

When The Sun Sets We Shall Remember Them

By Alan Miles ([email](#)) – September 2013

Maybe there are still a few people in Walthamstow who can vividly recall many of World War Two's events. Equally, and most probably there are men and women who tried to forget the horrors and carnage of war. These days amongst many of the troops returning from Afghanistan and also Iraq, there are those who will have lost limbs and of course there are those who have lost lives, and there are those that are still suffering, after witnessing the shock and terrors that is experienced in combat. Before I move on let's also remember once more the young gallant men and women who gave all and were brought home in coffins draped over with union jacks. Today, I feel a little jubilant, that this government have declined by democracy any involvement in attacks on Syria helping out once more the US government. Tony Blair and his cunning lying policies has left this nation with a deep distrust of politics and to an extent, disrespect for our military.

I would like to share with readers three cases of war heroes; two local men and an airman that lived in Camden before they passed-on to the higher realms. After the events of World War Two these men, suffered and had to live with, what we now call Post Traumatic Stress which once was termed 'shellshock'.

The first story is about one of these men called Ron.

I once knew a girl called Susan who lived in Browns Road Walthamstow and a couple of times; I called round to have a chat with her. I also got to know her Dad whose name was Ron. I got on well with her Dad who was an amiable and intelligent man. He worked as a gardener in Walthamstow and always on his own. He did some great work on the grounds in front of the Walthamstow Town Hall; he was truly a professional gardener. For many years I never saw Ron, but then on a couple of occasions, I met him in the street at Chingford. He and I can chat for hours and one day he told me this story. When he was working on the gardens, sadly every now and then, he went into a 'funny episode' which people could not understand. He had some sort of fit and would start punching into the air for no obvious reason.

Then one day the admiralty contacted him, inviting Ron to go and collect a medal for bravery. After all those years it came as both a surprise and a shock to hear from the admiralty. He went to collect his medal and it was a hugely significant date for Ron, and not just because he was given a medal for bravery either. Upon collection the Admiralty were able to explain exactly what had happened to him, and why he was left with the 'scars' (both emotional and

physical) that meant occasionally he had these 'episodes'. Such was the strength of Ron's amnesia he had absolutely no recollection as to what had happened to him. So in finding out what had happened to him and what made him have 'an episode' helped him to make sense of the condition that he was forced to live with, and offered some kind of relief.

The Admiralty explained to him, the terrifying event that he had experienced in the war and Ron went on and explained it to me. He was only 18 years old and he was a rating in the navy.

In those days the navy worked on fishing trawlers for laying mines in the sea and during the course of duty, low on the horizon and coming fast came a Dornier Bomber of the Luftwaffe which began to strafe. Everybody ducked for cover as pieces of debris and bullets bounced everywhere. It flew some way into the distance but horrifically it turned again and flew back at them. Ron was only 18 years old at that time, a crew member shouted out to Ron "watch-out". Ron grabbed hold of the triggers of a twin Lewis machine gun, which was their only anti-aircraft cover. As the aircraft lowly approached the ship strafing the vessel, Ron returned fire with his Lewis guns and just kept firing and firing. The Dornier as well as strafing, dropped a small bomb, hitting the prow of the mine. Of course the explosion blew bits and pieces everywhere, and a large piece of wood, hit Ron on the forehead and also the vessel began slowly to sink.

Ron back home, woke up in hospital not recalling much of anything, he had severe amnesia. In later years if someone was to shout out "Watch out" his reaction was to fire the machine guns, and he appeared as though he was punching at nothing.

Ron was finally remembered for his bravery. This condition afflicted Ron all of his life, I knew Ron very well and he was a lovely spiritual man, and a first class gardener.

The second story is about my Dad whose name was Jim who served in The Royal Dorset Light Infantry

Jim was a dispatch rider and he went into the army in 1939 and was demobbed in 1946 and his own words were he "was front line all the way". My father would walk along Winn's Avenue holding my hand when I was a very little boy, and if an aircraft flew overhead, he would quickly look up and say to himself out loud "It's Alright It's One of Ours". This was due to the fact that he served in North Africa in Tunisia, in the seventh division under Field Marshall Alexander. They were later replaced by the Eighth army, commanded by Field Marshall Montgomery. I can virtually remember his very words

"When we first got out there we were Stuka-bombed. I watched them fly above us in the air and one by one, they would peel off, strafing us and dropping bombs. The screaming of the Stukas was unbearable and all we could do was lay flat on the ground and hold our ears. But worse than that were the German heavy mortars. Each mortar was the size of a dustbin and it would fire six shells at a time. They would start up each morning regularly on time; you could hear them in the distance going 'boomph boomph'. Then you could hear them above us howling as they came down, this was the worst part, because as with an artillery shells, you could roughly hear them coming at you, and hopefully pass over head. But with the Mortars you couldn't tell where they were going to land, and when they landed, they blew up an area the size of a football pitch.

Later on they sent out to us Bofor guns, Hotchkiss machine guns and Pompom guns. When the Stukas came over, we watched the Bofa guns knock their tails off, watched them spinning and crashing to the ground. Then they sent some spitfires out to us, and they cleared the skies of Stukas. But then the Germans sent out ME109s which could fly very low and hedge-hop across the desert avoiding gunfire, and strafing and bombing us. We used to see the Spits come up from the rear, and watch them dog-fight in the sky with ME109s, and quite often we would see the ME109s crashing to the ground in flames. On one occasion we saw a man being carried out on a stretcher he was sitting up and punching in the air, shouting out 'Gunning them here gunning them there, gunning them here gunning them there'. He had been firing the Bofor Guns and they couldn't get him off the guns. He was Bomb-Happy which another name for Shellshock was"

These and other horrific memories after the war gave my Father bouts of depression and sometimes he would cry and hold his ears, as though he was still being bombed by the Stukas. I am sure he was suffering from 'Post Traumatic Stress' like so many others.

The third story is about a man called Henry Richard Leven known in the RAF as Dickie.

Dickie was a bomber pilot and joined 107 Squadron as a young NCO Pilot. By the end of the war he was a highly decorated Squadron Leader having survived some 127 daylight bombing missions. Some of his exploits in the War include helping to knock out the V2 launch sites, and he met members of the German High Command, like Ribbentrop.

Dickie was as vulnerable as the next man and woman in the war. After leaving the war he could not settle, became restless seeking truths and courting the unorthodox. A nature loving man who adored both the countryside and

seaside, he would take respite and retreat in order to try and soothe what he called his "shattered-nerve". His emotional and physical health bore the brunt of the cruel and pointless war in which he served, but his spirit remained free and indomitable. Depression, panic, impotence, sleepless nights and nightmares after the war was not uncommon to Dickie and to so many others.

He became a published author and poet and he drifted into work 'in the city', show business and the circus, and he appeared as a professional palmist on TV and radio. He wrote his autobiography which was published after he passed on to the higher-life, the book was called "My Flying Circus" which was a name aptly given to acknowledge his work both in the cockpit and in the circus.

Thankfully there are several charities which support victims and their friends and family, who are living with Post Traumatic Stress and recognise the huge impact that the condition has on people

Such as:

Combat Stress www.combatstress.org.uk

British Legion www.britishlegion.org.uk

Mind www.mind.org.uk