

BRIAN GREGORY

After school on 8th May 1945, I was playing 'soldiers' with some friends on a small green alongside Camp Road in St. Albans (now Drakes Drive). We used to pick sides (British and Germans) by selection and elimination through scissors/paper/stone contests, the losers becoming Germans for a period, and those who hadn't got toy guns used pieces of wood as rifles.

Around 4pm, the father of one of my friends came home from his job at Hill End hospital and shouted that we would have to find something else to play as Germany had surrendered and the war was over. Our initial reaction was really one of disappointment as our favourite game had no further point but after a short discussion we were about to regroup as 'Cowboys and Indians', when the father explained we were still at war with Japan. Joyfully we then carried on fighting as the 'Allies against the Japs'!

As children we were blissfully unaware of the horrors incurred in the actual conflict. Apart from a couple of nearby explosions from bombs or landmines, the preceding years had seen little damage in this area of St. Albans, despite being between the de Havilland airfield and works at Hatfield and those of Handley Page at Park Street.

I do remember one huge bang when a house about 100 yards away on the corner of Camp Road suffered a hit. Flakes of ceiling paint came down and covered my meal of liver and mash! My mother immediately shoved me into the cupboard under the stairs but it would have been a bit late by then. The next day we went and looked at the crater and another in the grounds of the hospital.

Some weeks later we cycled to watch the retrieval of a bomber which had crashed through the perimeter fence of Handley Page aerodrome and was blocking the main railway. Another pastime was looking for pieces of shrapnel, spent bullet cases from aircraft machine guns, and strips of metal foil which I later learnt were dropped from enemy aircraft to confuse our radar tracking devices.

During the war we had become experts at identifying the sounds of the Merlin engines fitted to Spitfires and Mosquitos compared to Hurricanes and Dakotas, but were puzzled when we saw and heard aircraft without propellers which we thought must have been powered by rockets, as we were unaware of the invention of jet engines as fitted to the de Havilland Vampires.

[email account provided by resident Brian Gregory]