

## CHAPTER TWO - THE WAR YEARS

Most people would never say that their memories of war -- any war, were particularly pleasant ones. But for me, as a young boy, those years were filled with so much excitement. Years later, as I grew into adulthood, I saw war for what it was -- a struggle for power by a person, or a group of people, to inflict their will on those that don't agree with them, regardless of the cost in life and property. There is no glory in war, but as a youngster, and in my particular case, through my eyes, it was a time to enjoy. Fear never entered into it.

As a six-year old I had heard talk of Munich, Hitler, Chamberlain and the Maginot Line. These were just names to me, and not half as interesting as rolling halfpennies down a drain. But even as a six-year old I can remember that warm Sunday morning of the 3rd of September 1939, when Mr. Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, announced that we were now in a state of war with Germany.

To me, those words had little meaning, because the sky didn't fall in immediately after the announcement, and the sun rose again the next day. In fact, the only thing that seemed different was that a few hours after the announcement we heard a strange wailing sound of alternating pitches on a siren, which for some years to come, although I never realized it at the time, meant death and destruction for so many people. We would come to live with that sound -- and life would go on regardless.

That beautiful day in early September was just a continuation of the warm sunny weather we had experienced on our holidays at Warner's Holiday Camp at Dovercourt a month earlier. But that day, as it did for many others, changed our way of life forever. For my father, who had changed his lifestyle once to come ashore, it was about to change again.

Unless you were in a protected job, such as a fireman, or some other form of essential service, men, between the ages of eighteen and forty were to be conscripted. Most of those conscripted went into the army. Others, who had some specialty, such as a civil flying licence, would probably be sent for pilot training in the Air Force.

My father, because of his background and qualifications, volunteered for the Navy. He was near the top end of the age limit, and was not yet in line for conscription, but he decided that this is what he wanted to do. On January 9, 1940 he was appointed a Temporary Lieutenant in the Royal Naval Reserve. I don't recall his exact movements after that, but he probably was required to carry

out some shore training with the Navy. I do remember however, that he had been stationed up in Scapa Flow, in the Orkneys, for a while.

The period from when war was declared until the early summer of 1940 was given the name, "the phoney war." Even for me, as a child, it was strange. I couldn't understand what was going on around me.

There were numerous activities taking place to prepare the civilian population for war, but I couldn't understand why it was being done, because in my mind, today was just the same as yesterday. But things were to change rapidly a few months later.

There were instructions issued for this and that. For instance, we were told to listen for church bells, because if we heard them it indicated that we were being invaded by paratroopers. We were issued with ration books, which were to control and reduce the food intake, so that resources could be directed away from nonessential industries, to industries that would support the war effort.

While I cannot remember the actual quantities of all the rationed commodities that we were allowed to buy, I can remember some of them.

We were allowed two ounces of butter, two ounces of other fats, ie. cooking fats, eight ounces of meat, and four ounces of sugar each per week. I can recall that somebody told us that a spoonful of syrup was the equivalent of a spoonful of sugar. We tried it occasionally when sugar was running low. It tasted fine, but it looked horrible. It turned a cup of tea into a murky purple colour.

Everybody was provided with gas masks, in their ubiquitous brown cardboard boxes, which we were told had to be carried at all times.

They even had special ones for babies. Later, some entrepreneurs manufactured fancy covers for the gas mask boxes -- which just proves that there will always be someone who sees a market for something.

The government provided people with rolls of sticky brown paper tape, which had to be applied to windows in a lattice work pattern.

This was to prevent flying glass in the event of bomb blast. What bomb blast -- what war? How little I knew at that time.

Windows also had to be, "blacked out." There were many innovative methods used to achieve this, from heavy dark curtains to wooden frames lined with black felt. Families sitting listening to their favourite radio programs at night lived in fear and trepidation of hearing the Air Raid Warden outside their house shouting, "Put that light out."

The Air Raid Wardens, like so many other organisations at that time, were a volunteer group of men and women, who, in the case of men, were either too old to be conscripted, or were waiting for the call. Women were not conscripted in the early stages of the war, so they took over many roles previously held by men.

Just before war was declared the government decided it would be safer to move those people in London with young families out of the city. This seemed like a prudent decision, because there was little doubt that if Britain was to be bombed, London would be a prime target. It was therefore decided that we (our school) were to be evacuated. Another word was just about to be added to my vocabulary. We had become, "evacuees."

As I said, the decision to evacuate was a good one, but there was one slight problem. We were to be evacuated to Folkestone, on the south coast, where, on a clear day, one could see the coast of France -- a country which, although it hadn't been overrun yet by the Germans, was a buffer between mainland Europe and Britain.

The enemy was advancing through Europe at an alarming rate -- getting ever closer to Britain, day by day. There were only twenty-one miles of sea separating us from France, and when the enemy arrived on the French coast, which they would surely do within a few days, or at the most, a few weeks, we would have been within range of his long range guns. This was later borne out when the German guns in Calais regularly shelled Dover, a small port on the coast, next to Folkestone.

My brother didn't come to Folkestone with us, as his school had been evacuated as a separate unit to Wadhurst, near Tunbridge Wells. We were assigned to live with a woman who had a large house next to the main post office. I don't recall a husband -- but he could have already been conscripted.

After about six weeks with nothing happening, as far as we (the evacuated families) were concerned, my mother decided to return to London, during this "phoney war" period. During our stay in Folkestone I had not been in school, as this was something that the authorities had not managed to organize. With my love of school, this situation had really worried me!

When we returned to Senlac Road I was duly dispatched to a new school -- Coopers Lane. Previously, in my halfpenny-rolling days I had been to Baring Road School, but in the interests of consolidation that school was closed and its pupils transferred to Coopers Lane. There is a particular reason for mentioning this school, because an incident happened there, which I think my father would have remembered to his dying day.

My father had been away from home since he first joined the service, and he was now home on a few days leave. My mother had given me a note asking my teacher, a Miss Walker, to let me out a little early that afternoon, as my father was home on leave. The note said that he would come to the school to pick me up. He was easily spotted by Miss Walker, through the classroom's ceiling to

floor windows, as he arrived by way of the playground in his brand new naval lieutenant's uniform. She immediately bounded to the window to welcome him, and then said to the class, "We should show our thanks to the Navy through Ray's father." She then led the entire class in unison, saying, "Thank you Navy." My father was so embarrassed, he didn't know where to look. As I said, it's an incident that he probably never forgot -- nor have I.

One night in December 1939 I remember being woken up by voices outside my room. Next morning I was told that Uncle Fred had died on the stairs on his way to bed. Hence the voices. I mention this incident for two reasons. Firstly, because I can actually remember it, and secondly, because, although he had apparently died of a heart attack, for many years later I told people that he had died of a "broken heart."

Among my toys at that time I had a bugle. Just the sort of toy you never want to give a kid -- but I had one. The morning after Uncle Fred (my mother's uncle in fact) had died, I wanted to play my bugle. I don't know why -- I just did! For some reason this did not seem to be appreciated by the assembled mourning relatives and friends -- so I was taken to Uncle Len's house to get me out of the way -- but not without my bugle. I think I resented not being allowed to play the "Last Post."

The early summer weather of 1940 was a repeat of the previous year -- warm and sunny, with clear blue skies, except that things were supposed to be different because we were at war. As the days changed to midsummer it was apparent that other things were changing as well. The air raid warning sirens would become a regular way of daily life, and although we had not been bombed yet, we heard various reports on the BBC that enemy aircraft had crossed the coast.

They were mainly attacking aerodromes and strategic targets on, or near, the south coast. At this time Hitler had not made his decision to try to bomb London into submission. But it was soon to start.

I don't remember the first raid we had, because to me we had moved from a sense of unnecessary precautions in my childish mind, to a state of hostilities within a short space of time. During the "phoney war" most people with any space in their garden had air raid shelters installed. They were called Anderson shelters. They were made out of curved sheets of corrugated metal, half buried in the ground, covered with a foot or more of earth over the entire structure.

Just clear of the entrance, a wall of bags of earth, or sand, would prevent blast from penetrating the entrance. It was a simple design, and would have been very effective against most forms of bomb damage, except a direct hit. People who didn't have shelters in their gardens had the option of going deep underground at a Tube (subway) station.

As the ferocity and intensity of the air raids increased into what came to be known as the, "London Blitz," the family, which had now grown by the addition of Auntie Flo and Thelma, spent more and more time in the shelter. At the height of the blitz, we stayed in the shelter throughout the night, because it was the only practical thing to do. Otherwise, we would have been up and down to the shelter from our beds continuously.

I can't use the word "slept" with respect to being in the shelter at night. How could one sleep when the world outside was filled with a cacophony of sirens, anti-aircraft guns and exploding bombs? Things had changed a lot since the "phoney war." Thousands of Londoners now spent their nights in the Tube (subway) stations, all around London.

There are many memories of that period for me. I think -- no, I know, that the thing that sticks in my memory more than anything else during those beautiful summer and early autumn days, was watching the "dog fights" between our fighters and the Germans. As I write this now I can vividly recall what went on above me.

I would stand outside the shelter and look up at the sky, and see what looked like separate irregular patterns of strands of white wool against that brilliant blue background. I was watching people trying to kill each other at fifteen to twenty thousand feet, but I didn't see it that way. At the age of seven all I could see was an exciting spectacle going on above my head. In fact, often I couldn't even see the aircraft. All I could see was their condensation trails, twisting and turning in a fight to the death.

It was these condensation trails that became wool-like after a minute or so, as the wind would start to dissipate the sharply defined trails emanating from the aircraft. Very occasionally, but not very often, you would see something white slowly come into view as a parachute drifted slowly down to earth. They were the lucky ones. Too often, the pilots would not be so lucky, as the white wool would blend into a black or grey, as an aircraft would slowly start to spin and fall out of the sky.

I had become so used to watching this type of thing, that the fact that people were killing each other within my sight, didn't really register with me. To me, as a seven year old it was just a thrilling, exciting spectacle. In fact, what I was watching was what came to be known as the "Battle of Britain."

One evening the entire northern sky glowed red and orange. The Germans had been concentrating on the London Docks for days, and they had left them in flames. Another time I can recall, was the day when the Tate and Lyle sugar factory had been bombed. Although we lived about twenty miles from it, the strong stench of burning sugar permeated the air for days.

The sights at night were very spectacular during a bombing raid,

particularly watching the searchlights sweeping the sky looking for enemy bombers. However, it was extremely dangerous being outside, due to the tons of shrapnel from the anti-aircraft shells that were falling all over London. A bomb could kill or injure you from a direct hit or a near miss, but the shrapnel being showered down could cut you to pieces, with its razor-sharp jagged edges.

Thelma and I would often go looking for shrapnel after a raid. The pieces varied in size. Most of it was small, but occasionally we would find a part of a fuse or nose cone. It was all still a game --of who could find the biggest or most interesting piece -- often to be traded with your friends. It was just like hunting for bigger and better horse-chestnuts. Death and destruction had nothing to do with it.

Auntie Billy, Uncle Fred's sister, who was in her eighties then would not come down to the shelter. She felt safer in the house. However, there was a slight problem. When a raid would start at night she would get up, open the curtains and switch on the lights! Not a very popular person with the Wardens.

All the houses around us received some form of damage or other. Mrs. Clark's house, just down the road from us, was very badly damaged. Her husband had been killed in an air raid in Grove Park. We had some structural damage. A large piece of masonry had been blown on to my young sister's bed. Had she been there, she surely would have been killed.

Because Hitler had not managed to achieve air superiority, he made the decision not to invade Britain. Instead, he had decided to open another front against the Russians in the east. We came so close to invasion, and what surely would have been our defeat, during that period. How different life would have been had that happened. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was watching one of the most heroic battles in history taking place above my head.

By late September, the ferocity and intensity of the raids seemed to have reduced somewhat. They were still heavy -- but it was all relative.

My father had been posted to Belfast, Northern Ireland, during this period. He was very aware of what we were going through in London, so he managed to obtain a Travel Permit for us, which would allow us to move to Belfast. While my father had tried to obtain Travel Permits for all of us, Auntie Flo and Thelma were refused, because they were not going to join their immediate family. This turn of events effected Auntie Flo's health considerably.

The morning we were due to start our journey to Belfast, she had a terrible hemorrhage. I couldn't understand what was going on, except that I had never seen so much blood in my life. Last

minute decisions had to be made to get Auntie Flo from the shelter. We were still living there, right up to the day we left for Belfast. Luckily, while this was going on we were not under air raid conditions. An ambulance took Auntie Flo off to hospital, and arrangements were made to have Thelma stay with Uncle Len and Auntie May for the time being.

My mother, brother, sister and I had a taxi take us to Euston Station for our train to Stranraer in Scotland. From there we would be taking a ship for a three-hour passage to Larne, Northern Ireland, and then on to Belfast -- and peace.

While waiting on the platform at Euston I remember hearing someone barking, "Make way for the German prisoners." And there, walking down the platform towards us, under armed escort, was this motley bunch of about half a dozen men, in what seemed to be a mixture of blue and grey uniforms. They didn't have horns, and they didn't look superior or arrogant. They just looked dejected, dazed and frightened. But at least they were alive, unlike many of their friends.

After a long and tiring journey we arrived in Stranraer, where my father was waiting to meet us and take us on the last part of our journey to Belfast. The only thing I remember about the ferry trip to Larne was that my father advised us not to shut the cabin door, in case we were torpedoed. Apparently, in some ships that had been torpedoed or mined, the cabin door had jammed on the impact of the explosion, preventing the occupants from getting out. He told us to leave the door on the hook. After our experiences in London, and the journey north, we really didn't want our escape to be marred in any way like that. We arrived in Belfast on 21st October 1940.

The next forty-eight hours were a total blur for me. I was so tired I had no idea where I was -- nor did I care. After a couple of days staying with relatives -- Uncle David, Auntie Peggy and my cousin Olaf, we moved into our fully furnished house at 11 Galwally Park.

For my mother in particular this must have been marvellous. She had finally left the bombing behind her and had moved into this nice big house in a city that appeared to be at peace. At the same time she must have been very worried about her sister's health. My mother and Auntie Flo were like many other twins. There was a close bond between them that existed until the day that Auntie Flo died. I cannot recall any incident involving an argument between the two of them, yet we lived as one family together in Belfast for four years -- and before that, in London. While we are not twins, or even brother and sister, a similar bond exists between Thelma and me, and has done ever since I can remember. I never had that bond with either my brother or my sister.

In this peaceful environment I again took up my favourite pastime -- going to school. Only this time I had outgrown rolling my money down the drain. And besides, it had lost much of its appeal, as my brother was attending a different school, whereas I was still at an elementary school.

In January 1941 Auntie Flo's health had improved somewhat. She again applied for a travel permit, which this time was granted for health reasons. It was a happy reunion when we saw her and Thelma again in Belfast.

One evening when we were just sitting around the fire, my mother cocked an ear, and said to my father that she was certain that she could hear an air raid siren. Her comments of course caused a great deal of amusement to the family, especially my father, who mentioned something about her having sirens on the brain. She was adamant about what she had heard, so my father and mother went outside -- and sure enough, there it was -- an air raid siren -- the first one sounded in Northern Ireland. This, within about six months of leaving London. My mother's uncanny hearing ability remained with her until she died.

From then on there would be the occasional siren heard, but nothing ever happened. Then one night in April it all changed. The very familiar sounds of German aircraft, which in London we had nicknamed "Jerky Jerry," because of their distinctive engine sound, were back again. It seemed that they were following us.

It started all over again, although this time the air raids were over a period of days, rather than weeks and months. We had no shelter to go to here, so we did the next best thing -- we went to a cupboard under the stairs. Not very comfortable trying to share the space with three adults and four children.

Belfast was badly bombed. Their aim was obviously to hit the docks, and while they partially succeeded, they also bombed a populated area that was near the waterworks. At the time, it was said that because visual bombing was the only means of identifying a target, the aircraft probably saw the reflection of the water in the lake at the waterworks, thinking it was the water by the docks. Hence the undue amount of damage to civilian areas.

Uncle David's house was badly damaged by the bombing, so he, Auntie Peggy and Olaf came to live with us at Galwally Park. They lived with us for a few months until they found a house. It was during this time that Olaf and I came to know each other very well. A friendship formed that has remained strong to the present day.

Uncle David, who had been the Pilot Master in Belfast, had been transferred to the Royal Naval Reserve on the outbreak of war to



take over the Inspection Service. He was responsible for ensuring that all merchant ships entering Belfast had the correct papers, and that the cargo carried reflected what was shown on the manifest.

The six years that we lived in Galwally Park were exciting years for me. My father was the Sea Transport Officer in Belfast, and he would often bring home some of his fascinating colleagues and friends for dinner.

I think the most memorable events during the period 1940 to 1943 were the parties that my mother and father had at our house. It was a large house, so it was ideally suited for that purpose. We always had a party at Christmas. To me, this not only meant it was party time again -- but because it was Christmas, my father's colleagues would bring presents. Yes, as a kid, I think I liked those parties best!

We had some interesting guests. One was a Commander Stannard, who had recently been awarded the Victoria Cross. He gave my sister a rocking horse, which was immediately named Stannard. Other guests included, American army and navy officers, who kept us in chocolate bars. At that time the name Hershey meant nothing to us. It was just a chocolate bar -- regardless of name. Another thing that remains in my mind about the Americans, was that it was the first time I had ever been called "Red." In Britain, people with my hair colouring were often called "Ginger," but I'd never heard of "Red" before. I preferred it to "Ginger" -- but I didn't like either really.

At these parties there would be a lot of music and singing. One officer, a Lieutenant Isacson, played the piano by ear, which of course made him a welcome guest at any party. There were lots of patriotic songs, like, "There'll always be an England" and "White Cliffs of Dover." Sometime during the evening, Auntie Flo, who had a very attractive voice, would sing, with my mother accompanying her on the piano. Today, I find it strange that we, the children, were allowed to stay up until all hours of the night. I think if it was me, I would have sent the kids to bed halfway through the evening. However, as we went to bed reasonably early at other times, we were allowed to stay up on these occasions.

There always seemed to be a lot of food and drink at these parties -- which, considering that rationing was in effect, was a bit of a mystery as to how it all appeared. Or was it? It could have been the work of our friendly butcher, who conducted his business as though there was no such thing as rationing. He killed animals for his business in a barn that was close to his property, whereas the lawful way was for butchers to get their meat from the abattoir. Their allocation was based upon the number of people registered with them. This did not seem to bother Mr. Cromey.

Another thing that I enjoyed about Galwally was that it was an open house for our own friends. We were four children, all with our different sets of friends. As a child, the age difference between groups of friends provides an artificial barrier between each group.

As one gets older the age barrier disappears, and you just remember these people as friends, rather than Geoff's friends, or my friends.

Many of the friendships forged during that period have survived to the present day.

Other than the short period when the air raids had taken place in Belfast, things were generally very peaceful. We would spend our summer holidays at Portrush, where there were lovely beaches, amusement arcades and the occasional summer stage shows. My brother would also go to Portrush for his summer holidays, but as he was now in his mid-teens he would go with his own friends.

When I was nine I left my elementary school and entered Methodist College, commonly known as "Methody." It was what in North America would be called, a private school, and in Britain, a public school.

Both Geoff and Thelma were there already, amongst twelve hundred other students. I will never forget that when Geoff and I would be leaving the house in the morning to go to school, Thelma wasn't even out of bed -- yet we all went to the same school. Thelma has never won an award for punctuality!

The teachers at Methody always wore their gowns. One of the two Headmasters that was there during my time at the school also wore a mortarboard, or cap, as it is called in North America. The male teachers always wore suits and the female teachers wore dresses -- not like today, where there does not appear to be any dress code.

We wore school uniforms and were required to wear our school caps flat on our heads -- not on the back of your head. While teachers would discipline you for dress or other misdemeanours, it was mainly up to the Prefects, who were selected sixth-formers, to monitor and punish for most infractions outside the classroom.

The normal punishment from a Prefect was several whacks on the backside with a rubber shoe or slipper. I think if there was more discipline at schools today there would be less youth crime. If you deserved to be punished, you were. Cheekiness, or any other form of bad manners was never tolerated. Smoking was a serious infraction. Discipline was enforced -- and it didn't do any of us any harm. It was simply a matter of living by the rules of accepted behaviour for school children -- which seems to have been lost today, where everybody, including children, are always looking for their "rights." I don't hear much about responsibilities -- just rights.

At school we had Assembly every morning in the Whitla Hall. At least, most of us did. I can't vouch for Thelma! During Assembly, the Headmaster would often read out the names and ages of old boys, and occasionally old girls, who had been killed recently in the war.

Most of them were so young. Some of them had only left school the previous year, a fact that clearly imprinted itself in my mind. One day, one of those names was a Flying Officer Stoneley. His father, who was the school's Musical Director, was sitting on the stage with the other teaching staff. How hard that must have been for him. I think that type of thing brought it home to us who were in relative safety, that we really were living in two different worlds. The days on which these deaths were announced we always sang the same hymn, "Thine forever, God of Love." Whenever I hear that hymn today my mind immediately goes back to those solemn moments.

When my father was sent to Admiral Cunningham's staff in the Mediterranean, sometime in 1943, the parties in our house stopped. Not only was he posted, but so were many of the interesting characters that we had met over the past three years.

As a Sea Transport Officer, my father's job was to set up a port for normal operations as soon as it had been liberated by the allies. Once the port was set up, he would move on to the next one. I can't remember all the ports, but some of the names I can remember are Tunis, Sousse, Bizerta, Algiers and Leghorn. In Algiers he was sunk twice in one day! When he was visiting a ship one morning, the ship was bombed and sank in the harbour. In the afternoon the same thing happened again.

Our house in Galwally continued to be a halfway house for all our friends. My mother and Auntie Flo made everybody most welcome. They were both very laid back about most things. In fact, at times I don't think they even knew how many people were in the house. The piano was a great attraction. I can still picture Oonagh, Thelma's friend, sitting at the piano playing "Largo," or the "Moonlight Sonata" -- and shortly thereafter there would be "Slug" Irvine, my brother's friend (now Doctor Irvine), pounding on the keys with "Boogie-Woogie."

Unfortunately, life at Galwally was not always full of roses. We were at war, and while we at home were relatively safe, people were getting maimed and killed all over the world. In most instances it passed us by -- it was always somebody you didn't know that had been killed, and while you felt sorry for them, as you would for anybody who had lost a loved one, it normally did not touch you personally. But in 1942 it was to strike close to home. One day, Auntie Flo received the news that her husband, David, had been rescued after his ship, the ss Mundra, had been shelled and torpedoed in the Indian Ocean. He had been badly injured, with multiple shrapnel wounds. There had been very few survivors.

He was finally rescued after spending twenty-two hours in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, hanging on to a piece of wood. Like many sailors he couldn't swim, which, as in many similar cases, was an asset. Some people who could swim tired themselves out, only

to slide below the surface when their strength ran out. He was later to tell us how he hung on to one piece of wood, and used another piece to frighten the sharks away. With the blood flowing from his wounds, he was a prime target for sharks. He was extremely lucky to be rescued.

After spending a long time in hospital in Durban, he eventually recovered, and returned home. His injuries had been so severe that he was pensioned out of the service. However, sometime later he became bored. He felt that he could continue to add something to the war effort, so he managed to get a Medical Board to declare him fit to return to sea, which he did.

I think these actions speak for themselves, about what type of person he was. I always remember him as a kind, gentle, softly spoken man, with a slight Scots accent -- and a twinkle in his eye.

In the autumn of 1944 I developed Scarlet Fever. Because it was highly contagious I was shipped off to hospital. Purdysburn Hospital had two functions. It was a fever hospital, but it was also Northern Ireland's only mental hospital. Even to this day I hear the same question many times -- "which wing were you in, or can I guess?"

The only reason I mention this event is that a very sad thing happened to our family while I was in there. The dates and events have never dimmed in my memory. Both my mother and Auntie Flo used to visit me every Wednesday and Sunday. They could only stand at the door to the ward, because the patients were contagious. But luckily my bed was nearest the door so I could talk to them. One Wednesday, my mother was by herself, and she told me that Auntie Flo had been taken ill and that she was in hospital.

On the next visit, Sunday 12th November, she told me that Auntie Flo had died on the day after my mother's last visit -- Thursday 9th November 1944. I was stunned. I had never had someone close to me die before. Uncle Fred had died, but I hardly knew him, and in my mind he was old -- and old people died -- but not Auntie Flo. She was only 43 years old. It was later determined that she died of some form of leukaemia. As Uncle David was at sea, and communications were restricted, it was to be some weeks later before he heard that his wife had died.

While it affected us all, it was particularly hard for Thelma. Two years earlier she had nearly lost her father. Now she had lost her mother. She was fourteen years of age, and an only child. She had spent so much time with her mother, because her father had been at sea all of her life. This must have devastated her beyond words. I still think of her every 9th November.

I was very keen on rugby and cricket at school. That interest

has stayed with me over the years. I have never had any interest in ice hockey, baseball or American football ( a strange name, seeing only one person ever kicks the ball) -- so, by living in Canada, I have had to pay the penalty of being deprived of the only sports that I enjoy. As a young child, I spent much of my time in the summer with my friends, playing cricket, either in a field, if we could find one, or up against the side of a building, if all else failed.

Of course, as I got older my sports became more regulated by playing on school teams.

Although I joined the Boy Scouts, I didn't stay with them for long, because I felt that the time I was spending there, was time I was losing not playing cricket or rugby. It was the same with music lessons. For a very short period I took piano lessons -- mainly because I wanted to play Boogie Woogie! After about half a dozen lessons I was still doing scales, so I managed to convince my mother that I was never going to become a maestro, and therefore I should give it up. I now regret that my mother acquiesced to my wishes so easily, because I really love music, and would love to be able to play an instrument. It's one of my big regrets, and it was all my own fault.

Only in later years have I reflected on how I was brought up during those years. While I was not a demanding child, I was allowed to do most of the things I wanted to do. I don't mean I was spoilt, because as I said I wasn't demanding. Luckily for me, it didn't seem to have any really negative effects (others may not agree), whereas it could quite easily have been a recipe for disaster. I don't recall getting a great deal of direction from my mother, but that could have been because I was reasonably easy to get along with.

I honestly don't know. Nor do I recall my father giving me too much direction either -- but of course, I didn't see him that often.

I think the same goes for my brother too -- neither of us were trouble makers. Geoff was a much tidier person than I was in those days. I was always seen as the scruffy one. The change came when I went to sea.

I have heard from other people that my sister was spoilt by my father. I can't say I saw it when I was young, but she was certainly "protected" by my mother in later years. My mother was always concerned that Aileen was going to be left out of things -- whatever "things" were! It wasn't spoiling -- it was just a form of making sure that Aileen was not forgotten. In later years, even when Aileen was in her forties, she continued to make sure that she was included in everything, until the day Aileen died.

We were great moviegoers, or picture goers as we were called in Belfast. I can't recall how many times a week that we saw movies, but I recall going with my mother one night and with Auntie Flo on

another night. In those days you got your money's worth when you went to the "pictures." There were always two feature films, a newsreel, previews of coming attractions, and possibly a cartoon or two, such as the "Three Stooges." Occasionally you even had a live organist. There were none of these clinical multi-theatre complexes that are around today. Today, you are herded into the "box," shown the movie, then ushered out again as quickly as possible. In those days it was a full, totally enjoyable evening of entertainment.

At the start of 1945 the war was slowly winding down. We had the Germans on the run, and it was now simply a matter of time before it was all over. By May the war in Europe was over, and by August the war against Japan ended after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Now our own world was about to change again.