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Blitz Kids

Written by Sean Longden

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BLITZ KIDS

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For Sapper Arthur 'Paulus' Woodard,
a sixteen-year-old 'boy soldier' at Gallipoli, 1915.

To my parents, Roy and Margaret Longden,
whose memories helped to inspire this book
but who did not live to see its publication.

And to all the staff of the Primrose Unit, Pilgrim Ward
and Godber Ward, at Bedford hospital,
who cared for my parents between February and April 2011.

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Preface

'a war of unknown warriors [in which] the whole warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers but the entire population, men, women and children.'

Winston Churchill¹

So many times we have heard or read the story of children in the Second World War. Yet so often that story starts with the painful wrench of evacuation and goes little further. There are the stories of gas masks, of rationing, of separation, of loss. The traditional version of events tells us about the struggle of the nation's youth to combine schoolwork with collecting scrap metal, or working alongside their parents on allotments to grow their share of desperately needed food. That version of the story casts the children as observers to the conflict and the incredible changes it caused to British society.

But in that story there is something missing. The sadness and separation endured by the evacuees, and the terrible sufferings of the children of the blitzed cities, are only the beginning of the story. What about the thousands of other youngsters? Those whose parents refused to allow them to be evacuated? Those too old to want to be evacuated, yet too young to be conscripted? What of those who were active participants in war?

Theirs is a forgotten story.

As an historian who believes in filling the gaps left in the traditional telling of history, for me the wartime experiences of British children and teenagers was fertile ground. My aim was to uncover the tales normally told to friends or grandchildren, yet seldom collected by

historians. I had no intention of writing another book about babies crying as they were placed inside gas masks or of tearful evacuees, when there were the tales of teenage sailors – some as young as fourteen – enjoying the pleasures of New York still waiting to be told. Their experiences of shopping for the latest American fashions or queuing to watch Frank Sinatra perform offer a perspective on youth in wartime that had been ignored for far too long.

For thousands of young Britons, war meant independence – from their families, their homes and their schools. It meant a fundamental disruption to their education, leaving them to enjoy – and exploit – their new-found freedom. Or it meant leaving school to work in armaments factories, earning high wages and enjoying the fruits of their labour. It was a period of taking pleasure wherever it could be found – regardless of bombs and bullets. As such, for this book, I wanted to rewrite the story of Britain's children and teenagers, to tell the story of those who were not just observers of life in wartime Britain but active participants in the conflict.

Prior to starting this project, I already had some idea of the independence offered by war. My father's story of leaving school (or more correctly, not bothering to go to school for his final year) and starting work earning a man's wage aged just thirteen had given me some idea of how war allowed children to grow up. I had not expected to discover that the small market town that was his home had also been the source of a significant proportion of the infections of American servicemen with sexually transmitted diseases. When I uncovered documents from a criminal case naming boys who spent their spare time watching the nightly antics of the local girls and American airmen on the town's riverbanks, I discovered the voyeurs were my father's contemporaries – boys living in the streets around him. Such details encouraged me in the pursuit of these forgotten stories.

Embarking on this project, I also thought of the story of my own grandfather who, as a sixteen-year-old boy had gone to war in 1915 and suffered serious wounds fighting in the Middle East. So many times the experiences of the underage volunteers of the First World War have been publicized. Surely, now was the time for the experiences of child soldiers of the Second World War to receive similar exposure. These days, when we think of 'child soldiers' we inevitably think of the

recent stories of children forced into African militias, sacrificing their childhoods – and often their lives – in some bloody civil war. Yet this is not just some Third World phenomenon. The pension queues and British Legion parades are full of our own one-time child soldiers whose story should never be forgotten.

As with my earlier books, I wanted this story to include the first-hand testimony of participants. Wherever possible I wanted my interviewees to be telling their story for the first time. And so began months of driving up and down the country to visit those who wished to tell their tales. Fortunately, I soon realized that I had already collected the stories of a number of underage volunteers during my research for earlier books. Some of the stories included in this book are of veterans interviewed for my first book, *To the Victor the Spoils* (published in 2004). At the time I had not examined the significance of their having joined the Army while underage. Fortunately, I was able to go back to some of them to get further details of their experiences prior to being in battle.

This made me realize that there must be many more veterans, from the Army, Navy and Royal Air Force, with similar experiences. And so I searched for the teenage boys – some as young as fourteen – who falsified their birth certificates to join the Army between 1939 and 1945. I soon realized that those who gave false ages were not alone and there were many youths who legally served under the age of eighteen. I had always thought that the Royal Navy's use of boys barely into their teens had gone out with the sailing ships. Prior to commencing my research, I did not realize that fourteen-year-old boys had served as buglers on battleships during the Second World War. So I tracked down former 'boy sailors' and Royal Marine bugle boys, the survivors from among hundreds who paid the ultimate price for their service at sea. Whilst many of their contemporaries were still at school, they had faced submarines, torpedoes and kamikaze attacks.

Now was also the time to remember the teenage boys that served in the Merchant Navy, who, in the nation's darkest hour, helped keep the United Kingdom from starving. Such job titles as 'Laundry Boy' or 'Pantry Boy' may not have been glamorous, but their jobs were vital and – to me, at least – a far more interesting element of the story of wartime children than stories of evacuees. The response from the

veterans who answered my appeal in the Merchant Navy Association's newsletter showed they were eager finally to tell their tales of lifeboats, shipwrecks and Arctic convoys. It soon became clear that the veterans of the Merchant Navy still feel their wartime sacrifices have been neglected. Once I had come to appreciate the scale of sacrifice, I realized there must have been boys in the merchant fleet whose ships were sunk and who were subsequently held in prisoner-of-war camps. Therefore, I uncovered tales of boys who spent most of their teenage years in the misery of German camps.

That the contribution of these boys had been forgotten was something I noticed whenever I spoke with veterans. So often during my research I spoke with men who told me that in later years people had queried their 'war stories' and membership of veterans' organizations. They have spent years answering the challenge 'you were too young to have been in the war!'.

Soon it became clear that, in the midst of a total war, there were thousands of children, of all ages, whose endeavours were vital to achieve victory. From the Boy Scouts, who unloaded ambulances at hospitals, to the Girl Guides who assisted the victims of the Blitz. From teenage boys using what they had learned in the Army Cadets to help train the volunteers of the Home Guard, to the valiant messenger boys of the fire service. In an era when youths are so often criticized, it is refreshing to uncover stories of teenage girls who were awarded medals for their courage during the Blitz. It was an honour to meet the man who, as an eleven-year-old evacuee heading to the United States, had been decorated for heroism after the ship he was travelling on was torpedoed in the mid-Atlantic. Nowadays, it seems unthinkable that fifteen- and sixteen-year-old telegram boys were sent to deliver messages telling families of the death of a loved one. To listen as a former messenger recounted tales of breaking the news to bereaved parents, then waiting to see if there was a reply to the telegram, made me realize the 'stiff upper lip' had never been stiffer – nor was it the preserve of the gentleman.

On a darker side, I also wanted to write about those who were emotionally scarred by a wartime childhood, and so searched for those who had experienced the full horror of the Blitz. Thus I heard tales told through a mist of tears as survivors of the Bethnal Green tube station

disaster recounted their memories, just yards from the spot where they had endured unbelievable trauma.

I also wanted to give a voice to the ‘villains’ of the period, those children who turned to crime to support themselves through the lean years, or the teenage girls who – lured by the bright lights of London and captivated by the glamour of men in uniform – fell into a life of prostitution.

What follows is the story of children and teenagers growing up in wartime Britain. It is a story of immense courage and sacrifice. It is the story of children who were forced to grow up amidst violence and horror: children who watched their world turn upside down. They were the bombsite boys and girls.

They were the ‘Blitz Kids’.

Introduction: London, 1930s

As the crowds gathered, so too did the local children. There was the black van with loud speakers fitted on top, surrounded by rough-looking men, all dressed in black. Maybe an orator was giving a fiery, heartfelt speech, or some martial music was playing, attempting to rouse the masses into action. Flags filled the air, black flags emblazoned with a symbol that meant nothing to the watching children. But they knew what the demonstration meant: trouble. From their vantage point perched on top of the wall, they could listen to the rhetoric and hear the cheers and jeers of the assembled crowd. Other flags appeared on the fringes of the crowd, clenched fists were raised in the air, voices chanted.

The children waited, all knowing what would come next. Suddenly a missile was thrown from the crowd, a punch, a surge, banners waving, flags falling, trampled under jostling feet. Gangs running at each other, a swirling mass of violence. Screaming women and shouting men. The sound of breaking glass. And on the walls, smiling children, non-partisan but urging on the fighting crowd.

And then whistles, the clatter of horses' hooves on the tarmac, swinging batons, a surge of blue-uniformed men striking at anyone in their path, clearing the street. Black shirts and even blacker bruises; red flags and red blood on the streets. A violent sign of the political divisions tearing Europe apart; a spectacle for the local children. Another day, another Blackshirt rally, in London's Bethnal Green.

Watching the spectacle was young Alf Morris and his schoolmates. This was just a couple of streets away from his house in Prospect

Terrace, so he could run home quickly if the trouble got out of hand. Born in 1930, this was his area. Life was hard, times were tough, but Alf was happy. He could run in the streets, play in the park behind his house. That his parents were working hard for little reward meant little. There was food on his plate, mates nearby and all his family was in the area.

But then life began to change. Whilst the radio spoke about distant troubles – what did the rise of a man named Hitler mean to a schoolboy in Bethnal Green? – real troubles appeared in his own neighbourhood. Whilst some adults concerned themselves with political crises, Alf and his mates could watch politics acted out on their doorstep.

When they used to march, they'd come through Bethnal Green. On the way past, they'd smash all the windows of the Jewish shops. The police tried, but they couldn't control it. As kids we didn't realize what it was about. We'd just see it, we didn't understand it.

Morris and his friends would sit on walls around a street corner where demonstrations took place:

We'd be watching the fights, shouting, 'Go on, hit him!' When it got out of hand the police were ready – they put police horses across the road to keep people away. And when it got really out of hand they'd charge. We'd look at the police and egg them on. It was fun for us kids, but it was serious – although we didn't realize it.

One night they were watching a fight when the action started to come closer to where they were sitting:

We got up and ran. Behind them were police officers on horses with batons drawn, who started to knock people down. Me and my mates ran along and a big man grabbed us and put us into the porch of a house and put his body in front of us – so the horses missed us.

Once the danger had passed, the man shouted at them: '*Go on – go home! Bloody fools! Go home.*' The boys made their way home reflecting on how it had been fun – a violent and bloody spectacle, but fun nonetheless.

What Alf Morris had seen was mostly from organized groups – communists, Jewish groups, trade unionists – opposed to Oswald Mosley and his supporters who intended bringing the ways of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy to the streets of Britain. But one night it was not the opponents of fascism who voiced their defiance. The Blackshirts were strong in the area and wanted more than to listen to speeches, flex their muscles and fight in the streets: they wanted to take real action. Their attempt to dominate the area was witnessed by Alf Morris. A crowd of Blackshirts gathered in his street and began threatening the Jewish family who lived next door: ‘They tried their utmost to belittle these people. They filled the street and stood there calling at the Jewish family, “You Jewish bastards” and so on.’ This was different to the demonstrations and street fights – things the local men often ignored or avoided – this was a deliberate attack on a local family. As Morris watched, the men of the street came out of their houses and confronted the Blackshirts: ‘My dad was out there, the men from across the road were there. Some of them were veterans of the Great War – they were very hard men.’ In no uncertain terms, they told the Blackshirts: ‘Do yourself a favour and go. We won’t mess about with you. There’s no one here to protect you. Now you go!’

As the boy watched, the Blackshirts turned away and walked off. It was the defiance of everyday people who had defeated them. Within a few years, the entire country would stand defiant to the same threat. The attack would be bloodier and more violent, but the defiance would be stronger. For what lay ahead was a war in which the children of Britain would witness horrors they had never imagined, and go from being spectators to being active participants in the heroics, endurance and sacrifice of a nation at war.