2 lbs., was showered separately or dropped in a containing frame which became known as a "bread basket."<sup>1</sup> Containers varied in size and in the number of bombs they held. The average was about 72.

An electric time device released the bombs after the container had fallen a considerable distance, and the incendiaries were distributed over a comparatively small area. By the force of their fall they penetrated tiled roofs.

Their magnesium alloy casing fused on impact, and if they were not quickly tackled, a considerable conflagration might result. The number of incendiary bombs dropped on the Borough, mostly in the first years of the war, has been estimated at 10,000. Eighty per cent fell in open ground; hundreds did not ignite; and only two really serious fires were caused.

This Borough was the first district to experience the explosive incendiary. This contained a charge sufficient to injure anyone near. A fire-watcher of over 70 lost the sight of an eye from this type of bomb, but continued on duty until the end of the war.

Enemy flares, hanging globes of fire, fell often to earth, but had mostly burnt themselves out before they reached the ground and left only the small parachute to which they were attached.

The unexploded bomb often deep in the earth, created a difficult problem; and roads had sometimes to be evacuated. Excellent work was done at great personal risk by the officers and men of the Bomb Disposal Service, both naval and military, who were drafted into the district.

The delayed action bomb, too, caused many narrow escapes. There was, for instance, the bomb reported in a back garden in Cheyne Avenue, South Woodford. The Post Warden at Post 22, required to confirm its presence, made his investigation and had just returned to the Post, barely two minutes away, when the bomb exploded, causing a large crater.

### ***Shrapnel and Unexploded Shells***

Shrapnel and many Anti-Aircraft (A.A.) shells came down unexploded, burying themselves sometimes to a depth of 60 feet in soft earth.

**"WE WILL REMEMBER . . . "**

### ***The Four Who Did Not Come Back***

The Blitz, sporadic in its last months, petered out in May, 1941. Wanstead and Woodford had its last bombs of the period on May 10th. There were no more that year.

In the months of ordeal, our Borough had suffered much, and heavy demands had been made on all branches of Civil Defence. It is possible in this book to refer only to a few incidents, but on pages 60 to 66 there is printed the section of the War Diary compiled at Control Centre which covers the whole period of the Blitz and beyond. It is impressive in the staccato phrasing of the moment.

In one incident in that long list, four members of the Civil Defence Services gave their lives. They were:-

Thomas James Hutton (Warden), aged 44. 4, Blake Hall Crescent, Wanstead.

William Leward Barnett (Warden), aged 36. 43, Belgrave Road, Wanstead.

Roy Frederick Broome (Messenger), aged 17. 35, Lake House Road, Wanstead.

Herbert Clifford Stower (Messenger), aged 18. 14, Clavering Road, Wanstead.

The two Wardens and their young colleagues were attached to Post 41, " F " District headquarters (Aldersbrook Tennis Courts), an area of South Wanstead, which, from the battering it received from the early days of bombing (and which continued through the phases of the flying bomb and the rocket) became known as "The Battle Field" or "Hell Fire Corner."

The following impression of the night of March 19th, which gave Post 41 the worst of its many severe ordeals, is written by one who was on the scene :-;

"The wail of the siren opposite the Post announced at 8.15 p.m. the arrival of the raiders. The Post personnel saw a startling sight. The Flats were a sea of flame. Thousands of incendiaries were burning on the open space. The guns roared. It was obvious that the enemy was making a concerted and determined attack. Bomb flashes stabbed the black-out. Planes droned overhead. The batteries on the Flats joined those further away in putting up a terrific barrage.

"At 8.50 p.m., three H.E. bombs fell in Lake House Road, damaging a number of houses and partly demolishing Nos. 14 and 31. A few casualties resulted, one being a man who was trapped in the doorway of No. 14. Wardens heaved on the obstruction to release him. Gas escaping in the same house caused a fire. This was quickly dealt with and the flames smothered. A nearby barrage balloon had burst into flames, illuminating the scene with glaring brilliance and revealing the widespread damage.

"At 9.20 p.m. this first incident appeared closed, and Services were awaiting the result of a final search and check-up before being dismissed.

"Then a parachute mine landed. It exploded a few yards from Aldersbrook corner on the Leytonstone side. Houses in Lake House Road, already badly damaged, tottered to destruction. Number II caught fire and was destroyed. Loss of life would have been heavy but for the fact that most of the inhabitants had by now taken refuge in the Aldersbrook public shelter, and those who remained were in their own dug-outs.

"The attack died down. Wardens returned to their Posts;-but the number for Post 41 was sadly lacking. The two boys' cycles stood in their usual place. "Busy somewhere" said the Chief. But the absent ones did not return, and a search was made. They were found;-in the mortuary, three of them. It was known that two others had been taken to hospital. Warden Barnett was one of these. He died next morning of his injuries.

"Just before the mine exploded, the Messengers had been giving assistance in one of the less badly-damaged houses. Broome, although officially not on duty, had rushed out to lend a hand. Warden Hutton was endeavouring to turn off the gas at No. 14 when the mine fell.

"So the four from Post 41 died doing their duty on the Home Front. The two boys;-pals in the Service;-sleep in one grave in Old Wanstead Churchyard. The two men lie close by, in Ilford Cemetery.

**"They shall not grow old....."**

A few days later their comrades stood silently at attention as the funeral cortege halted, outside the Post. A Union Jack covered each of the four coffins. The Mayor (Councillor R. B. Fidler), the chief officers of Civil Defence and others prominent in the life of the Borough paid a last tribute at the funeral service held in Wanstead Church.

When the mine landed on that night in March, an ambulance car which had been standing while the bombs fell around was only some 25 yards from the point of explosion. It was blown to pieces. The male driver was uninjured, and the girl attendant, although suffering from nerve shock, carried on her work with the Service. A member of a Stretcher Party carrying a casualty from a house had his leg broken by a falling wall.

The three bombs in Lake House Road which preceded the mine were among seven to come down in a line, roughly north-east to south-west, in ninety seconds. Woodlands Avenue received three: the other fell at the back of Mornington Villas. After the explosion of the mine, six more bombs and a second mine added to the destruction in the Lake House area, but caused no casualties.

During the same raid period, four bombs and two mines fell in the adjoining Post 42 area. One mine exploded. A Warden from Post 43 was severely injured when dealing with an explosive incendiary;-one of the shower of fire bombs that dotted the Flats.

### **Flying Bombs & Rockets**

In the Summer of 1944 the local Services faced a new and serious problem, for the fly-bomb, with 1,000 lbs. of explosive in the war-head mounted in a thin casing in front of the fuselage, caused only a shallow crater, and consequent extensive surface damage. The local organisation worked very successfully during the Blitz, but the fly-bomb, one of which could damage 500 houses, strained normal resources to breaking point.

On Friday, June 23<sup>rd</sup> the new ordeal of Wanstead and Woodford began. Late in the afternoon the chug-chug of a "buzz bomb" as it was already being called, was heard coming from the south-east - the main line of attack from the original German launching sites in the Pas de Calais area. Then the engine gave the final cough that in future was to be a familiar danger warning, the bomb gradually lost speed and stability and crashed (see footnote).

It is not possible to deal with each incident in detail. But one or two events are recalled:

Marine William Webb, aged 21, of Belgrave Road, Wanstead, home on leave after taking part in the D-Day landing, was boating in Wanstead Park with a young woman friend on July 2nd, when a fly-bomb fell and killed both.

On Thursday, July 13th, the house of Mr. Robert Stanley Bostock was among those in Tennyson Avenue, Wanstead, seriously damaged by a fly-bomb. In other houses on the opposite side of the road lived his brother, Sidney Fenwick Bostock and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. B.R. Bostock. Father and sons were well-known estate agents. On the following Saturday afternoon the two brothers were joined by a third, Frank Samuel, in salvaging personal property. Many workers were on the scene and a W.V.S. mobile canteen was still standing by when a second fly-bomb was seen approaching. The three brothers went into the brick surface shelter of a neighbouring house. The bomb fell almost on the same spot as the first. The shelter, apparently weakened by the earlier explosion, collapsed and all three men were killed. A prominent W.V.S. worker was among those injured.

*In the following three months, "F" District received eight of these V1 fly-bombs, the majority either in the Park or on Wanstead Flats.*

### **Grouped Hits**

It became the accepted belief that the majority of the fly-bombs which fell in Wanstead and Woodford were launched from one or two sites and given the similar direction and timing that would cause them to come down in a well defined area. The "repeat" hits in the vicinity

of The Eagle, Snaresbrook, the two in Tennyson Avenue and the falls in Hermon Hill, Sylvan Road and Wanstead Place, it was pointed out, were all more or less "on a line."

## **THE LAST PHASE**

Forms of attack heavier even than those of the fly-bombs had been for some time anticipated. But the coming of the long-range rocket was as far as possible concealed from the general public. When, on September 8<sup>th</sup>, the first rocket exploded in Staveley Road, Chiswick, encouragement was given to the rumour that a gas explosion had occurred. The phrase "gas explosion" became in the end something of a grim joke.

Wanstead and Woodford waited four weeks for the arrival of the latest weapon of war, which made its descent from a point some 30 miles above the earth at a speed reputed to be faster than that of sound, and gave no indication of its coming. On the night of October 4<sup>th</sup>, there was a flash high in the sky, and almost simultaneously a detonation of unprecedented "sharpness". A rocket had fallen in Blake Hall Crescent in an already sorely-tried area of the Borough. That was the first of the 14 rockets to explode in Wanstead and Woodford. It killed eight persons. In the immediate neighbourhood the people heard nothing - for that was the way of the rocket - but saw their homes begin to disintegrate before their eyes. Further away, a violent explosion was both heard and felt. Wardens had no doubt when a rocket had fallen in their area.

*In the following six months, "F" District alone received seven of these V2 rockets, the majority either in the Park or on Wanstead Flats.*

Amid the strain of those times, the fact that the enemy did not until November 1944, abandon the plane-dropped bomb was overlooked by most residents. Official records show that on November 1<sup>st</sup> a bomb fell on Wanstead flats, 300 yards from Aldersbrook Road, causing damage to property in the area but no casualties.

*Footnote: The fly-bomb or flying bomb was also known as a doodle-bug or buzz-bomb. The former title inspired the following notice, displayed outside Post 33 (corner of High Street and New Wanstead):*

When the "Doodle" dallies

Don't dawdle -

DIVE!!

No such mock levity concerning the V2 Long Range Rocket is recorded.