

Audio file

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Transcript:

INTRO:

You are listening to Their Finest Hour, a podcast from the University of Oxford.

Presenter (Dr Joseph Quinn):

You've probably been wondering, at what point are we going to share the stories? At what point are we going to start revealing this rich archive to our listeners and to our followers? Well, over the past few weeks, we've been receiving quite a lot of submissions and we feel that we really are in a position to start sharing these stories with you in great detail.

And we've got some wonderful stories - extraordinary stories that tell us a fascinating amount about how the war was experienced by people right across the United Kingdom. But I suppose what we would like to do is we would like to share with you some stories that are both extraordinary but also encompass the ordinary. Because many stories we are receiving tend to tell stories of normal everyday life – of everyday experiences, as they were experienced by people who went through the war, either as enlisted service personnel or as ordinary civilians on the home front.

So we have a variety of stories that we would like to share with you that encompass both the ordinary and extraordinary, the mundane and the simply fascinating and unbelievable. We want to start by sharing with you ordinary experiences - things that you would normally associate with the war but are extraordinary in their own right. And we're going to begin by sharing with you the story of Arthur John Pike.

We're going to start with the story of Arthur John Pike.

This is a story that was submitted to our archive under the title, "Memories of a Prisoner of War".

"My dad was a machine gunner who was badly injured whilst fighting in the Middle East. When the group he was with retreated, it was decided to leave the badly injured behind in the hope the German army would treat them. His Forte D who was uninsured, volunteered to stay behind to surrender. My dad was taken to hospital and ended up in a prisoner of war camp. He was forced to work in a coal mine and was again injured in an explosion. Until the day he died, he had tiny pieces of coal embedded in his face and body."

Our next story concerns the experiences of Walter Pullen, and is under the title, "Walter Pullen and the Canterbury Blitz of 1942".

"Walter Pullen was my grandfather. He was born and lived his whole life in Kent. He owned a garage for many years, when car garages were very rare in the early 1900s. I attached a photograph of him, taken in 1916, when he was 39 years.

In 1939, when World War Two started, he lived in Sittingbourne, Kent, and I think he was retired. He wrote poems and stories, and I have a collection of some of his writings. I am sending you one he named "Canterbury Blitz", which is his account of the Germans bombing Canterbury in 1942.

He gives an insight into the horror of war, and also an insight into how life went on despite it all. You can read in this account how Walter mentions his son Max, who was my uncle, who lived with them at this time, when Max was about 19 years old. Max was training to be an accountant, and after a night of bombings he still had to travel to London to take an exam. At some point, Max joined the RAF, and he was based somewhere near Dover where he was a radar operator and listened out for the Luftwaffe heading to England across the English Channel.

After the war, Max did eventually qualify as an accountant, and he died in 2017."

And this is an extract from "Canterbury Blitz", written by Walter Pollen.

From our lawn, and anywhere in front of the House, we could plainly see that Canterbury was being badly attacked by the Luftwaffe. The sky was vivid with the glow of many flares and the bursting of shells. A good few flares also appeared either from the guns or thrown out by enemy planes. There was little doubt that the attack was severe, and the Canterbury was the target. We wandered about around the house, talked to Mr. and Missus Lee for some time, and during the lull enjoyed a cup of coffee. To much relief we welcomed the all clear at 2:30 (a.m.) And so to bed. Max having to go down to London on the 10:00 o'clock train for his intermediate exam, it would be like that.

Anyhow, we all got up and carried on hoping for a good night after one of the hottest days of the year. Max returned at around 9:00 p.m. We talked, supped and so on until 11:00 o'clock, arranging for Max to be up and have his breakfast in time to catch the train for London at 06:00 o'clock.

Off we went to bed, and by midnight I should think we were asleep, although rather fearing a return visit of the raids. At 2:30 a.m., June 3rd, and so and so siren woke us, and the fun started all over again. The glare from Canterbury was so bad, and Jerry was evidently a bit tangled, for when we went outside we could hear more of his planes and the gunfire was closer. After one burst from Chutney, we heard one of those wailing screams that used to denote the falling plane during the Great Blitz. We afterwards heard it fell away to the sea over Sheppey way.

At this period, we had descended to our dugout. It was quite comfortable and the light there helped us make it so. We stayed there about half an hour. Max fell through the seat of a deck chair, and that may have hastened our exit. During this time, we found Mr. Leeson having a cruise around and Mr. and Missus Sheeter. Mr. Sheeter came in and had a cup to drink and it was while he was here that the light gave us its usual wink and the all clear. By that time it was nearly 04:00 o'clock, and as we resumed the angle of repose, a crowd of army lorries came to a halt, with engines running stretching from our corner far up the Woodswick Road. This prevented sleep and as the dawn was breaking, I could see from our window the activities which included the roar of

motorcycle traffic controllers, or whatever they are. None of us could rest, so Mother and Max got up again, got breakfast and prepared for his 06:00 o'clock trip to London with books, papers, sandwiches and all the etcetera's almost to the umbrella, which could only have been useful as a shade, for the day turned out to be another hot one.

So Max trooped away to his full day exam after two hours sleep, and a day full strain which I am inclined to think he will remember, for we shall not forget the night and mother was so tired that she went to bed in the afternoon to help get over it.

And that was an extract from "Canterbury Blitz", written by Walter Pullam. Walter Pullen's story was submitted to our online archive by his grandson, Robert G.L. Pullen.

Our next story pertains to "Italian farm labourers in Hampshire", and this story was submitted by Paul Beaver, author and historian, and it, in part, pertains to his mother's experiences of the war and in particular, act of kindness - a lovely act of kindness - that was bestowed by a talented Italian prisoner in tribute to his mother.

"During the Second World War, a large number of Italian prisoners of war were transported from the Western Desert to Britain. Many of these young men, who had been caught up in a war about which they cared little, were from the southern provinces of Italy; the agricultural areas.

During the war, my grandfather held a position in the Hampshire War Agricultural Committee as he owned and ran an agricultural engineering and contracting business. Amongst his claims to fame were the invention of the dimmer switch for hen houses which allowed the lights to be slowed faded down which did not worry the chicken (and hence egg production). The firm which bore his name was formed in 1922 and included a bus company (until it was nationalised) as well as early harvesting equipment which was contracted out to local farmers.

E Beaver & Sons was based in Kempshott, then a village outside the ancient Borough of Basingstoke, a market town between Reading and Winchester, now greatly enlarged and surrounded by roundabouts as part of the London Overspill Plan of the late 1960s. To make use of the Italian skill set of hard work and agricultural experience, especially after the country's surrender and change of sides in 1943, the PoWs were offered farm work and, I suspect, extra rations and some freedoms. My father, Norman, remembered they were hard and were very resourceful as many of them had lived off the land in Italy. They could source rabbits, hares, game birds and, of course, chickens. They were obviously homesick and the villagers of Kempshott-with-Dummer, took them to their hearts and tried to alleviate the pain of separation. There were parties, sing-songs and music nights in the huts which my grandfather had built at his premises in Pack Lane (now, of course, a housing estate).

The Italians re-paid in kind by sharing their rations which, in true British style reflected the Geneva Convention and, according to my father, were more generous than those allocated for civilians. My father had been injured in an incident in the English Channel in 1940 and invalided from his naval engineering work with Thornycroft at Woolston near Southampton; he went to work for my grandfather and, incidentally, joined No 6 Platoon, Hampshire Home Guard at the same time.

My mother, Olive had been evacuated from the Dibben Purlieu in the New Forest in 1941 and found herself in Kempshott where she met my father. When the Italians heard that she was to celebrate her 21st birthday, one of them called Giuseppe painted her portrait which I still have in my study in Hampshire. She had fond memories of the songs, the poetry and the gaiety of those

young men so far from home. She would always think of Italians and Italy fondly, and often wondered what became of them when at last they were shipped home in 1946.”

And that was from Paul Beaver, submitted on the 24th of March 2023.

With this submission, Paul also enclosed a lovely charcoal black and white drawing of his mother, a very fresh-faced 21-year-old gazing up with an adorable smile at the person who is capturing her likeness.

THEME MUSIC [White Cliffs of Dover]

Our next story is one of a number of stories that have been submitted anonymously by our participants. And it is important to note that you can submit your story anonymously without your name being mentioned or without any reference to your personal details being made.

The story is called “Mum and Auntie Kath's wartime service”.

“My mother Marjorie and her older sister Kathleen joined the WAAF as cooks in Coastal Command airbases. Places my Mum mentioned were RAF Chivenor, near Barnstaple, Haverfordwest West, Plymouth, and, at some point, they must have been Morecambe where the street photographer took the snap of them”.

And the street photograph was taken in Morecambe in 1941. Kathleen on the left and Marjorie on the right.

And looking at the photograph, you have two very smart looking ladies. Not necessarily identifiably sisters, but very pretty and beautiful, one slightly smiling, another person seriously faced.

The person with the serious face is the contributor’s mother and the person to the left is her aunt. And they're both uniformed, very smartly dressed on a street shop. And they looked very, very beautiful, but very purposeful.

And what's striking about the photograph is that although it's very dated and faded, and although there are crackles and lines here and there, and the wear and tear is showing, when you look very closely, it seems as though it was taken yesterday.

THEME MUSIC [White Cliffs of Dover]

The final story in this episode is a story that was submitted by a person called Jane Giffould, and the story is entitled “A schoolgirl growing up in WW2”. And the story is about her mother, Rosemarie Williams, as she was then known.

And what the story is, essentially, is it's a very short play scene where a bit of a dialogue is broken down. This is clearly a sort of a joke or a fable that was told within the family about her mother Rosemary's experience during the war.

And the scene is set at morning time at a school in Ilford in London.

Scene: Morning at a school in Ilford, London.

Head teacher: Rosemary Williams you are half an hour late. That is not acceptable.

Rosemary: But we are allowed to be half an hour late if there was an air raid.

Headteacher: There was not an air raid over Ilford last night.

Rosemary: The siren went at Woodford, where I live.

Note: this was a problem when sirens did or did not go off in different localities. Students were expected to get to school the next day but were allowed to be half an hour late if there had been an air raid.

At another time in the war, Rosemary was an evacuee down in Devon, where she loved being on a farm and riding horses. However, she had to return to London to do her matric (matriculation exam for leaving school). After school, she did TB nursing somewhere on the Suffolk coast.”

What you've probably gathered from listening to this episode, and, in particular, some of the stories featured within it, is that we have submissions with which are enclosed images of original photographs, we have documents enclosed with them and we also have images of items, objects of personal significance to the contributors that connect them and connect with a story in a very meaningful way - a war story concerning a member of their family.

And this is something often of very deep emotional significance. Take the portrait of Paul Beaver's mother that was drawn by an Italian prisoner of war on her 21st birthday. This is something that we cannot adequately convey within a podcast series, obviously. But it is important to note that we do have ways that we can share these images of physical heritage with you, and that will be through videos and that will also be through social media posts where you will see images of these objects, and we will share these with you over the course of the coming year. Our aim through the podcast is to convey mainly the stories.

And if you have any feedback about our podcast, and if you have any feedback about the stories that we are receiving to our online archive, and, in particular, if you have any stories that you yourself want to contribute, visit theirfinesthour.org and make sure to click the **SHARE YOUR STORY** button to connect with the direct upload facility, where you yourself can fill out an online form and submit your story from the comfort of your own home.

Thanks for listening.

OUTRO:

THEME MUSIC [White Cliffs of Dover]