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We Are at War

Simon Garfield

Chapter One

THE HOLIDAYS

'At the National Gallery we decided to move every picture out of London to various places of safety. We chose places in the west of Britain which were not at all likely to be bombed and which had big halls and rooms where all the pictures could be arranged in such a way that we could inspect them easily and see that they were not coming to any harm.

We decided to take the pictures there by rail rather than by road because it really is much smoother and more certain. The only difficulty was that three of our biggest pictures would not go through any of the tunnels, even if slung quite low on the lines on what is called a well-waggon, and to meet this difficulty a member of our staff who is a mathematician thought of that old idea which used to be such a nuisance to us at school, called the theorem of Pythagoras, and he constructed a case by which these big pictures were tilted slightly on their side and the upright part of the case was just low enough to pass through all the tunnels.'

Sir Kenneth Clark on the BBC Empire Service, 29 August 1939

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23 August 1939 Germany and USSR sign non-aggression pact. 25 August Britain and Poland sign a Mutual Assistance Treaty; British fleet mobilises. 1 September Germans cross border into Poland and annex Danzig; the start of the black-out and civilian evacuations from London. 3 September Britain, France, Australia and New Zealand declare war on Germany.

THURSDAY, 24 AUGUST 1939

Eileen Potter

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Evacuation officer in west London, age 41

The outbreak of the crisis finds me at Stratford-on-Avon, attending the summer school in folk dancing, and working for the advanced examination in country dancing. Unlike some of the students, I read the paper every day, and am not unprepared for the development of the crisis.

I notice territorials on the way to the station with kit, and think our turn will come soon. In the evening I go to the Memorial Theatre Conference Hall for an evening of folk singing and dancing. Someone says, 'There is a telegram on the notice-board.' I look and find it is for me - 'Report at once for duty.' Return to my digs and decide to travel by the first train next morning. I pack, arrange a taxi, and then return to the Conference Hall and cancel my arrangements for taking the exam. By this time dancing is in full swing and I decide to stay and finish the party, feeling rather like Drake playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe.

FRIDAY, 25 AUGUST

Eileen Potter

Leave Stratford by 7.32 a.m. train. A still, misty, peaceful-looking morning, very few people travelling. I arrive at Paddington at 10 a.m., leave my suitcase in the cloakroom (after being searched for possible bombs) and proceed to my office at the London County Council [LCC] nearby. I find my colleagues drinking tea and talking. Our instructions are to 'stand by' for evacuation work.

SATURDAY, 26 AUGUST

Eileen Potter

Spend the morning and early part of the afternoon standing by. I have my hair shampooed and set, not knowing when there will be another opportunity.

MONDAY, 28 AUGUST

Eileen Potter

Report for evacuation duty, together with six of my colleagues, at the Divisional Dispersals Officer's office, Kensington. One of us has a car, and is kept on duty for messages. The rest of us do office work and interview helpers who have volunteered to escort mothers and babies to the country. A man on the staff appears to be somewhat overexcited by such a sudden influx of female colleagues, and makes facetious jokes, and something is said about alleged complaints about his language and behaviour. We all feel, under pressure of work, that our language is becoming stronger and our manners less polite.

TUESDAY, 29 AUGUST

Pam Ashford

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Secretary in coal shipping firm, Glasgow, age 37

In the office a certain amount of 'merriment' prevails in regard to first-aid equipment, gas masks, incendiary bombs, etc. (like the 'We shall all do the goosestep' attitude of 1914). People regard gas masks askance.

The public morale is immeasurably higher than at the black points in the September crisis last year. Mr Mitchell (my boss), who has been spending a holiday at Millport, returned today, which is a day earlier than he was due. He believes the war will last 10/20 years. Miss Carswell openly says 'she has the wind up'. Everybody else agrees that if we show Hitler we are afraid, he will press his point. Noon dialogue between Miss Bousie and me:

Miss Bousie (about 55): In the back of my mind I feel it won't happen. It is too colossal. I woke up last night at three and had such a lovely feeling of calm.

I said: Strangely enough I am not suffering my nerves as I did [during the Munich crisis] last September.

Miss Bousie: I was calm then, but I have had the jitters this time.

I: I have a religious kind of feeling. We must put our trust in God.

2.30: Mr Mitchell on returning from the Exchange announced that 'everyone at the Exchange expects war. It is needed to clear the air.'

I showed Mr Mitchell the carbon of a letter I typed to my Dresden friend on Friday. Ostensibly it consisted of a description of the way sporrans are made (she asked me about this once). I signed it, 'With fondest love, your affectionate friend, Edith.' I added a postscript asking her to give Mr Mitchell's best wishes to Herr Jacob (her boss). We know enough about Herr Jacob to know that he has a cosmopolitan mind and dislikes the intense nationalism in Germany today.

On the way home I bought an electric torch and battery, and looked at stuff for ARP [Air Raid Precautions] curtains for the dining room. It would cost at least £1 to darken. I think I will wait and see what happens.

Eileen Potter

Two of us lunch in Kensington High Street. It is a lovely day and everybody is going about their normal business, wearing summer frocks and looking very calm. Somehow the thought of war seems far away, and we joke about the evacuation, saying what a waste of work it will be if it never comes off.

WEDNESDAY, 30 AUGUST

Eileen Potter

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Slightly increased pressure. There has been a rumour that evacuation is to take place tomorrow, but this is definitely denied later in the afternoon.

Pam Ashford

I was so tired that I slept heavily from about 11.30 till 5.30. It is strange that although I am a victim of insomnia generally, I have never had an entirely sleepless night over this crisis. From then till 7.30 thoughts of defending our home against fire were running through my head. In the ante-room between the bathroom and the hall we have shelves stacked with hundreds of old periodicals. I think I will remove them to the cupboard in the dining room.

The boats that we are loading at Glasgow are to sail, although many charters have been cancelled. Thirty Glasgow 'puffers' (boats of 110-120 tons) engaged in the Glasgow/West Highland trade have been commandeered to take supplies to those parts for the Government. I am mystified to know what supplies the Government can want to send there.

Absent-mindedness and poor memory seem rife. All the morning Mr Mitchell has been asking me questions, the answers to which would normally have been quite well-known to him. Mr Mitchell and I both find the same thing, that the strained atmosphere has upset our sense of time. An hour seems like a day, and a day like a week. The month of August seems to have lasted for decades.

Afternoon: calmness prevails everywhere. Miss Gibson who has charge of the bookkeeping for our depot at Govan says that people are not stocking to any remarkable extent. Sandwich-men wearing tin helmets and respirators are parading the streets advertising that ARP wants volunteers.

It is said that the Government schemes for evacuating children are much hindered by parents changing their minds. Those who said they would look after their own arrangements now want the education authorities to take their children away, and vice versa.

Mr Mitchell came back from the Exchange (2.30) confident that there will be no war, pointing out how unnecessary it was. He spent most of the afternoon trying to dissuade me from my policy of stocking household requirements.

There is no doubt that the tension is subsiding in the City this afternoon. Everybody is saying the same thing: 'There won't be a war.' Personally, I think it is premature.

After work I bought a second electric torch and battery, and told the assistant I was setting up everyone in the house. He advised me to bring all our old cases along quickly, as battery supplies are to be rationed.

I then went across to Arnott-Simpson's and examined the ARP curtains. Certainly the material could be used for other purposes if it got left on one's hands, but no-one would voluntarily wear black lingerie. Passing Craig's I saw tins of SPAM (a ham preparation) and bought two tins, thinking it would be a change from the corn beef

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Mother has been stocking. They have banana butter there too, and I will buy in some tomorrow as a substitute for butter.

I visited the ARP Shop in St Vincent Street and asked for a pamphlet telling one how to protect a Glasgow flat. They gave me the four Government pamphlets that have already been sent out by the Post Office. They are useful up to a point, of course, but not full enough for my tastes.

I went up to Annette's and bought a bargain frock (red silk) at 8/11. If war comes I don't want to have to give a thought to clothes from the start to the finish.

On reaching home I found Charlie (my brother) thought the war was off, and that Mother was perfectly confident and wants to start using up her groceries straightaway. My evening was spent dissuading her.

THURSDAY, 31 AUGUST

Eileen Potter

Go to the North Hammersmith Treatment Centre, where a lady doctor is in attendance for minor ailments. Only about three children turn up, and we spend most of the morning discussing the situation, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. The dentist arrives. He was shell-shocked and wounded in the head in the last war and has been unstable ever since. He delivers a long harangue on the subject of war in general, making many self-contradictory statements and getting into a very excitable state. The doctor, nurse and I do our best to humour him and calm him down.

One child is brought in suffering from toothache: he is sent away to a nearby centre where there is an opportunity of having the aching tooth extracted under gas today. I go to a nearby restaurant for lunch, and stay to listen to the one o'clock news bulletin. I hurry back to the office, guessing that something is in the wind. On my table I find a note to the effect that the evacuation will start tomorrow and asking me to be at East Acton Station (where I am acting as Assistant Marshal) at 7.15 a.m.

Arrive home rather late, to find (not to my surprise) that my landlady has decided to evacuate to friends in Somerset. Her son has hired a car and will drive her down tonight. She goes to the house next door but one, after consulting me, to ask if they can give me a bed there, as I do not wish to remain alone in the house, especially if there are no dark curtains, and the black-out is imminent. They agree to do so, and I am glad, as I know that the wife is very kind and the husband is an Air Raid Warden, so I feel that I shall be all right there. I go to my new quarters at about 11 p.m. and go straight to bed. At about 12 I hear voices calling under my window. It is my friends calling goodbye. They hold up the cat in his basket to say goodbye also. I stand at the window, watching them get into the car and drive away.

Pam Ashford

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In general I am avoiding the newspapers as unnerving, for I want to keep my brains clear for other things. I get the 7 p.m. wireless news, and that does me for the next 24 hours. I don't listen later than that for to do so would assure my sleep being disturbed by nightmares. At the week-ends, however, I read carefully the Sunday Times, Sunday Observer, and Commander Stephen King-Hall's newsletters, also some miscellaneous matter (I like the Oxford Pamphlets on Foreign Affairs).

The department in which I work (exporting) is, of course, the one that ultimately will be most hit. Many of the trawlers that we normally bunker are at Grangemouth Dockyard being fitted as minesweepers.

Afternoon: hope of a solution is rapidly declining, and tension rises every minute. Glasgow schoolchildren are to be evacuated tomorrow.

After work I made a purchase of electric torches. Notice the gradation: on Monday I bought a 6d torch and spare battery; on Wednesday, a 1/6 torch and battery. On Thursday two 1/9 torches plus one battery and two spare globes. Yesterday Mother got a spare battery for her torch.

I then went along to Massey's and bought three tins of new potatoes and 2lb of sugar. I also bought at Craig's four 6d jars of butter substitutes (grapefruit butter, lemon curd, apricot curd, banana curd).

FRIDAY, 1 SEPTEMBER

Eileen Potter

Arrive at East Acton Station at 7.15. I am put on telephone duty. The station is a small one, with a narrow, wooden platform reached by a flight of wooden steps. At first, ordinary passengers arrive for the trains, but the station is theoretically closed to the public at about 8 o'clock. The first evacuation train is timed for 8.15. The children from the nearest school begin to arrive considerably before then. They march up in good order, accompanied by teachers and helpers and all carrying kit and gas-masks. The elder children of a family help the younger ones along. Some of the mothers and fathers come to see them off, but have to say goodbye at the station entrance as there is no spare room on the small platform. All are cheerful looking - hardly any in tears - but I feel rather a lump in my throat myself at seeing them all going off so cheerily.

Many of the children attend the treatment centre where I normally work, and I recognise a good many of our patients. The head teachers are also known to me, and several of them come and shake hands and say goodbye. There is a general feeling that they may all be coming back next week.

Christopher Tomlin

Writing paper salesman in Fulwood, Lancashire, age 28

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The first thing I remember is the arrival of evacuees in Broughton. Four girls left a motor-car and what 'things' they were! Dressed in 'old clo' man coats, dirty, common, the last kiddies in the world for an 'aristocratic' spot like Broughton.

In spite of the shock the evacuees gave me, I'm afraid a lump rose in my throat when one girl asked nervously, 'Can't I stay with my sister?' She was told, 'No, you go there, and she will be across the road. You will be able to see her every day.' I was sorry for the girls because they were so forlorn. They must miss their mothers, or at least I hope they do. We must not shut our eyes to the fact that some parents are delighted to have their responsibilities carted away.

Pam Ashford

Mr Mitchell and I discussed the psychological effects of the evacuation of the children. If they are away long, the mixing of the different classes will have a marked effect on the rising generation.

10.30. Phone message that Danzig has been taken. People are not ready to accept this message till it is authenticated.

11.30. A friend phoned Mr Mitchell saying that on the wireless it is said that 'Warsaw has been bombed, Danzig taken, Gdynia vacated; Poles retaliating.' News received with consternation, but also with calm. 'We are in the war now all right,' was the general comment.

By noon the bills and newspapers proclaim the bombing of Polish towns. Intense but subdued excitement prevails everywhere. At lunchtime I bought two small bottles of sal volatile.

Mr Mitchell said, 'Hoarding is now illegal. This will put an end to your little game.' I said, 'After war is declared I shall buy nothing, believing the goods in the shops should go to those who are too poor to have laid stocks in already. Just at the moment I am hanging between two decisions: one, that buying is patriotic foresight, the other that it is a dirty form of hoarding.'

3 p.m. Miss Carswell (a timid nature) says if anyone offered to let her put her head in the gas oven, she would do so. It is better to die than to be tormented. Miss Crawford (far from timid) is sick of all these scares, and would not mind dying and getting out of it. I said that I shall hold on to the bitter end.

Miss Bousie on returning from lunch: 'I saw some of the children going away. They were such dear little mites. No one could object to taking them in.' There was general sympathy. This is a big improvement, as for weeks past I have been hearing from all quarters complaints, and you would really think that the prospective evacuees were the most awful individuals. Mr Mitchell and Mr Hutchinson get their children in tomorrow.

The papers make it look as if Italy is not going to support Germany. There are pronounced feelings of elation. Many humorous comparisons are being made

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between the present and 1914 when Italy stood out till she saw which side was going to win. Tributes are also paid to Signor Mussolini's common sense, etc. It was 4 p.m. before anyone noticed that we had all forgotten to change the calendars from August to September.

In the afternoon we heard that six children ranging from six to eleven had arrived at our Managing Director's house in Carluke. They are from Tradeston, a working class district with much slum property. Mr Ferguson, who likes children and is believed to wish he had several of his own, is delighted about it. He has bought camp beds and blankets and says that to fit the children up has cost him pounds. His own little boy (13) is delighted at the prospect of having companions. Ian is a typical, wealthy, only child; brought up by a governess and now at private school. It will be his first encounter with the raw material of humanity.

The whole town seems to be buying black paper and about every sixth person is laden with a roll. The buses and trams are running with only headlights. The balloon barrage is up. I reached home just as the wireless was beginning to report Mr Chamberlain's speech.

We listened to the news. The calmness with which I (with a long history of nervous breakdowns) am going through this crisis is a revelation. During the last twenty years there has never been a time at which fear was so quiet in my mind as it is at this moment. Yet I still have a deep-seated and long-established dread of pitch darkness. I don't know how I shall cope with that. I always sleep with the blind up to see the street lights shining throughout the night. How glad I was that there was a full moon for the first night.

SATURDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER

Tilly Rice

Mother, living in Port Isaac, North Cornwall, evacuated from Tadworth, Surrey, age 36

We arrived down here for our annual holiday on August 26th. My husband had thought it advisable to put the trip forward a week, partly on account of the international situation and partly on account of the possibility of there being a railway strike. This, in view of the fact that September 2nd, our original date, was to be taken up with the wholesale evacuation of school children from London and other danger spots, proved a very wise decision.

We arrived to find that there were little or no signs of crisis. There was a distribution of gas masks going on in the village, and people tended to congregate in groups about those cottages that possessed wireless sets.

Two parties of women-folk with their children arrived the same Saturday as I did with my two. They seemed to be more alive to the crisis than the others. Two had husbands in the Bank of England who had been evacuated and one had a husband in the reserves who had been called up. I myself felt removed from the war at first, but

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as things have intensified these last days, have felt an urge to be back in the thick of things.

There has been practically no sign of hysteria, excepting on the part of the maid, a village girl who, upon the calling up of her young man, was rendered prostrate with hysterics for a day.

Christopher Tomlin

The dominant thought today is: the Government knew war would come, thank goodness the children left in time.

All my customers realised things were as bad as could be. I had a dull thud in my stomach all the time. The crisis last year was bad enough, but here was another. But now everybody says Hitler must be taught a lesson.

My work day is 5 to 6 hours long (non-stop). I work every day but Sunday: no half-days at all, and canvassing is damned difficult at times. My work day would be two or three hours longer if Father wasn't here to conduct the booking, costing, mail and packing departments. There is much more to my job than filling in an order book.

Eileen Potter

On duty at East Acton Station again. The evacuation of school children continues according to plan, except that again there are fewer than expected and we get them off more quickly. We have one casualty, an elderly teacher who faints on the platform. There is a rumour that Hitler has declared war on Poland, France and Britain. I think that this does not sound like his methods, but have a vague, uneasy feeling.

Work at the office is even more hectic than before. Owing to the worsening of the situation, it has been decided to sandwich the third and fourth day's evacuation programme into one day, and this means a good deal of alteration in the train schedules, instructions to voluntary helpers, etc. We all work late at the office.

I lie awake in bed at night hoping that Chamberlain is not going to back out of his pledge at the last moment. Distant thunder can be heard, and the lightning flashes almost continuously. Presently the storm bursts right overhead with great violence and deluges of rain. I lie still in bed pretending that it is an air raid, and practicing feeling brave, but am not very successful.

Pam Ashford

At Boots' at 9 o'clock I bought two very small torches for handbags. That makes three small torches, one for each of us. Climbing the stairs at night will be a trial. I also bought two hot water bottles, for these went into short supply in the last war.

Uniforms are prominent. The policemen have on tin hats, and are much pitied by the public who think they must be most uncomfortable. The certainty of war seems to

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have a quieting effect, after the fever that the uncertainty of the last ten days induced. The improvement in public morale since twelve months ago is conspicuous; also the unity of purpose. This morning Mr Mitchell, with me as 'boy', set to work to darken the office.

On the floor below is a lawyer who arranges marriages and there are such a lot of couples getting married. This is considered stupid by everyone in the office, but for different reasons. Miss Carswell says, 'The girls will lose their jobs and their "pensions" will never keep them.' Miss Bousie: 'There is enough misery in the world without getting married. And they are all so young that they will change their minds quickly and then it will be too late.'

Mr Mitchell told me of the preparations he has made for the four children who are to come to him today. He says he and Mrs Mitchell will give them the same as their own two children, but it simply can't be done on 8/6 each per week. He will be out of pocket. The cessation or diminution of coal exporting will affect his income; he may lose his job, he says. I think that is super-pessimism, for Mr Ferguson's department is to bunker minesweepers and surely Mr Mitchell can help them.

After work I went to Massey's, for Mother had asked me to get three more tins of new potatoes. I had to stand half-an-hour for my turn and decided to increase the order to six tins of potatoes, three of baked beans, half a pound of coffee (vacuum packed) and half a pound of sugar. Massey's are not allowed to sell more. I went into town. The Exhibition of the Princesses' Dolls (given by the French nation last year) was closed. It opened last week.

Wireless on all the evening. If the youth of fifty years hence should ask me how I reacted to the tremendous events of today, I expect I shall 'remember' hearing the announcer's words. But the truth is I only listened with half an ear. I am desperately anxious to get our house arranged in such a way that we can best handle whatever may arise. For some time past I have been collecting big tins with tight-fitting lids and I have been begging Mother to put all the groceries at present in cardboard boxes into tins, partly as a protection against mice, partly as a protection against damp, and partly as a protection against gas. Mother, who is a Sunshine Susie, does not expect any of these troubles.

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