



Some reminiscences of Robert Dancy, born in 1931, and living at Hook Green on the Kent-Sussex border near Tunbridge Wells throughout the war 1939-1945.

(Written in stages between 2001 and 2009)

The start of the war in 1939 is very vivid in my memory although I was only eight. That Sunday morning I had been helping Mr. Woollett, who had a small farm near us, take a cow to the bull at Furnace Mill Farm, about half a mile away. This particular cow was a "jumper", and was most difficult to get to go in the direction we wanted her to go. She had a nasty habit of jumping over hedges and needed several people to drive her. Mr. Woollett would get us to help him, which was no problem, particularly as it usually meant a sixpence at the end of the job. On this particular sunny day, when we returned my father came out of the house onto the Green to meet us and told us the news. Although I didn't understand the full implications I realised that it must be a serious matter from the way that the grown-ups were talking.

Included here are lots of incidents, exciting to a small boy, and the impression might be gained that there were actions taking place all the time. Except for the Battle of Britain and the Blitz early on in the war, and the few months of bombardment by Doodlebugs in the summer of 1944, things were not so hectic. Life continued in much the same way, though after the beginning of 1940 austerity certainly reigned.

Soon after the outbreak of war, my father ("Pop") was made an A.R.P. Warden (A.R.P. standing for Air Raid Precautions) mostly because we had one of the three telephones at Hook Green. One of his jobs was to put a big red flag out on the corner of the fence in front of the shop when he received a call to say that enemy aircraft had been detected coming our way. This did not last for very long, because later on we had so many coming over that no one took much notice, and anyway we often saw the enemy when there had been no warning and conversely didn't see any when there was one!

Not a lot happened for months, as Hitler was much more involved in the conflict on the continent, and it was seldom that we saw any enemy aircraft. After the fall of France in May

1940, however, things changed and our life became more hectic. To a small boy of nine, exciting things were happening all the time. On the ground we always seem to have Army vehicles on the roads, despatch riders on their motorcycles, and often Bren gun carriers and, less frequently, tanks. On quite a few occasions we had a large number of troops arrive, put up tents on the green, camouflage their tanks and other vehicles, stay for one or two nights, then depart to some unknown destination. I think many of these events were when they were on exercises, getting used to travelling, setting up camp and then reloading and moving on.

In 1940 when the threat of a German invasion was very real, obstructions were put out in all the fields to prevent enemy aircraft from landing. Amongst the items in the field opposite us, on Hook Green Farm, was an old piano. This provided us with a lot of fun, as although it did not play very well with its keys we could at least use it as a harp, and before it finally collapsed in a heap of iron and timber we enjoyed ourselves twanging at the open strings.

In the air we saw more and more aircraft and we became very good at aircraft recognition. We were only about twenty five minutes flying time from the German airfields in Northern France, in a direct line between many of the airfields in France and London, so it was not surprising that we saw a lot of action.

Although we had a fair number of German planes over during the early summer of 1940 it was not until the Battle of Britain that we really started to see them in large numbers. It was a remarkable time, and seemed to last for much longer than a few months. Most of the major air battles took place in glorious weather when hop picking was in full swing. We had a "half-bin" in the home-pickers' set on Hoathley Farm, and being out of doors permanently from seven in the morning until about five in the evening missed very little of what was going on in the skies around us.

We saw waves of German bombers, Junkers 88s, Heinkel 111s and Dornier 17s, all in formation protected by Me 109 and Me 110 fighters. There would be about forty or fifty bombers, all close together, and around twenty fighters with them in a flight. Our own fighters, mainly Hurricanes, and less frequently, Spitfires, met them from a higher altitude, diving down out of the sun into the formations of bombers, usually shooting one or two down at the first pass and splitting the formations up, so that they could more readily pick off the bombers before the protecting fighters could engage them.

Dornier 17 bombers in formation. This was what we often saw during the summer of 1940, trying to get through to London.

