

## EXTRACT FROM PRIVATE BATTLES CHAPTER 1

**THURSDAY, 31 OCTOBER 1940**

**Maggie Joy Blunt**

*Metal factory worker living in Burnham Beeches, near Slough, age 31*

The winter is here. It seems to have come so quickly. Yesterday I found the dahlia leaves blackened by frost and I lifted and stored the tubers and cut the remaining flowers. They are in a vase now in front of me: their delicately crinkled petals spread in perfect circles of pale colour. I didn't realise dahlias were so lovely. What shall I be doing and feeling, and what shall I have done and felt, by the time those tubers bloom again ...

**SATURDAY, 2 NOVEMBER**

**Ernest van Someren**

*Research chemist in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, age 37*

Jean R. came to see us. We sat and talked most of the afternoon and evening, largely about incidents in London. She has just moved from an old house very near a railway to a steel and concrete block of flats. She told us about a woman having a bath in Kentish Town whose house was damaged by a very close hit, so that her bath slid down into the street without spilling the water or hurting her in any way. It was dark too.

**MONDAY, 4 NOVEMBER**

**Pam Ashford**

*Secretary in coal shipping firm, Glasgow, age 38*

At 2.45am the alert woke me up, but I went to sleep again, and did not hear the all clear; this is said to have gone at 3.50. I have been surprised by the changed attitude so many people are showing – they stayed in bed. Familiarity must be one factor, and I should think the cold nights another.

My friend Miss Whittan was 'phoning London friends this morning and they reported that last night – the first for 56 nights without an alert – was so quiet as to be 'eerie'. There they were in their shelters expecting something to happen and nothing did. The ears get used to the noise and then quiet keeps one awake.

Miss McKirdy has heard of a house that was bombed in London, and immediately the salvagers began to go all over the debris looking for a pair of pink corsets. The owner had £2000 sewn in and had not happened to be wearing the garment at the time the bomb fell.

**Ernest van Someren**

Up early for Jean to get a coach back to work. A good post, letters from my brother and bro-in-law in RAF and a note from my mother with some ham from my sister in USA. Tony, my brother, has been moved from Scotland to Lancashire to a RAF

training camp where he is allowed to do some consultant work as a psychiatrist, which he had hoped to do.

During the day a parcel arrived from Tessa with assorted sweets and two pairs of nylon stockings. After we had sampled the sweets we found a letter saying that they were for Esmee and her two boys. We sent on the rest of the sweets the next day.

In the evening wrote diary and letters. It was fairly noisy.

### **Maggie Joy Blunt**

Heart of my heart! It seems six or seven bombs have just fallen outside my back door. I heard a plane and then zzzoom! zzzoom! zzzoom! – one after the other. I felt the ground shaking and dived for the table. We have had bombs at H Corner which destroyed two council houses and the landmine in the Beeches but nothing as near as this. What damage now is done? I heard the soldiers stationed in the woods shouting ‘Lights! These people aren’t blacked out at all!’ But it’s not easy to keep a slither of light from showing now and then. The times I have pulled and tacked and padded my black-out.

The silence now ... and the darkness! Outside never was such a dark night and that one plane swooping from the clouds, dropping its bombs without warning ... I have heard no siren ... In this quiet, withdrawn spot it is the unexpectedness of such an event that is so terrifying. I would rather be in a town and hear the barrage guns.

## **TUESDAY, 5 NOVEMBER**

### **Pam Ashford**

I am told there has been an increased demand for pianos – people are having musical evenings at home and canteens want pianos. And of course there are munition workers with big packets of money that they want to spend, despite the appeals of the War Savings Committee.

## **WEDNESDAY, 6 NOVEMBER**

### **Pam Ashford**

Nowadays I look at [my brother] Charlie’s *Herald* before leaving for work and today there was a post in a shipping company advertised. It might be an opportunity and I have replied. Nevertheless Mr Mitchell has always been so good to me that I would be dreadfully unhappy leaving him. Today I have been reduced to copying a directory so as to look busy!

Mother went to a whist drive at Marie’s church this afternoon, and found herself with quite a different class of women from her English Society and its friends. Partick is, of course, a shipbuilding area and the members of the church seemed to be in that swim. These women were all saying what terribly long hours their husbands worked, how worn out they are, and how much they fear for their health. One man got home at midnight last night and had to get up at 4am.

There’s something terribly wrong with the way the activities of the nation are organised. Shipyard workers pressed like that, and people in commerce longing to do something and not being able to find anything to do.

## **THURSDAY, 7 NOVEMBER**

### **Ernest van Someren**

In the evening took Laurie [three-year-old son] out to see a neighbour, as he had not been out all day. He surprised me by identifying a car in the dark as Mr Randall's, by the sound of its engines (it's a 1926 Clyno). We were caught at neighbours by a warning, started home but turned back when there was gunfire near us. L was slightly but definitely scared, I carried him a little way back and he said, 'Panda doesn't mind the bangs' about the pet he was carrying.

### **Pam Ashford**

Mr Hutchison has lent Mr Mitchell a book called *The Martyrdom of Poland*, presented to him by the Pole who is billeted at his home in Biggar. Mr Mitchell declines to let me look at it on the grounds that it would shock me, and keeps on reading out atrocities to show me that that this is the case.

People are contrasting the winter that they anticipate and the winter of last year. Last winter was one of the healthiest on record, thanks to people getting extra rest in the evenings. This winter we anticipate the ailments associated with damp and frost. I have not, and I should not be surprised when figures come to be told if we don't find out that the air-raid casualties fall short in number of the number that get 'flu, measles, diphtheria – and possibly worse illnesses.

There is a story going about that Lord Haw Haw has said that tonight Glasgow is to be razed to the ground.

There seems a general opinion that old people don't take the air raids so seriously as younger ones. They may even think that sudden death is better than years of senility.

Ten days ago the BBC said that carrier pigeons were to be rationed and it made me a little anxious about canaries. When the war broke out the Ministry of Food announced that the Government would let neither man nor beast go hungry, but all the same we have kept half a stone of seed always on the premises. I enquired from my dealer today of mixed canary seed, but loose there is none, and he does not know when there will be any. All he knows is that the Government have clapped 50% on the price, i.e. from 6d a pound to 9d. Of course, I would never think of my bird in terms of money like that, but I bought a packet of bird seed and it looks the same as what Dick has always had. What does make me savage is that ever since his quarrels with Mr Ross's bird in June he has refused to sing a note. At first he had the excuse of moulting, but now it is either sulks or laziness.

## **FRIDAY, 8 NOVEMBER**

### **Edward Stebbing**

*New recruit stationed in England, aged 21*

Roosevelt's re-election seems to have been taken for granted and as nothing much happens in Greece there is not much comment about that either.

The popularity of strip tease ... Tonight the theatre was more crowded than before, people standing at the back and at the sides all through. The show was entirely altered, and if anything better than before, but more daring and sexier too. Posters invited one to 'See the lovely lovelies'. The strip tease act appealed to me because there was as much emphasis on the tease as on the strip. The artist digs at the audience were amusing because true.

### **Ernest van Someren**

I went to town instead of to the works, and I left at about four and did some shopping. With great difficulty bought a beret for L, had no idea small boys' hats were so rare until I had to hunt for one. Then I went to a music shop and bought a recorder in a synthetic plastic for 5/- (intending to sell it to a friend) and some music on approval. I was rather depressed by the mess around Oxford Street. Went home on the 5.10 train which was very full. I sat on a ledge in the guards van and played the recorder most of the way, after asking the guard if there was any regulation against it.

### **Pam Ashford**

Miss Smith was saying that Reginald Foort is in jail for communicating with the enemy – he selected his tunes on the organ in such combinations as to convey messages. I said 'That yarn has been fastened to nearly every regular broadcaster by now!' My scepticism was brushed aside, and people are going to watch the BBC programmes closely to find out if he appears again. Then it is said that in Parliament questions were asked about the German wife of a BBC announcer. I myself had sometimes wondered why he does not read the news nowadays, but I never hit on that notion.

Mr Mitchell is feeling ill today and says he has 'war nerves in the stomach'. Miss Bousie says, 'So have I; so has everyone; this continuous strain is more than human nature can stand.' My observations would not bear out that 'everyone' has 'war nerves in the stomach', though naturally I can only speak definitely of myself, and my experience is that the stimulating atmosphere of war has benefited my health, with one or two breaks – such as the Collapse of France – when the strain has made me sick.

Laughing I said, 'This is Friday – the Germans' favourite night', but it transpires that Mr Ferguson on leaving had said just the same and thrown half the women in the office into the depths of despair. Miss Bousie: 'That terrible sound!' There seem to be lots of people who find the siren an unpleasant sound. Perhaps if we lived beside a siren – as Mrs Wallace does – we should think so, but at a distance I can't see anything unpleasant about it. I am sure that these people project their own feelings on to this quite inanimate object.

I was terribly shocked at 6 to hear that Mr Neville Chamberlain is dangerously ill. There are few things that anger me so much as the way he is sneered at in so many quarters. While there's breath in my body I'll stand up for him.

## **SATURDAY, 9 NOVEMBER**

### **Ernest van Someren**

It was rather a noisy evening. We live on one of the naturally defined routes into London (the Lee Valley) and often hear planes flying over even when there is no gunfire or bombing until they get nearer to town.

### **Edward Stebbing**

Soldier comment on Chamberlain's illness: 'That's it, you old b—, die.' Another soldier: 'Why, is he ill?' Reply: 'I hope so.'

## **SUNDAY, 10 NOVEMBER**

### **Pam Ashford**

I learnt of Mr Chamberlain's death with deep sorrow, mingled with indignation at the abuse that has been thrown at him during the past two years. Mother, Charlie and I have not as much in common as you may find in some households, but in this sorrow we are at one. Mother has been saying, 'There is not a soul in the nation will not grieve. There won't be so many grieve at my passing.' I can't set down how deep is my respect for the late Prime Minister.

The bus seasons are up to 3/6 now, and one is limited to four journeys a day.

## MONDAY, 11 NOVEMBER

### Edward Stebbing

Had a letter from home. My sister says 'Aren't you glad Roosevelt got in? We all are, for we do know how he feels about things and I'm sure he will help us all he can.'

Observed the two minutes' silence, but only thought how futile the last war was and how futile this one is. Reluctantly bought a poppy.

Of four papers read today, only the *News Chronicle* seemed to be sincere in its comments on Chamberlain. The *Daily Mail* and *Daily Sketch* seemed to be making desperate efforts to whitewash him.

### Pam Ashford

Mother says that the grocer boy, aged about 15, asked the time when he came to the door at 10.55 so as to observe the silence. Surprised, I said, 'There is no silence this year.' Mother herself was moved and on her own observed the two minutes, during which she was thinking of a picture in one of the newspapers two or three years ago. I remember it too for its extreme beauty and pathos – a farm labourer, alone, with bowed head, in a field. I myself feel that in these days we have increased reasons for remembering those who fell in the Great War.

Mr Chamberlain's death has touched many people. Miss Carswell said that on the bus yesterday two girls sat saying they were glad he was dead and abused him and Mrs Chamberlain terribly. Mr Mitchell has been saying, 'He was too much of a British gentleman to fight gangsters,' and Miss Bousie is praising his home life and good character.

### Ernest van Someren

At work had a warning a bit before 11, went to the shelters, came out before 11 and forgot the two minutes' silence for the first time in many years.

At home I had supper early and typed an article afterwards (technical, commissioned and overdue) and after the news [my wife] Kay copied out and made a fair copy for me to send off, from which I hope to earn 3 guineas for Christmas presents. We have decided to give only to relations and children and the household – not to friends at a distance this year.

## TUESDAY, 12 NOVEMBER

### Maggie Joy Blunt

The bombs fell in the gardens of houses about a quarter of a mile from the cottage. Glass broken but no one hurt.

Spent the weekend with Stella and Paul in their new house in South Mimms. A romantically charming place – parts of it very old – but awkward, cold and uncomfortable. SS is sharing with them – she is as pro-Fascist, cynical, unstable,

depressing as ever. Yet not without charm and a good deal of intelligence. She and P and S seem inevitably of the stuff of which Fascists are made. The way they talk makes me feel sick. They delight in counting up the bomb craters in London, and nosing out new damage. They ignore the miles and miles of untouched streets, the buildings that have escaped destruction ... I still feel that they would rejoice to ... see German military might supreme and the Fascist idea of socialism established in Britain. But I may be being unfair to Paul. Should like to have a discussion with him on his own ...

### **Pam Ashford**

On the way into town this afternoon a passenger beside me asked how to get to St Enoch Square, and as that necessitates alighting at the same stop as I use, I promised to put him right. He is attached to a ship (not the Navy), and was in London (apparently between two voyages) last week. He said that at 3pm the children began to queue up to take their places in the shelters. 'It was pitiable. There is no part of London that has not had some damage by now. There is broken glass everywhere.' He stayed beside St Clement Dane's Church and used the crypt as his particular cover. He was crossing the road to enter it when the bomb fell on the church and damaged it severely. He evidently appreciated its beauty and felt the loss. He went to see a Dutch church in Leadenhall Street and found there was nothing left of it at all. I said, 'Well you will be able to get some sleep now you are in Glasgow.'

## **WEDNESDAY, 13 NOVEMBER**

### **Pam Ashford**

Those people who take tea umpteen times a day and always with heaped spoonfuls of sugar are taking the rationing system badly. Agnes says that there is no sugar left from this week's ration, and she will have to buy a sugar substitute at a health food shop (pills called Sugarettes). She ended her dismal story with, 'I never thought I could come to this. I always thought we should get at least enough sugar.'

Agnes came back from lunch with the Sugarettes, still declaring that she never thought she would fall so low as to eat chemicals.

One thing we do use at home is biscuits. Perhaps it is because there is no economic basis to our housekeeping, and everything is on labour-saving lines. We have only one course at lunch, with coffee and fancy biscuits to follow. Supper: biscuits and cheese; Charlie breakfasts off Butterette biscuits; my Saturday lunch consists of Healthy Life biscuits nibbled in the darkness of the cinema. A year ago I laid in large stocks which I let go down as the shops always seem to have plenty, but it has been a deceptive plenty. I went to Cranston's this morning (a shop that normally carries a very large assortment) and there were only plain biscuits on the premises. After work I got some chocolate biscuits from Cooper's.

There was a time when everyone who could listened in at 1. Mother and I still do, but our continuance would seem rather the exception than the rule. Today we happened to have the set still on at 1.10 when the news of the naval victory came through. How thrilled we were. Returning to work I saw crowds reading chalked notices on Sauchiehall Street and ran up the three flights of stairs to the office to tell the news. Believe it or not, such is the boredom in certain quarters that I raised not one flicker of interest in the three who were in, viz. Miss Crawford, Margaret and Lottie. As Margaret put it, 'You saw often that this or that was given out in the one o'clock news, but how could one day be more important than another?' Mr Ferguson

came in then. He knew the news and was jubilant. Mr Mitchell was the last to hear, and his enthusiasm was intense and infectious. (He was in the Navy last time.) He went all over the place telling everyone a second time of how 'Half the Italian fleet was out of commission.'

## **THURSDAY, 14 NOVEMBER**

### **Edward Stebbing**

I have heard a good many members of this unit say that they wished the war would end whether we win or lose, or that they would be glad to get out of the army (myself included). If there were only one or two of this opinion, I should not take much notice, but almost every day I hear some variations of the same idea, the common reason being that most of us are fed up with the whole business.

The Government is criticised for its lack of aggressiveness and the attack on Taranto came as a welcome bit of excitement: concentrate on Italy - in Greece, in Egypt, in the Mediterranean, with air attack - seems to be a widely held view.

## **FRIDAY, 15 NOVEMBER**

### **Pam Ashford**

Today is foggy. Miss Bousie fears to have the lights on in a fog during the day lest the light gives us away to enemy aircraft overhead. As if it would! She also thinks fog will help the enemy get away after dropping their bombs on us. This began talk on flying with instruments, and several people put it down as 'eye-wash' that the Germans are not so well equipped or so skilful as we. There was an idea that Birmingham and Coventry had it badly last night Miss Bousie: 'They said serious damage.' Miss Smith: 'And heavy casualties.' I listened to the eight o'clock news at a distance and with half an ear, and I did hear something about serious damage but failed to take the item in. It must have been a more conspicuous item at one o'clock for when I got in at 1.15 - late - Mother was seriously alarmed about a report of 1000 killed.

There is no doubt that stocks in grocers' shops are not as large as they were, and Charlie who has always scoffed at Mother's hoard (to which I have contributed generously) has now advised me to build up a reserve again. I know that mother and I saved pounds on our 1939 purchases, but things are dearer now. To build up a reserve is less easy. In fact I often wonder about the ethics of it. If it were that I did the housekeeping I should run more risks, for I have the strength (if need be) to stand in queues and to devise new dishes from available supplies. But with Mother at 73 as the housekeeper, we should be in a pickle if we were thrown back to the situation that prevailed in 1918.

I am surprised that today's entry has been so long, for since 12.30 my mind has been pinned on another matter. A fatal accident happened beside Campbell's in Union Street while my bus was beside Peacock's. A lady was killed by a tram which had to be raised. I have said to myself, 'If you feel a street accident so deeply, what would you be like in a Blitzkrieg? Perhaps you are wrong in thinking you are not afraid of air raids.' Again (after finding the fatality not in the evening papers), 'The nation attaches horror to Coventry, but not to a street accident. I am the other way round. It all depends on how far off you are.'

## **SATURDAY, 16 NOVEMBER**

### **Maggie Joy Blunt**

*News Chronicle*: ‘Heavy bombs were dropped last night during one of the biggest recent attacks on the capital. An ARP warden said, “For numbers (of planes) it is the worst night of my experience.”’

Jules and I were hanging out of the window of SM’s top floor flat in Marylebone High Street from 1 to 3 o’clock in the morning. Plane followed plane over our heads and we got to know almost to the second when they would release their bombs. ‘*He’s due to lay!*’ Jules would say. And down they would screech – to the right to the left and far ahead of us. The awful noise of rent air; the scream of metal as it hit the waiting city; the explosion blast and shiver of the wounded earth ... rooftops pallid in the light of a full moon, echoes of gunfire rolling along the still streets, shrapnel sweeping past our window like hailstones, and in the distance a carillon of fireballs and the horizon above the chimney pots coloured like the afterglow of sunset ... We didn’t know whether the next bomb would be ours or not but it didn’t seem to matter. I felt no fear. It was terrible and splendid.

I said, ‘Isn’t it rather rash to be standing at a window like this?’ Jules replied, ‘A man was saved standing at his window – the house was cut away behind him ...’ It never was any use trying to influence Jules. SM had gone to bed quite early but Jules had a feeling that it was going to be a spectacular evening and would not let me join her. I didn’t want to die, naturally – what would happen to my cottage and the cats? – but I didn’t think I would. And if I did – ‘*tant pis*’. No one is indispensable.

Homes again now after an exhausting journey full of delays owing to damage at Southall. It was strange to see early this morning in London people quietly getting on with their work, sweeping up glass, walking along the streets. Logically, somehow, everyone should have been prostrate with reaction, confused, paralysed ... But no. shop doors were open, women went about their marketing as usual, men were climbing onto buses in the normal way. There was a sad, grey atmosphere over the town but nothing on the surface betrayed the horror so recently suffered. It is night again now. Planes are once more overhead, the guns in action.

Last Monday afternoon as I was coming back from Slough a plane swooped from low clouds just over the bus I was in and machine gunned the road. People looked bewildered, terror-stricken and ran for shelter. The conductors on our bus – it was stationary and people were descending – cried, ‘Get down on the floor, away from the glass.’ I ducked but there wasn’t much room. It was all over in a few seconds. I don’t think anyone was hurt. The nights are very long. I think I shall grow tired of such excitement.

This afternoon in a railway carriage crowded with Tommies and workers returning home – a wizened man, like a peevish dwarf, who had been complaining at the delay and muddle at Paddington, began to attack the Government. There was general grudging admission of mistakes made until a cheerful little Welsh soldier said, ‘But it’s the people’s fault. Our Governments *have* been rotten but we’ve put ’em there.’

### **Ernest van Someren**

We got up a lot earlier than usual and I rang the railway to see if trains were normal, then caught one at 8.20 to town.

I went to Waterloo and got an electric train to Reading. The damage to houses near the line of S.R. in London was very serious in the first few miles. I travelled



alone in a first class car and read a history of the Quakers, or alternately practised the recorder a bit, which I can do while looking out of the window.

Got to Reading at 12.30 instead of 11 and took a bus to the University for a meeting of a new body, the British Rheologists Club. After lunch we went in various cars (about 20 of us) to a show of rheological apparatus, where I found something very interesting to me in connection with my work, I also listened to short talks on how to test for pregnancy in cows, and how we judge firmness by touch.

### **Pam Ashford**

The tea store that individuals gathered in the early days of the war must be going down – at any rate two people have referred to cocoa today. Miss Smith said, ‘The man on the BBC said “Why not try cocoa? This is how it is made, you put cocoa and sugar at the bottom of a cup, make a paste with milk and pour the water on!” So I tried it and quite liked it.’ The others showed intense interest in this novel method, while I was flabbergasted that it should be regarded as an innovation. It transpires that in these parts people boil cocoa in a saucepan. I have lived in Scotland 23 years and never knew that before.

### **Edward Stebbing**

Overheard at breakfast; ‘I hear Churchill talking about a campaign in 1944.’ ‘Of course I think most of that’s propaganda.’ I had been thinking the same thing myself for some time – and very clever propaganda, too. Notice that nothing is said in the papers about the damage which must have been done to factories and other military objectives in Coventry.

## **MONDAY, 18 NOVEMBER**

### **Pam Ashford**

The Soroptomist again. Miss Forster has a London friend who in the black-out drove her car into a bomb crater. Unable to extricate it in the darkness she left it. She returned next morning only to find that another bomb had fallen, and her car was blown away this time.