

# **KINGHORN IN WAR TIME**

**by**

**NELLIE PHILLIPS**

The church service on Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 was held at an earlier time than usual so that the congregation could return to their homes in time for the Prime Minister's broadcast on our radios at 11am.

Everyone knew that war was imminent but most of our parents were of the opinion that it would be over in a few months. But as we listened to Mr Chamberlain's sombre tones and he announced "I have to tell you that from this time we are at war with Germany" we realised it would be a long fight.

We had heard the siren on the town hall roof wailing out its warning in practice but minutes after the Prime Minister's speech ended the siren screeched out in earnest. We were glad when the all clear sounded very soon afterwards. We learned afterwards that it was a solitary Nazi plane which had sparked the alert in its attempt to bomb the Forth Rail Bridge.

## **The Leather Works**

That first Sunday at our house was used to perfect the blackout system. Fortunately the leather factory had a big stock of thick black paper used for the dispatch of animal hides. Dad made big frames for the 10 foot high windows in the house and offices and tacked on the paper. If the frame wasn't right up against the window the ARP warden would knock at the door and say there was a chink of light.

Dad also had to set up a fire watching station in the factory with a rota for all the workmen to do fire watching duty after their work shift and overnight.

However an even more urgent priority was the requisitioning of the old Billet. The Billet was occupied throughout the 1914-18 War because the "Powers that be" thought that the gun battery could be attacked from the rear of Kinghorn. I remember Dad telling me that at that time the army made rifle holes along the long brick built factory by taking a couple of bricks out every few yards then using the patent leather hides piled up for the soldiers to man the posts. Mr Cameron, the owner of the factory, was reputed to have received substantial compensation for the destruction of his stock. During the 1914-18 War my Dad was in a reserved occupation because the leather was needed for horse harnesses and saddles. Anyway, once again the Billet was requisitioned because it was listed in War records and once again a company of soldiers was housed in the leather works. The lives of my sisters and many other Kinghorn lasses were greatly changed with the arrival of all these soldiers.

The painted flags with which the 1914-18 soldiers had decorated the Billet were covered with a couple of coats of whitewash. Bunk beds were installed by Pioneers (dogsboddy soldiers) who also erected a row of latrines and a canvas covered row of hand basins along the base of the platform where, at one time, the trains came into the factory. The company kitchen was made from rows of bricks on the platform and here large dixies of water, porridge, spuds, stews etc were cooked over open fires. And at night, when the fires were doused, it was not uncommon to find soldiers of the "Dandy 9th" Royal Scots in their kilts getting a true warm-up astride these fires before battle dress arrived for them.

Did you ever wonder why the officer carried a swagger stick? Well, when my sister and I peeped through the curtains to watch morning reveille the stick was used to flick the kilt to see that the lads were properly "dressed" underneath! What an eye-opener for us. If my Mum had known the tricks we got up to we would have been in serious trouble.

But back to the cookhouse - Louis the cook had very limited experience as the company were territorials (part-time soldiers with other full time jobs) and he had only cooked on week-end camps. One day he made a dumpling. He combined all the ingredients together then put the mixture into a huge cloth before sticking it in a dixie of cold water before lighting a fire beneath. The resultant mix was inedible with the men ending up using it as ammunition to pelt Louis with.

So Mum said that the next time he wanted to make a dumpling he should come to her. Sure enough some time later Mum lit our stone wash boiler, scalded a sheet and with the men mixing the fruit, spices, flour etc for her she then cooked the huge dumpling all day. It smelled wonderful. When the "Dandy" Ninth returned, ravenous, from their manoeuvres and shooting practice at the butts up at the Rodden Braes and the Binn they had big mugs of tea and huge slices of a perfect dumpling in their individual dixies - the large rectangular tins used for all their meals during the war.

The word requisition was a word heard a lot in Kinghorn at the start of the war. The old British Legion hall opposite the town hall was requisitioned to be used as Siren Headquarters and the ambulance service station. Part of the Mill, now a garage, was requisitioned as was Abden House, the old poor house and Providence House, the Church of Scotland holiday home.

Thankfully the school was not requisitioned this time unlike the earlier war when my eldest brother and sister had attended school in the church.

While all this was going on the Billeting Officer decided to allocate a Lieutenant Wark to stay in our house. He was installed in Mum's best bedroom after moving Mum and Dad's bed into the sitting room and putting their huge wardrobe in the hallway. We even had a visit from Lord and Lady Wark to see where their son was living.

However this arrangement proved too inconvenient for our family particularly as we only had the one bathroom. So it was decided to house the officer down in the main village. In his place 4 bunk beds

were put in the room and 8 sergeants lived in the house - they used the latrines!

My sister, Dot, made great friends with these men but I was at that time still too young. However as the war progressed I was allowed to go to the concerts and dances in the Regal Hall and I soon got the measure of the flirt and would ask to see their pay books before I dated them to make sure they weren't married. Sometimes they would try to get close by telling the girls they were going on embarkation leave but it would turn out they had been posted to a spell of duty over on Inchkeith. I did enjoy growing up amongst them.

When the severe snow came, the billet at the leather works was condemned when the men woke covered in snow blown under the old roofs. These men were eventually sent to France and came out through Dunkirk. I often wonder how many survived.

The billet then became a workshop to make flying boots. Workers were employed from Kinghorn and winter saw the locals all well-shod.

## **Down in the village**

The usually quiet life of the Royal Burgh of Kinghorn speeded up somewhat when the defence of the Firth of Forth was dependent on the link between the guns of Kinghorn and those on Inchkeith. At first the big 12" gun was so fierce that the houses in Pettycur Road and Rosslands Place had to open their windows when the gun fired to prevent them breaking. However very soon the big gun was replaced by six 6" gun sites round the headland at Rossness and where the Villa Attena, now is. Some of the foundations can still be found around that area but mostly they have been built over.

There is still a listening and searchlight post in the garden of the old barrack building in Pettycur Road - the only part of the old barracks remaining is the glass topped wall at the entrance to some modern houses. There were 5 searchlight posts: Grange Hill overlooking the

golf course where a house was later built; Pettycur Pier where you can still see the foundations on the pier; Ross Ness; Crying Hill and at Salmon Cottages. These lights criss-crossed the sky above the Forth to give the troops command of the defences.

There were also listening posts manned by the Signal Corp one of which was at the golf course. It was not until a long time after the war finished that we learned that my sister, who was an ATS sergeant in the Signals, was part of the team reading enemy messages picked up by these and other listening posts throughout the country. She trained hundreds of listeners in morse for the service. The messages picked up were sent to Bletchley Park for decoding.

### **Air raid shelters**

There were several air raid shelters for the public in Kinghorn. The largest was the rail tunnel from the leather works, under the Port and coming out at the back of the health centre. I remember being in it when it was packed with dancers from the Regal Dance Hall and off duty soldiers all keeping the fun going. There was another down at Pettycur for off duty soldiers and another at the Loch.

Most gardens had Anderson shelters with their round corrugated iron roofs. One can be seen still in a garden in Strathmore Street.

I remember one very bad raid when we were in our Anderson shelter, having tea using a primus stove, when a bomb landed on the golf course opposite the house - yes, the golf course came right over the hill at that time! Next day when the bomb disposal squad came to de-fuse it Mum made the lads a cuppa and I asked if I could climb up and touch the bomb so that I could say I had touched an enemy bomb and lived.

The other defences in Kinghorn included tank traps at the top of Station Road and one outside the school. These were 6 feet deep concrete structures with a staggered way through. Then Italian and German prisoners of war were used to erect posts all along Pettycur

Beach so that gliders or planes could not land. The bases of these posts can still be seen here and there on the sands.

The Home Guard was formed from butchers, bakers, boat builders and others. They were ably drilled by an ex-major and Sergeant Birrell.

There were canteens in both churches where men could meet at night for tea and chat. My sisters were both volunteers at the canteen. DOT had to give this up when she was called up to the ATS. We had a great leader in Kinghorn and ex-major Julian, our head-master, who organised local volunteers for the ambulance rota, siren attendance, gas mask distribution and boys runner service which took messages to the listening posts, the search lights or wherever. Everyone was used at some time. When the Major organised siren duties, one man who was not too bright wanted a job, so he was put on the roof of the town hall and told to watch for a flight of aircraft and to then set off the siren if he saw one come up the Forth. However the poor soul switched the siren on when the search lights picked up a flight of sea gulls.

Major Julian got the task of issuing gas masks which everyone had to carry at all times. As a teenager I remember using mine as a handbag. My Dad got me a scrap of leather so mine was rather posh with its leather shoulder strap. Mothers had to carry masks for babies and there were "Mickey Mouse" ones with two eyes for older children.

The Major organised some of the men of the village to erect a brick passage in the school playground. Straw was set on fire inside the passage and people put on their gas masks, went in one end, through the smoke and out the other. This gave us an idea of what gas would be like. I don't think other villages got this service.

## **Poles**

When our infantry soldiers had finished training they were sent abroad. Then Polish soldiers arrived in Kinghorn. They were mostly

officers and so colourful and well-mannered. Each house was inspected by the billeting officer to see if one or two could be housed. Most houses in pre-war Kinghorn had let a room for summer visitors so they used this as a basis.

How the local dances brightened up! Plus great concerts, good singers and musicians. Our local dancing teacher married one of the soldiers and soon had a smashing polish dance group. Miss Masterton and her aunts embroidered lovely new coats, bandanas and headwear. The men wore knee length boots and wielded axes and knives in their dances. I still have a book of music with costumes for different regions of the large country of Poland.

The first Polish officer we had in our house was totally unsuitable. However he was followed by a lovely couple who, on my marriage, presented me with a Polish silver heirloom which I still have. Unfortunately I have forgotten their name and which part of Poland they were from.

## **Called up**

I have decided to include these further reminiscences as an example of the experience of one Homer's part in the war effort.

On reporting at the temporary centre set up for recruiting personnel I was given medical tests and was fortunate in being given the option of the Forces or munitions. I remember my Mum and Dad were horrified I had chosen munitions. Their fear was that I would be sent to fill bombs and my skin would turn yellow with contact with high explosives. But I was willing to take my chance on this after my elder sisters told me enough about the ATS to convince me I didn't want to go there. To my delight I was sent to Ramsay technical College in Edinburgh for training in aircraft engineering. We were given coupons for train and tram fares and travelled daily to the College.

On arrival the first day we were issued with overalls. My ample rear gave us all a laugh as I struggled to find a pair that fitted. We were

also told to put our hair in turbans before being shown into a large workshop. We were handed spanners and screwdrivers and told to take this dirty old bike engine to bits and clean all the parts in a large paraffin tank. Afterwards we were given stuff called Swarfega to protect our hands and multi-coloured cotton waste which was a shredded mixture of rags. At times we even got rubber gloves.

Certain days were set aside for classroom learning where the technicalities of engines were taught. I remember chanting "Sook, Squeeze, Bang, Blow" meaning Induction, Compression, Fire and Exhaust - the basis for the working of the petrol driven engine. Very slowly we progressed to car engines. How important we felt when we got a big motor torpedo boat engine to dismantle.

However 2 mates and I made our biggest faux pas when we had to pull a crank case onto a trolley and take it outside onto the main road and round the back to a hose point. We got it out the College but in struggling it onto the road we managed to get the trolley wheels stuck in tram lines stopping all the trams to and from Portobello. The tram drivers eventually helped us clear the way but berated us before telling us the trolley should be hauled NOT pushed like a pram. It took so long it was no wonder the instructor thought we had absconded. There was lots of laughter at our expense when the rest of the class learned what had happened.

I was amazed at the class work arithmetic and calculations on micrometers and depth gauges. Luckily I found this quite easy. On completion of the course I was sent for by the principal. I thought I was going to be told I couldn't go into aircraft repairs. However it was to ask me if I would consider becoming the first female aircraft engineer as I had shown such aptitude for the course. However I declined and in time I was instructed to work in Donibristle I soon found grinding pistons for crank cases too boring - as was all the repetitive work. I became an inspector testing for metal fatigue on engines and looking for cracks in components by immersing them in hot oil then covering them in chalk which then showed up the cracks and also using iron fillings. I was good at spotting corrosion and must have scrapped loads of components because of this. One cannot take chances with aircraft engines and our reconditioned



ones went out as good as new. I finally left this service with the rank of air engine inspector when I married my airman husband, Victor.

At the end of the war Kinghorn finally got back to normal. The huge nisson hut site became private houses; the Pettycur battery gun sites also became available for houses as was the site at Queen's Crescent.

Peace was restored to Kinghorn but, to my mind, it started declining and became a dormitory town for the bigger cities around.

*Nellie Phillips*