

MEMORIES OF PENSURST DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

David Martin

Chapter 4

DEFENDING THE VILLAGE – part 2

The Fire Service

Prior to 1938 there were some 1600 local fire brigades in operation up and down the country. Under the Fire Brigades Act of 1938 they were brought together under one centralised organisation and control in the Auxiliary Fire Service, the AFS.

An Auxiliary Fire Station was established in Leigh, the nearby village where our Martin family came from. There was a proper permanent brick-built fire station, just off the main village street, behind the two pubs, the 'Fleur De Lys' and 'Bricklayers Arms', in the side road leading to George Bennett's cycle and electrical shop and the railway station, Leigh Halt. This fire station was where they kept the water pump and its towing vehicle, a Foden lorry.



Leigh Fire Brigade pre-WWII

On the outbreak of war a sub-section of the Leigh AFS was formed in Penshurst from a group of about ten part-time volunteers under the command of my father, Leading Fireman R.C.Martin. He probably got the job because of his strong Leigh connections and was one of the few who had access to a telephone. A sectional wooden garage was erected on a small plot of land by the back entrance to Latymers, near the Fir Tree Tea Rooms, opposite the old telephone exchange. This became the Fire Station and the centre of all AFS operations.

They had ladders, some hand-operated stirrup pumps with water buckets, lots of hoses and a powerful new motorised pump on wheels with inflatable tyres. Unfortunately they had no regular

towing vehicle. Using Cecil Barrow's three-wheeled 'Chonker' was considered, but it did not have a tow bar and anyway, was not powerful enough. Most of the time they moved their pump around by hand.

My father's friend Cecil Barrow was one of the volunteer firemen. Others I can remember were Fred Fenner the Latymers gardener, Bill Fuller the chauffeur, Neville Edwards the builder, Len Goater and Bob Sellings, both plumbers. Part of their personal training was to practice getting up and dressing as fast as possible. I well remember my father doing this, there would be a sudden rumpus in the main bedroom and a frantic flurry of arms, legs, underwear and trousers which he sort of jumped into.

The arrangement was that a group of three of them took turns on two days every week to do night duty and sleep over in the main fire station in Leigh. I understood that the proximity of the back door to the 'Fleur De Lys' made this a far from onerous and even enjoyable chore. They were rarely called out, spending most of their time on the lookout for incendiary bombs or asleep in their bunks.

The Peshurst AFS soon became NFS when they were merged into the National Fire Service. They held regular practices, when they often trundled the pump and hoses down the nearby Coach Road. When they reached the first bridge they dropped the pump's intake pipe, its end covered by a cylindrical wicker basket, which looked rather like an eel trap, to keep out rubbish, over the parapet into the water of the drainage ditch which ran round the large field called Marsh Hope. They started the pump's petrol engine which was always kept immaculately maintained because they had plenty of spare time to do it. With two men holding the nozzle using an overhand grip to prevent injury to their wrists, on the command, "Water On" the control valve was turned on and the powerful jet of water made the nozzle leap and buck in their hands. Local boys used to gather to watch their fire practice.

The target for directing the water was always the upper dead branches of one of the trees in the avenue of poplars that lined the road. Despite their best efforts they were rarely able to break one off. This was a pity, because Leading Fireman Martin was in the habit of collecting firewood along there. Poplar was his favourite wood because it was easy to split for kindling and burnt cleanly without spitting sparks.

The Fire Brigade was always ready for action and although in the early part of the war incendiary bombs, designed to start a fire, were dropped, they usually fell in open fields. Suspicions may have been aroused when occasionally a haystack caught fire but this was more likely to have been a result of the hay being gathered and stacked when it was still too green.

Dramatic action came for them in the summer of 1944 when two flying bombs, or 'Doodlebugs', fell close to the village. The first came down in the corner of one of George Davison's Ford Place farm orchards, opposite the South Park gate lodge and right next to a wooden bungalow where one of his workers, Harry Coulstock and his family, lived. The house was badly damaged, but fortunately the family emerged unharmed because they had heard the buzz-bomb coming and taken shelter under the table. Collateral damage was reported when a mounted stags head fell off a wall in the farmhouse, burst open and lost its sawdust stuffing.



The second V1 flying bomb came down a few weeks later, one afternoon when I was watching the Salman's Farm men haymaking down by the river near the weir in the field called Marsh Hope. We all heard it coming and leapt into the dry ditch and culvert under the road. We didn't actually see the flying bomb as its engine cut out and the Doodlebug dived into the top corner of the field by the drive leading down to Moat House where Dr Charrington Wood lived. We heard the explosion and were close enough to feel the blast. Naturally we rushed to see and arrived before the Fire Brigade. The crater was still smoking when we got there and the

Coulstock family home bomb damage

acrid smell of the explosive was all around. This time the only damage was to the lime trees lining the boundary wall of Peshurst Park, which took the main force of the blast. Ironically, apart from the Moat House, the nearest building was the 'Fire Station' so it didn't take them long to respond to the 'shout' and arrive to assess the damage and start clearing the road.

The Doodlebugs came in daytime, both in the late afternoon. But it was during the night, just a few weeks later in the early autumn, that two of the more powerful V2 rockets landed near Peshurst. The first came down in a field to the rear of Larkins Farm, Chiddingstone, but our Fire Brigade was called out to attend. Fortunately, apart from a big crater there was no damage and the only casualties were a couple of bullocks. The second rocket came down just south of the village in a hop garden belonging to the Faircloth family at Warren Farm. We went along to look at that and the crater it made in the heavy clay soil was enormous. The complex poles and wirework system of the hop garden had collapsed in a great tangled mess, but again, there was no more serious damage to people or property.

Parts of plaster ceilings coming down as a result of explosions was a regular occurrence, making a lot of dust and mess. The exposed area was quickly covered with plasterboard as a temporary repair and later dealt with properly by professional plasterers free of charge to the owner of the property, once it was classed as 'bomb damage'. Many of the old ceilings in Peshurst Place were damaged in this way.

The Fire Brigade had another call-out and practice when the owner of the Leicester Arms called for assistance to lower the water level in the backwater of the River Medway along the bottom of the hotel garden. A female relative staying at the hotel had been helping with weeding the garden. For safety she had taken the rings off her fingers and wrapped them in her handkerchief, tied securely in

with a knot. She put them in the wheelbarrow where she was piling up the weeds and then forgot all about them. At the end of the afternoon she pushed the barrow down to the backwater and tipped the lot into the deep water, realising too late that her rings tied up in the handkerchief had gone as well.

Although she poked and prodded around she could not locate them in the murky water so they were feared lost. That evening in the bar, somebody had the bright idea of asking the Fire Brigade to try and lower the water level by pumping some of it out. So next day they brought their pump down into the field and proceeded to suck out water and direct the jet out over the field. But the task proved too great and they had no effect on the water level. As fast as they pumped it out, more water flooded back and in the end they had to give up and the rings remained lost. Perhaps some enthusiast with a metal detector might still get lucky if they found the right spot or, it is just possible, maybe the rings were never there at all.

There was some real fire-fighting action and excitement when one of the assistants in Chapman's Stores was sent down to the bottom of their property to burn cardboard cartons and other rubbish dumped behind their garage and sheds. Unfortunately he built his bonfire too close to the shed and that, too, caught fire. The Fire Brigade was turned out and, for once, putting their pump and hoses to their proper use, they quickly extinguished the fire. But not before one of the firemen, Neville Edwards the builder, venturing inside the building had one of the burning roof beams fall on his head. Fortunately as they all wore steel helmets, he was not seriously hurt. We saw all this because it happened just as we came out of school at half-past three.

The firemen were well equipped. Uniform of tunics and trousers with a thick greatcoat, waterproof capes and leggings plus thick leather, well-shod, knee length boots, came not just with a steel helmet, but also a webbing belt with their personal axe in a pouch. That day, Neville was grateful for his helmet.

That was right at the end of the war and the last action they saw. Soon afterwards the section was disbanded and the pump taken away, but they were allowed to keep their uniforms and boots. I used to covet my father's belt and axe. I know he kept it, but have no idea what eventually became of it, nor the large coal-scuttle shaped pith helmet which he never wore. But I did get his leather boots with the studded soles and wore them for years afterwards when my feet grew big enough.

The Fire Brigade hut was turned round at right angles to open onto the road and was handed over to the District Nurse, Miss Watson, as a garage for her small black Standard saloon car. But they left the steel pipe they had lashed between two fir trees in the adjacent field over which they hung their wet hoses to dry. This came in handy later on for me when I had a rugby ball and used it as a cross-bar for place-kicking practice.

Flying Bombs and V2 Rockets

V1 flying bombs, more commonly known as 'Buzz-bombs' or 'Doodlebugs', were jet-propelled pilotless aircraft carrying about two tons of high explosive. They just about had the range and were designed to be launched generally against southern England and London in particular. They were either launched from the air carried on a Heinkel bomber or fired from inclined ramps. In flight,

being jet-propelled, they were faster than conventional fighter aircraft. However, their guidance systems were unreliable.

The first flying bombs landed in June 1944, soon after the D-Day landings in France. Many thought at the time that the action was in direct retaliation for the invasion. The attack by 'Doodlebugs' lasted for 80 days before the launch sites were captured or otherwise put out of action. In all 2,300 were launched out of the 8,000 the Germans had built.

Defence against them was by anti-aircraft artillery fire or interception by fighter aircraft which attempted to shoot them down and occasionally turn and divert them. Barrage balloons and cables proved to be of limited use. In all 5,500 men women and children were killed by flying bombs and further 16,000 seriously injured .The larger, more powerful V2 rockets came soon after between September 8th 1944 and March 27th 1945. They had a greater range and carried a heavier load of explosives. With more and more of their launch sites progressively put out of action the number of their attacks dwindled and no more were launched, well before the Germans surrendered on May 7th 1945.

RAF Penshurst

Penshurst had an aerodrome, as they were called before the war: not airfield, that came later. It was not exactly in Penshurst but by the hamlet of Charcott, part of Chiddingstone Causeway, close to Penshurst railway station. It never had a concrete runway or anything like that, but was a flat grass field, as many aerodromes were at that time, since the aeroplanes were much lighter in weight. Established by the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) after the 1914-18 war, it was also used between the wars for some private flying.

The RAF took it over in 1939 and although it was not an operational aerodrome in the sense that it was a base for fighters and bombers, they used it for pilot training. They kept a small number of Tiger Moth bi-planes and flew these for retraining and rehabilitating pilots who had been shot down, crash-landed and lost their nerve.

One of the regular confidence building exercises they carried out, using Penshurst Place as a landmark, was flying in low from the north, skimming the hedge of Latymers field to touch down briefly and perform circuits and bumps in the 20-acre field known as Marsh Hope by the river Eden. First they had to remove the tall wooden poles put up across the middle of the field as part of air defences against gliders and paratroops.

Sometimes for a bit of variety, they flew in low and dropped a dummy bomb on a target. From a distance these 'bombs' looked more like large rag dolls. We watched them closely but never got our hands on one because they had observers in a truck which moved in quickly to retrieve their toy bombs. The planes flew in so low that, hiding in the hedge below, we could see clearly the pilot and instructor. Many of these small bi-planes had fearsome grinning faces painted on their noses.



The Flying Fortress which also crash-landed at Penshurst aerodrome – the plane David refers to below may have been a Liberator (see Colin Burchett's www.worldofcolin.co.uk/chaptertwo.html)

The most exciting event on the aerodrome was a crash landing, without undercarriage, by an American bomber, which skidded to a halt by the road. Some said it was a 'Fortress' but when I went to see, it did not look big enough. It was immediately placed under guard but either the sentries were not attentive enough or just did not care, for plundered parts of the bomber started to circulate locally. Somehow I finished up with a panel light, clearly removed with a pair of wire cutters, which I kept as a souvenir for years.

Penshurst aerodrome was closed down in 1946 after the war and reverted back to agricultural use but you can still see where it was from aerial maps.

Collecting Shrapnel

In the early period of the war, when the Battle of Britain was raging overhead with aerial 'dogfights' between Allied and enemy aircraft, supported by local anti-aircraft batteries manned by the Royal Artillery Territorial Army Unit at Tonbridge, a popular pastime for the village boys was collecting fallen debris, collectively known as 'shrapnel'.

Proper shrapnel was jagged fragments of steel from shells fired by anti-aircraft guns. These varied in size, the smallest about the size of a penny, the largest a few inches in diameter. One particularly prized specimen, picked up by my brother while out with the Army Cadets, was as big as a person's hand. Shell nose-cones made of Bakelite were also found, as well as the odd spent incendiary bomb dumped at random by bombers heading back to base to save weight and conserve fuel. If a dogfight had taken place right overhead, we could also find spent cannon shell casings. These were particularly prized and regularly swapped in the interests of building up your own collection. Later in the war, when radar was being brought into use, we could also find clumps of 'chaff,' magnetic tape thrown out in order to try and confuse radar reflections.

When the army was being reorganised, soldiers carried out training manoeuvres around the village and especially in the open spaces of Penshurst Park. They were sometimes careless about clearing

up afterwards and left blank 0.303 rifle or Bren gun ammunition or even the odd unexploded 'Thunderflash' lying about. Village boys followed them around and knew where to look for this stuff. A 'Thunderflash' was like an overlarge firework banger and was normally ignited when thrown, creating an impressive explosion. They also went off when thrown on a fire. It was rumoured that Sidney Bedwell, son of the carpenter on Redleaf estate at the top of the village and his small gang of friends had made a 'Thunderflash' gun out of a length of drainpipe, but this was never confirmed.

Blank 303 ammunition rounds also went off if you put one in a tin and heated it up on a fire. Even though they were just blanks they made a satisfyingly loud bang when they exploded and the tin flew up in the air. Another myth was that they could be fired by putting them in a vice and striking the percussion cap with a nail and hammer. We never tried this, but using a pair of pointed pliers you could open up the crimped end of the bullet and shake out the smelly little sticks of cordite. They could be exploded, too.

But the greatest fun of all began in June 1944 when a cordon of barrage balloons was put up around the south of London in an attempt to block the 'Doodlebug' flying bombs. RAF fighters were sent up to try and intercept them. So enthusiastic were some of the pilots in their attempted pursuit of a 'Doodlebug' which they tried to shoot down or divert, that flying low it was thought that they were in real danger of flying into the balloons or their cables. So the RAF Regiment sent out small groups of airmen to establish camps in the countryside where they set up launchers for small rockets carrying a flare on a parachute to warn the pilots.

Well, you can imagine the excitement this was for us boys. When we saw a rocket go up, if the wind was carrying it in our direction we raced to where we thought the parachute and flare would land. The flare would have burnt out by the time it reached the ground although usually was too hot to touch. Being first to grab the parachute was the main prize but you had to be quick and prepared to fight for it. Second prize was the rocket canister. If you thought you had no chance of reaching the parachute ahead of the pack, you turned your attention to watching the falling canister. If you got it, this was nearly as good, they were about three or four feet long with a compartment for the parachute and flare at the front and four fins at the back. They had a distinctive smell, too.

One of these look-out camps was on Salman's Farm on the hillside above the hop garden near the big barn. We used to hang round there and the airmen, probably bored witless, were friendly and seemed to welcome our interest. One of them, Dick Cheshire, used to carve small model aircraft out of balsawood and paint them for a hobby. He then just gave them away to us boys. He gave me a Lightning Fighter, painted grey. One day, watching him do this while he was on duty, sitting in a small tent with the rocket launcher a short distance away from the main camp, I accidentally put my hand down on the firing button and sent up a rocket by mistake. His explanation was that he thought he heard an approaching aircraft, but I'm not sure any of the others were entirely convinced. But even with a head start I did not get that parachute or its canister.

The unit closed down and moved out soon after that: the D-Day landings in Normandy required their services elsewhere and the barrage balloon idea had not been all that successful as a defence against flying bombs, anyway.

The Army Moves in and out again

The large property called Latymers, with its extensive gardens, coach house and stables, standing right in the heart of the village, became vacant at the beginning of the war. Owned by the Penshurst estate, until then it had been rented and lived in by Captain Hawkins and his family. But by then the greenhouses and hothouses had long since fallen into disrepair and the stabling, not used by coaches and horses for many years, had mostly been given over to garden storage. The full-time



Latymers, Penshurst

gardener, Fred Fenner, with his wife and son still lived in the gate lodge but the coachman's cottage was empty.

A detachment of Royal Marines took it over and moved in immediately, setting up Pay and Personnel Records offices. On parts of the garden they built Nissen hut accommodation for some of the men. The remainder of the officers and NCOs, together with several women members of the WRNS, lived in the main house. For recreation they reinstated the lawn tennis court and the croquet lawn. Although the personnel frequently changed, the unit remained there throughout the war and for a time afterwards while they sorted out their records and the accrued pay.

The privately owned Swaylands House, on the high ground to the east of the village overlooking the Medway, had been turned into Cassel's private hospital, some kind of specialist institution, a few years before the war. This was also commandeered and turned into a military hospital specialising in skin diseases. Some of the patients under treatment were allowed to walk out, wearing their distinctive bright blue uniforms. But to avoid creating anxiety among the locals who feared contamination, they kept themselves to themselves. From the purple patches on their skin, it would seem that their treatment involved considerable applications of gentian violet.

While South Park, the home of Viscount Hardinge, and Oakfield owned by Lord Hardinge of Penshurst as well as Penshurst Place itself, were left in private occupation, two other large country

houses were taken over by the army. Despite the military call-up, all these houses employed their own full-time gardener and I could name them all but I won't bore you.

Redleaf House, the home of Mr L. D'Englebronner, was up the hill north of the village on the road to Leigh. He and his family moved out to another of his estate properties, Doubleton Farm, leaving the main house to be comprehensively trashed by members of one of the Scottish regiments. They even destroyed the carved wooden staircases and burnt the rails and bannisters.

The Royal Army Service Corps who moved into Glebe House were much more respectful of property. They earned the gratitude of the village by resurrecting the football pitch. One foggy morning early in 1944, they marched through the village into Peshurst Park and headed for the cricket pavilion where they found the football goal nets. A group went across to the maintenance yards at the rear of Peshurst Place and retrieved the goal posts which had been stored away. They cut off the bracken growing on the pitch, scythed off the grass, found the white line marker, set out the pitch and were away. The officer in charge was clearly a keen footballer and a good player himself, others had been professionals; one of the halfbacks called Austen had played for Aston Villa and they had a great goalkeeper. Playing twice a week, in no time at all they had formed a league with other local army units and were soon proudly established as leaders at the top.

Then one day early in the summer, June 1944, it all came to an abrupt end and they were gone. I supposed that if I had been more observant I would have recognised that all around there had been much more military activity recently. It was, of course, D-Day and the beginning of the end.