

PUT THAT LIGHT OUT!

Heinz Guderian invented the Blitz. Sort of . . . The German army general advocated a tactic based on speed and surprise, where light tank units and fast-moving infantry were supported by air power. Hitting hard, moving swiftly, creating havoc, it was the blitzkrieg or ‘lightning war’ that Adolf Hitler adopted to overrun Poland in 1939 and enslave Western Europe the following year. It was blitzkrieg tactics that drove the British Expeditionary Force back to Dunkirk in 1940, and their most awesome use was at Operation Barbarossa – the German attack on Russia in 1941.

To the British, however, the Blitz came to mean only one thing: nightly aerial bombardment by the Luftwaffe. Throughout the autumn, winter and spring of 1940–41, the nation came to dread the wail of air-raid warning sirens, particularly in the big cities of London, Birmingham, Sheffield, Coventry, Hull, Manchester, Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow and Belfast, but also in smaller towns and even, on occasion, isolated villages.

Altogether some 43,000 civilians died during the Blitz on Britain. Almost 140,000 more were injured, and more than a million homes were damaged or destroyed. Yet far from dampening the spirits of

HOW BRITAIN KEPT CALM AND CARRIED ON

British men, women and children, this danger and deprivation served only to strengthen their resolve. And it was laughter that seemed to be the national anaesthetic. It helped the British through the bombing, not least because they could chuckle at themselves, which was just as well when one considers what outsiders sometimes thought of them.

According to Walter Graebner, London correspondent of the American news magazine *Time*, the besieged Londoner was a very special creature:

Londoners are admirably suited to standing up to the blitzkrieg. Small and wiry, they can step quickly into low, cramped Anderson shelters and dugouts. Phlegmatic, they express practically no emotion when death and disaster strikes near.

Unused to a high standard of life, they don't grumble when they lose their home or possessions and their jobs. So long as they can have three or four cups of tea a day and go for walks, their two most cherished desires have been satisfied.

Because for centuries they have braved one of the worst climates in the world, sturdy Londoners do not find leaking roofs and damp shelters unbearable. Because they have fought so many wars in the past, they don't look upon this war as a calamity, even though it's coming down on top of them.

So Londoners just had to laugh at themselves. As one newspaper commented of Graebner's description, it conjured up an astonishing picture of a race of inscrutable dwarfs, crouching philosophically under a steady stream of water pouring from a busted ceiling, surrounded by dripping walls and moving only for an occasional walk in the world's worst climate.

The paper ended: ‘Mr Graebner’s Londoner seems a cross between a happy alligator in a damp cave and an undersized tramp asleep in a tea-chest.’

That they were certainly not – but when it came to raising a laugh with a quip, there wasn’t a breed to beat them. When an old man filed into an air-raid shelter one night, carrying under one arm a long-handled spade with which to deal with incendiary bombs, and under the other a harp – presumably for a little entertainment – one cockney said to her friend: ‘Blimey, there’s a bloke wot’s backed ’imself both ways.’



As far as Britain was concerned, life had to go on as normally as possible. Nowhere was this more apparent than at golf clubs where special rules had to be devised to deal with the interruption caused by air raids.

In 1940, Richmond Golf Club in Surrey conceded: ‘In all competitions, during gunfire, or when bombs are falling, players may take cover without penalty for ceasing play.’

However, another rule said: ‘A player whose stroke is affected by simultaneous explosion of bomb or shell, or by machine-gun fire, may play the ball from the same place. Penalty: 1 stroke.’

A typical example of golfers’ sangfroid was shown by the following rules: ‘The position of known delayed-action bombs are marked by red flags at a reasonable – but not guaranteed – safe distance.’ And: ‘A ball moved by enemy action may be placed as near as possible where it lay, or if lost or destroyed, a ball may be

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dropped not nearer the hole, without penalty.’ Well, you couldn’t say fairer than that.

Indeed, British sport in general took the Second World War in its stride. In July 1944, at Lord’s, a cricket match between the army and the Royal Air Force was stopped when a doodlebug was heard approaching the ground. The players lay on the turf, and spectators disappeared under the stands. But the rocket flew over the ground and landed in Regent’s Park. Middlesex and England opening batsman Jack Robertson dusted himself down and celebrated the narrow escape by hitting the next ball for six. An outraged *Wisden*, the cricketer’s ‘bible’, later reported that this was ‘the first flying-bomb to menace Lord’s during the progress of a match’.

Watching football as the Battle of Britain raged overhead could be a tiresome diversion. The Home Office had ruled that play must be stopped whenever the air-raid alert sounded. Clubs attempted to counter this with a system of ‘spotters’; even after the alert sounded, play would continue until the spotter on the roof of the stadium signalled the actual presence of enemy aircraft.

It wasn’t just the bombs that caused problems, though. The blackout was as much a nuisance to sportsmen as it was to the general public. But they coped with it. Southampton FC’s coach driver, returning from a game at Cardiff, became lost in the blackout, then he hit a brick wall, and finally the vehicle suffered a burst tyre. The players were forced to spend the night in the coach, not arriving back in Southampton until lunchtime the following day. The players of Wycombe Wanderers had probably the worst experience. After a Great Western Combination game at Slough, the Wycombe team had to walk the fifteen miles back to High Wycombe.

The blackout also caused problems for players training after work. Harold Atkinson of Tranmere Rovers recalled the dangers: ‘The part-time training was on a Tuesday and a Thursday and you

ran around the ground at your own risk. We used to sprint down the side of the pitch in the dark, and there were more injuries caused by training in the blackout than there were in proper matches.'

Young and old, people coped. Writing to America in thanks for Bundles for Britain – a collection of clothing and other items sent from the USA for those bombed out of their homes in Britain – an elderly Scottish woman said: 'When the air-raid siren goes, I take down the Holy Bible and read the twenty-third Psalm, then I put up a wee prayer, take a wee dram of whisky, get into bed and pull up the cover. Then I tell that Hitler to go to hell.'

Going the rounds in Hull – as we have already seen, the second most bombed city in England, with ninety-five per cent of its buildings damaged or destroyed – was this definition of the perfect air-raid warden:

He must be as brave as a lion, strong as a bullock, wise as an owl, industrious as a bee.

A warden must be prepared to be blown up, thrown up, burned alive, shattered, splattered, flattened, and be able to act as wet nurse, dry nurse, doctor, undertaker, Spitfire Fund collector. He must be agile, servile, deaf, dumb, and unconscious if necessary. Above all he must be able to speak BBC English, repair a phone, anticipate the sirens, and suffer criticism without thought of retaliation.

The war often brought out the best in people, especially during the Blitz. One North-East farmer, anxious not to abuse the system for claiming compensation for damage, registered his claim thus: 'Repairing broken glass in piggery £3; replanting hedge £1; bomb crater fifteen feet deep by thirty feet across is well placed for making a new farm pond that will be entirely acceptable to animals.'