

We Are At War: Extract from Chapter 1

Thursday, 24 August 1939

Eileen Potter

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 7.32am train. A still, misty, peaceful-looking morning, very few people travelling. I arrive at Paddington at 10am, 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

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

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 brought two tins, thinking it would be a change from the corn beef 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 7.15am.

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 11pm 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

In general I am avoiding the newspapers as unnerving, for I want to keep my brains clear for other things. I get the 7pm 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

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 [smelling salts].

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.'

3pm: 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.

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 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 Action 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 brought 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 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.

Sunday, 3 September

Christopher Tomlin

An announcement by the Prime Minister to be broadcast at 11! I went to 11 o'clock Mass. During Mass, as the priest went into the pulpit, an altar boy walked

from the altar to the presbytery and returned with a note which he handed up to the pulpit. The priest took the note and said, 'I regret to say the inevitable has happened. We are now at war with Nazi Germany.' He delivered an excellent address. He exhorted us to pray for the dead Poles, and the dead Germans who were no longer our enemies. We must have charity and try to love the German people who were betrayed by wicked men.

How glad I was when the service was over. I expected an immediate air raid and knew we were for it if the bombs dropped on the church. All the day I felt crushed or enveloped in an invisible menace.

Tilly Rice

This morning everyone, barring three of the children, stayed in to hear the ten o'clock news bulletin. And everyone seems to think war is inevitable. This is a reverse of the feeling that was prevalent yesterday when the BBC announcement that the Germans had *not* invaded Poland, but were confining their activities to bombarding certain towns from their own territory, seemed to encourage a general feeling of optimism.

I myself have felt all along that the war would possibly be averted at the last moment. I have felt that Herr Hitler must break soon, that internally things are beginning to seethe uncomfortably and that if he doesn't do something to provide his sorely tired people with something in the way of fireworks, he's finished anyhow. I've felt too that his hand is being forced by those surrounding him, particularly Herr von Ribbentrop, whom I regard as a greater menace to peace than the Fuhrer himself. But I haven't felt swayed by the alternate waves of pessimism and optimism that affect those round me. I've felt that we must dig our heels in and not get rattled or panicky. That we must determine to face up to whatever is coming and that it is a point of honour for those who are not actively involved in this horrible struggle to carry on as usual as nearly as possible. I don't find that point of view reciprocated by the women who have come down here with their children for safety, but I think that with a little persuasion they will adopt it. Now I shall leave any further entry until after this fateful 11.15 news bulletin that we are all hanging about the house waiting for.

Later: We all sat round the wireless set in silence. Even the children were quiet, and after the Prime Minister had made his affectingly simple statement, no one said a word. We all sat there for some moments until the national anthem was played, then, still in silence, each got up and went up to their own rooms.

Eileen Potter

On duty at the station again. Mothers and babies are being evacuated today. At last all are safely got away, with no casualties. One of the voluntary workers has brought a portable wireless set in her car, and we sit in groups on the steps outside the office listening to Chamberlain's speech on the expiry of the ultimatum in Germany. For about the first time, I feel in agreement with the greater part of what Chamberlain says.

After the speech, instructions are given about air raid warnings, etc. Hardly have these finished than the sirens begin to sound. We wonder whether it is a practice, but decide that it must be the real thing. We scatter about the building

in small groups. I go to the basement, where I have previously been working, with about four others. Some of us try on our gas masks and adjust straps. Somebody puts up the shutters. We sit there keeping perhaps rather self-consciously calm and cheerful. My predominant feeling is one of admiration for Hitler's thoroughness in timing the first raid so accurately. When I afterwards find out that it is a 'wash-out' I feel rather disappointed in him. I do not really think that the Germans will get as far as Kensington the first time.

Early in the afternoon I am sent for by the chief and told at a moment's notice to go to Guildford with an emergency party of evacuees. A voluntary helper takes me in her car to the school from which the party is starting. I find them gathering in the playground, a miscellaneous collection of mothers and babies and unattached children. I am not quite sure whether I am supposed to be the leader of the party or not, but I march them to the nearby Underground station, assisted by a boy of about 12 who says, 'We must all pull together in these times, mustn't we, Miss?' A father, seeing my LCC armlet, puts two small boys into my personal care, saying that their mother will be able to join them the next day and asking me to find a billet for her. They are aged six and four. They are very good, the only untoward incident on the journey being the dropping of a halfpenny under the seat.

Pam Ashford

I spent the morning in bed as usual, though this time very busy writing out my shorthand diary for yesterday. What I have been doing during the week has been to keep a notebook [for Mass-Observation] in Mr Mitchell's sanctum and whenever the chance arises I have jotted down a new paragraph. Then I type out the notes as occasion offers.

I got up at 11.40, so as to hear the 12 news. Charlie and I heard the announcer tell us that we were at war. We sat there with our attention riveted. Mother would not listen to the wireless, but just stayed in the kitchen getting dinner ready. She has a wonderful spirit but I think she has really been shaken up badly. In my own case Commander King-Hall has been preparing me for months past, whereas it is barely ten days since Mother realised that such a thing was really a possibility. Charlie is splendid. This crisis has made us all realise how much we mean to one another. I am thankful that today is a Sunday. We have been let down more lightly than if we had had our work to think of.

We have had our meals at the same time. Then there has been the usual Sunday ironing and mending for tomorrow. It has been just like an ordinary Sunday, but all the time there is the thought, 'This is the last of the ordinary Sundays.' It is now 7 o'clock. I am just going out for a walk, and unless something quite unexpected happens there will be nothing more to put down for today. This has seemed such a long, long, long day.