

Chapter 10

Third evacuation, V2 hits Blackheath

**Summer 1944 –
Spring 1945**



In July 1944 the Powers That Be decided on a third evacuation from London. We travelled by coach to Corton on the Norfolk coast, taking Gale's pram and basic necessities. The party consisted of about 250 boys and girls of eleven to eighteen, mostly from Stratford Grammar School but a few from a neighbouring school in Plaistow, my father the headmaster, the caretaker, Peter, Gale and myself, and six assorted mums who were to cook.

We landed up in an ex-holiday camp in the woods on top of a cliff. The beach below was mined, and there were no fences or walls. The army had occupied the place until about a month before and it was a shambles. Half the huts' doors were hanging off. The drains were blocked. The workhouse and laundry were so overgrown we didn't find them for two days. Everywhere was filthy and thickly strewn with live ammunition.

And, because it was the start of the summer holidays none of the staff had come!

There were two large halls on the site, one for recreation and the other a dining room with kitchen attached with gigantic cooking stoves, long tables and tip-up wooden chairs. The authorities had provided basic food, mainly dried egg, spam, potatoes and cabbage. Gale was a very fast crawler and when I put her down for a minute on the hall floor she was immediately unrecognisably filthy. Luckily I had made her several dungarees out of unrationed check dusters.

Gale was never one to sit still. She would set out, very fast, for the crates of third-of-a-pint bottles of milk and poke her little fingers in all the tops if I didn't get there quickly enough.

The Old Man got hold of some tools and set about mending the huts with a team of helpers – gathering up the live ammunition as he went.

The caretaker recruited a gang of ne'er-do-wells who enjoyed going down the drains, and managed to clear them.

Peter got on the phone which was working thank goodness, and rang up the nearest army base. This couldn't have been more helpful and sent over immediately two members of the Catering Corps to teach our mums how to cook in bulk on the gigantic stoves. They also warned us to watch out for our girls as there was a camp for delinquent young soldiers a mile down the road. For the next two days Peter spent most of his time on the phone. As our outside contact man he had to get the hot water system working again, order food and supplies of cleaning materials and necessary equipment, argue with the authorities. For a non-organisational man he did very well. I spent most of my time settling Gale's needs. Eventually the hall floor was scrubbed so I was able to allow her to crawl as long as I watched the milk, but the tip-up chairs presented a real problem. She was not heavy

enough to hold the seat down when she was strapped in so if I didn't keep my foot on the seat the chair would snap shut with her inside.

To begin with our food consisted mainly of fried spam and sausage rolls which I didn't consider perfect for an eleven-and-a-half-month-old baby, but I got hold of a large container of dried egg which I was able to reconstitute and scramble on the corner of one of the stoves.

And what if the two hundred and fifty boys and girls? Well, there was no-one to look after them, so they had to run the place themselves. The sixth form took responsibility for the younger ones without being asked; saw them to their own huts and to bed before, we suspected, running their own grown-up parties in the woods. We thought it best not to know. The eleven to fourteen girls took up housekeeping, and could be seen gossiping at the door of their huts as they leant on the half-doors. A dozen or so each day, missing their little brothers and sisters, would queue up outside our hut each morning and beg to be allowed to do something for Gale.

"Can't I even wash a dirty nappy, Mrs Hewett?"

Soon I found that I could be more useful to the whole party as I could trust them to mind her and stop her eating the sandy soil of the cliff top. Wherever I was in camp I could hear the chant, "One... two... three... four...Oh!", "One ... two... three... Oh!" "One... two... three... four...FIVE... SIX!... Oh!" as Gale learnt to walk.

Meanwhile the fifteen-year-olds began organising regular evening classes and entertainments in the other hall. The leading light was Spud, although in general he was one of the least law abiding. From somewhere he had cadged on long loan a Music Centre, so dances were popular with himself as Master of Ceremonies. "Come on, Mr Ewett, look at Eileen all dressed up and with no partner! Do your duty!"

Really the "children" were no trouble... that is, until the beginning of September when the rest of the staff arrived. They were horrified! "How are we going to keep them in camp with no fences and no gates?" they asked anxiously, and immediately set about organising a rota to patrol the camp at night. Lessons started although we had no books – but it would "keep them out of mischief". Nightly we watched the Doodlebugs pass over on their way to fall on other, less fortunate, people.

My father put one of the two village pubs out of bounds to the staff. He knew there was nothing else for the seventeens and eighteens to do. There was nothing else for the staff to do either, and while we learnt to play Cardinal Puff, a wicked game to

ensure you drank more beer than you should, in our pub we couldn't see our pupils playing darts in the other, so we didn't have to know they were there or do anything about it.

But the nightly patrols were a challenge to Spud and his friends as we knew they would be. One horrible dawn my father was called to the phone.

“Are any of your boys missing? This is the coastguard. I'm afraid there is something on the mined beach below your camp that looks like a body.”

The army were called and made their way down. It was a body – a dead boy – blown up by a mine.

The huts were searched and Spud and one of his friends were found, in bed but dressed and wounded in the back.

“Yes, they had evaded the patrol and crept down to collect more live ammunition. Yes, there had been a mine detonated. Yes, they had been hit and were scared and had run back and put their heads under their blankets. Yes, their friend, Sid, was not with them. No, they didn't look. They hoped he had got away along the beach.”

The doctor came and said Sid had died instantly – thank goodness. We couldn't bear the thought of his having lain there all night in agony. That was what we found hard to forgive – that his friends had not known that he couldn't be saved and done nothing.

The London police were alerted to contact his parents who came next day. His mother, in shock I suppose, kept worrying that one of his socks was missing. There were two younger siblings and against our advice she insisted on taking them to see the body. Perhaps she was right.

Gradually the children drifted back to London. By Christmas there were only about thirty-five left, including Spud, and we were moved to a large house in Hunstanton, where Gale was astonished to see coloured curtains and cushions. She had forgotten that sometimes things need not be just plain wood. The local WVS provided me with a large bag of pieces of material and I spent most of my time with Gale patching the boys' trousers. Peter was in charge.

Spud had learnt nothing from the tragedy and we caught him many times searching the Hunstanton mined beaches for live ammunition. There was nothing we could do! We couldn't keep a fifteen-year-old boy in the house day and night, and you can't punish him more than by wounding him quite badly and killing one of his close friends. Peter always wondered what happened to him after we all went back to London after Christmas. I expect he either grew up to be a millionaire or spent all his adult life in and out of prison – who knows?

The Doodlebugs stopped coming and soon after we got back to London the V2s started to arrive. Horrible though they were they didn't cause us so much anguish of mind. Perhaps this was because the war was coming to an end. We were winning and it was now only a question of time. If one of the V2s landed, and they were not all that frequent, it could be heard all over London – but if you heard one you were safe. The bomb arrived before the sound of the bomb so if you were hit you would never know.

One morning I wheeled Gale up to Blackheath village to buy some buttons in the large drapers, and she grizzled and wouldn't stay in her pram outside one of the palatial entrances. So I unstrapped her and lifted her onto my hip and we went in. As I stood waiting to be served I saw with amazement bricks and debris detaching themselves near the ceiling and beginning to fall. There was time for me to step across the aisle and crouch down with Gale under the counter before they landed and the noise of the explosion came. Suddenly I couldn't see my hand before my face for dust.

Quite unharmed I picked my way, still carrying Gale, to the open door. There was Gale's pram, still on its wheels but packed with shards of jagged plate glass. With Gale seemingly quite unperturbed on my hip and pulling the pram behind us I turned uphill.

At the top we emerged into clear air to confront a small crowd of people applauding each survivor. A V2 had fallen just the other side of the village.

Still carrying Gale and pulling the pram I walked slowly down Lee Park, dreading what I would find. The windows were out of most of the houses but strangely enough the old avenue of lime trees was undamaged. We came to the house next door. Their windows were out too. But amazingly as I turned into our gate I saw that our house, number 44, was the first that had escaped unharmed.

Before we even washed I phoned Peter at school. "Don't worry – we are all right and so is the house but a V2 has fallen in the village. I don't know about the Old Man's house, but that would have been empty anyway."

At school all those miles away they had heard the bomb and I knew they would be worrying. We always did. If there is a moral to our bomb story it is that one should never leave one's child alone in a pram outside a shop.

Soon after that came VE Day. There were street parties in some of the working-class streets off Blackheath but no signs of rejoicing in the "posh" streets of large houses like ours. My sister-in-law babysat for us so Peter and I wandered out to join the celebrations if we could find them after Gale was in bed. When we did come across one we realised that we were strangers so felt too shy to join in and went home. It was an anti-climax really. But as far as we were concerned, the war was over.