

# It was as if my dream was a reality

by Melynda Jarratt

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ifty years ago this year, the crack pilots of the German Luftwaffe were dropping thousands of bombs all over England in what has come to be known as the historic Battle of Britain. Thousands died in the initial blasts, thousands more were injured - many severely - and the damage to cities and towns throughout Britain was devastating.

Those who survived the harrowing days and nights crouched in bomb shelters 50 years ago must be sad to see that with all our modern technology things haven't changed that much. For like the German air war over Britain, the US-led coalition of Allied air force bombing of military targets in Iraq and Kuwait has resulted in an untold number of civilian casualties. This week we bear witness to the cruel effects of allied bombing with the horrifying deaths of hundreds of helpless women and children who sought refuge from the incessant allied bombing in a Baghdad shelter.

Yet, the critical difference between this air war and the Battle of Britain is that the world knows very little of what is happening to the civilian populations of Iraq after nearly a month of persistent allied attacks. Under the cloak of censorship, reporters have become willing - or unwilling collaborators of the military propaganda machine. With the stroke of a pen, human casualties are translated into collateral damage. Meanwhile, the relentless cruelty of allied bombing continues with little or no complaint from the watching world.

This begs the question, what is it like to live through a bombing raid? Only those who have survived one can tell, and being that Iraqi survivors of Allied bombing are in short supply let's turn to the story of May Brockway of Saint John, New Brunswick. May survived the spectacular bombing of Clydebank, Scotland on March 13-14, 1941, in which more than 2000 people were killed.

At the time, May was a 21 year old clerk working in a clothing store in Clydebank, a large burgh and important river port located 9 km northwest of Glasgow. Today, Clydebank is well known for its Singer Sewing Machine factory and as a major shipbuilding area. During the 30s and 40s, the shipyards at Clydebank were among the largest in the British Isles and it was a Clydebank that famous luxury liners the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth were built in the 1930s. Because of its strategic ship-repair and shipbuilding yards, Clydebank was subjected

to intense German bombing raids, especially in March 1941.

May's story begins with a prophetic and disturbing dream that foresaw with spine-tingling accuracy the experiences which lay ahead.

She had the dream a few weeks before the German bombs started raining down from the skies over Clydebank. In her dream, she was walking down a dusty darkened road. On either side of the road were two burning tenement buildings, the flames licking up its high sides and casting an eerie glow onto her path. She continued walking through this unearthly landscape until she woke up, frightened.

She remarked how close the dream was to reality. "There were two burning tenements on each side, and I'm walking down this road, and it was absolutely true of the night that I spent because I walked down the street with the buildings burned and bombed on each side. It was just as if my dream was a reality."

Despite the war mentality pervading the world at the time, May was impervious to it all. She took life pretty easy, after all, she was only 21 and had a whole life to look forward to. Work, friends and family, those were the important things. And the cinema! The cinema was important too. So on the fateful evening of March 13, May and her workmate went by bus to Glasgow to a film. During the evening, air raid sirens went off but like the Glaswegians, accustomed to howling sirens, the two women didn't pay much attention and continued to watch the movie.

After the movie was over, she and her friend made their way out of the theatre and tried to get home by bus. Then cold reality struck. The Germans were bombing Clydebank. What should they do? It may seem odd, she recalls now, but her natural reaction was to head for home, to something familiar.

After some time on the bus, "It started to get really bad," she remembers. She and her friend were only able to take the bus about five miles from Clydebank when the driver refused to go any further. "You're on your own" he said to the pair as they began the long and dangerous journey by foot to Clydebank.

Once on the streets, the realization that they were in the middle of a bombing raid struck home. They could see the flash of the bombs and the dull droning of the planes as they flew overhead on their way to Clydebank, a few miles ahead. Curiously, despite the obvious dangers, they continued on their trek towards home, ignoring the bombs and the fires and the bright flashes lighting up the night sky overhead.

The pair continued on until it got so bad they could hear the sounds of the bombs crashing above their heads. "The aircraft and the noise was deafening," she explained. Gripped by fear and unwilling to continue any further in the danger, May took shelter in the basement of a tenement building nearby while her friend - a little more brave - decided to struggle on ahead towards home.

Her experiences during that night of bombing were hair-raising. Huddled in with strangers who were equally as scared, they heard a bomb fall close by. Later, at dawn, when the group ventured outside, they found that a theatre around the corner had taken the brunt of the bombing and was totally destroyed.

After leaving the shelter May struggled on home nervously until she arrived at what was left of her neighbourhood. Once there, she discovered that her parent's

and her brother's home were totally destroyed. Fortunately, her mother and father had evacuated to the countryside some weeks earlier because May's mother had lung problems and was finding the nightly trips to the air raid shelter difficult. May's brother and his wife too, were safely tucked away in their bomb shelter and had survived the firebombs which wiped out the neighbourhood that night.

"Their house was destroyed. Our house was destroyed... It was total devastation and when I was walking up the hill to go there, there was a crater, oh ten feet deep and we just had to go single file up and it was total chaos... One in three houses in Clydebank was destroyed. That was the great thing. We didn't really realize it. I stayed there all day, just picking up and confused and you know, and just wondering what had really happened."

Fearing another round of bombing that night, May and other survivors were evacuated to Glasgow by bus and truck around 6 that evening. It was a fortunate move because that night the German bombs were falling again over the ruins of the city.

Aside from the second night spent in Glasgow listening to planes fly towards Clydebank, this was the extent of May's bombing experiences. But she saw enough to know she didn't like it. She knew many many people who were killed in the two consecutive raids, one a neighbour across the street from her parent's home who was what they called a "factor" - a person who runs the town council houses and collects the rent. "I saw... when I went down to view our ruins that she (his wife) was standing out at nine in the morning with her two little children... her husband had been working at his office that night, and these buildings were totally destroyed and he never came home... He was buried alive in the buildings..."

Then there were the friends from school, family friends and the list goes on. "My friends, and girlfriends who I've gone to school with were killed. And whole families." May recalls a book she later read about the bombings and one vision stands out in her mind. "There was an old lady killed with her granddaughters. The whole building was destroyed. The poor old lady was clutching on to three hundreds pounds. They had just come out of the house and run for the shelter and she and her grandchildren were killed."

How May survived that terrible night of bombing on March 13 is a miracle indeed. Put yourself in her shoes and imagine the whine and moan of the bombs landing around you left and right, while the planes fly overhead and the city burns to ashes. Imagine the smell of fresh earth upturned by the force of the bombs and the cement boulders in the street, the greyness and the dirt, the ruptured gas lines and everything you know as familiar broken into a million pieces and scattered to the wind.

If you can, imagine what it must be like to live in the burned out shell of Iraq today and you will know it isn't a dream like May's, it is a reality. And reality - like war - can sometimes be hell.



"14th Street" by Jose. M. Pavon

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