

*Here follows the second part of Ron Swan's (BGS 1936-41) memoirs of his time at Borden Grammar School, in which he recounts the outbreak of the Second World War and his subsequent evacuation to south Wales.*

In the few years leading up to 1939 and the declaration of war on 3 September 1939, much work had been done as regards civil defence and military preparations. One of the civil defence arrangements was the availability of small air raid shelters for each property, these took the form of outdoor shelters which could be installed in the garden, these were called Anderson or Stanton shelters or an indoor shelter introduced by Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, and known as a Morrison shelter. My father was concerned about the inherent health problems, i.e. influenza, etc., which could arise from the outdoor shelters and therefore opted for the Morrison which comprised a large sheet of steel about half-an-inch thick supported from the ground by large angle iron legs. The top of the legs had a steel frame upon which rested the large steel plate, held in place by a large number of nuts and bolts, the sides of the shelter were essentially strong wire mesh. My sister Joan (two years older than me) soon found that the Morrison was an excellent table tennis table with the particular ability that if you could hit the ball onto one of the heads of the bolts which held the plate in position then the ball became virtually unplayable! It may be of some interest to know that some forty odd years later we were visiting a recreational club for Chinese children after school in Beijing and I was invited to have a game with a nine or ten-year-old Chinese boy who promptly gave me a good thrashing in the game of table tennis - this was on a proper table and therefore I missed the heads of the bolts in my returns, which I would add were few!

About fifteen to twenty minutes after Neville Chamberlain had stated that we were now at war with Germany, the air raid sirens went howling their warning. My mother, Joan and I promptly went into the Morrison shelter whilst my father, who was an air raid warden, went about his duties. The German tactics at the start of their involvement in the Spanish Civil War and in their invasion of Poland had always started with what was called 'Blitzkrieg' and it was therefore with some trepidation that we went into the Morrison shelter. However, fortunately this turned about to be a false alarm to everybody's general relief.

The first eight or nine months of the war, sometimes referred to as 'The Phoney War', were incorrectly described by that term in respect of the navy who were very busy on convoy duty with essential supplies and by the RAF who sent a few squadrons of fighters and light bombers to France in support of the French. In addition, the RAF opened a scheme or five-year commissions and engagements for aircrew: the part played by these trained aircrew at the start of the war is not really fully recognised particularly with respect to the large number of non-commissioned fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain which was yet to come. *[One such pilot was Peter Waghorn (BGS 1932-33), who was subsequently killed in action during the Siege of Malta.]*

During this period of time, the trains to Sittingbourne were running fairly regularly and school went on much as it had done in the pre-war years. Then on 10 May 1940, Hitler invaded Belgium, totally obliterating a fort which was thought to be impregnable within a few hours; by so doing the Germans had gone around the very heavily defended so-called Maginot Line, and therefore outflanked the Allied armies. The French Army at this point was

absolutely shattered and the British Army was too few in number to make much difference, and then began the retreat to the coast and the miracle of the 'little ships' at Dunkirk.

While the rescue from Dunkirk was taking place, many of the little ships were from the Thames and so consequently used Sheerness as their base. But this did not prepare us for one morning when standing side-by-side with our train was another train filled with tired, dispirited, desperate men who had been taken from the beaches at Dunkirk and brought to Sheerness. These were mainly British and French troops but there were also a few Belgians. Many had lost a lot of their clothing and most had lost their rifles; they were desperately tired and hungry so I passed my packed lunch through the open window to the grateful troops in the adjacent train. Several of my friends did the same and we all knew that we ourselves were looking forward to a hungry day so a few of us retained their own lunches which we shared when lunchtime came. It was a pitiful sight which affected us by seeing at first-hand some of the horrors of war if only in a small way. From this time on the railways became less reliable and we went onto a system of going to school once or twice a week and collecting work for the next few days.

It was now clear that there was a major threat of invasion, similarly of heavy bombing from much closer airfields and also that the reliability of the railway was not going to improve in the immediate future. Decisions were therefore taken to evacuate children from Sheerness and the Isle of Sheppey, especially the children, such as myself, who were entering into the final year before their major exams. The arrangements were therefore made for us to go to South Wales with Mr Highton acting as the head of the party. He was accompanied by Mr Snelling and Mr Higson; Mrs Highton and Mrs Snelling also went with us and both set up temporary homes in Wales. I did not know that our teachers were, apart from Mr Highton, going to rotate although in the case of Mr Snelling and Mr Higson this was inevitable as they were both to join the armed services. I have no recollection of any staff changes in the one year that I was away.

To carry out the evacuation, we all had to assemble at Sheerness railway station to await the arrival of our special train. This we did with each one of us with our gas masks in a small box which we had to carry with us at all times and among my luggage I had taken special care to include my running spikes. Apart from Borden Grammar School, part of the train had been reserved for the County School for Girls from Sittingbourne [*now Highsted Grammar School*] and included in that party was my sister Joan who was destined to go to Hengoed, not far from Pengam. We were to be accommodated at the Lewis School in Pengam but we were not to be integrated with the boys of Lewis School and we were to preserve our own identity as BGS with our own teachers; these arrangements did not preclude us from joining a form of Lewis School boys for any special subject provided it did not interfere with our own timetables; for example, my friend John Carter joined them for a class in Welsh history.

Upon our arrival in South Wales we were met by a number of people who 'distributed' us around the area with our foster parents. I was partnered by Alan Higgins and we were left in the care of Mr and Mrs William Morgan who were very pleasant and kind but to my surprise were about sixty years of age and hardly the people you would have thought would have taken us in on that account. Mr and Mrs Morgan lived in their own house but they had three children, all adults, who were away from home; their eldest son, Bill, was married and serving as a regular in the RAF ground staff, we did not see much of him as he was only on

leave now and again and he was a married man with his own family. They also had a married daughter who lived fairly near with her own family, we did not see a lot of her and never met her family but whenever she visited her parents, which was frequently, she seemed a very jolly sort of person. Then there was the younger son, Ron, who was aged twenty-one, who was serving in the RAF as a sergeant (observer) in aircrew under the five-year engagement scheme that I mentioned above. At the time of our arrival in Wales, Ron was serving with the RAF in France but he came home on leave soon after returning to this country after the fall of France, so I met him then; sadly, soon after his home leave he was on an operation to attack the fleet of barges being prepared by the Germans for the invasion when he was shot down and killed. The only other person of the Morgan family that we met was a nephew of Mr and Mrs Morgan: his name was Doug, he was about eighteen years of age and awaiting his call up to the army. He was due to go into the airborne forces but whether this was as a parachutist or in the glider forces I just can't remember. Doug was on the books of Wolverhampton Wanderers as a footballer and living locally; he frequently came along to us to kick a football about, to my cost on one occasion he kicked the ball towards me and I stopped the ball flying past me with my hand with the result that I received a dislocated thumb on my left hand. We never saw him after his call-up papers arrived.

Obviously, being such a small group of only sixty-five to seventy boys spread over the age groups we were very weak on the structured sports of football and cricket, so that we were not really compatible with any opponents. Nevertheless, we did put out a side whenever we were required to do so and we lost all our matches, although we enjoyed playing the games. I notice also from the school records that I won all the track very easily in our own sports day, I must admit that I have no recollection of that whatsoever. I do, however, remember running against the Lewis boys in the half-mile race which I had thought was the first half-mile I had ever run competitively. I recall that there were six, or possibly seven, in the race and all the Lewis boys were saying that 'Aggie' Thomas would be the winner: I did not tell them that I was a country class runner at the quarter mile. When we set off, I let them set the pace and remained in about fourth position for the first lap, the first lap was not at a very testing pace and at the halfway point I decided to see what they could do and stepped up the pace, nobody came with me and I was soon about a hundred yards ahead of the rest, a position I held until the end of the race. I have no recollection whatsoever of running a quarter mile race in those Lewis sports.

As an amusing sidelight, I will tell you that where we lived was the end house of a terrace and the last house in the village and every morning the bus that we had to catch to go to school made its first stop in the village outside our house. There was always a queue of people to get on the bus, but nobody ever got off there and the bus was fairly full when it arrived at our stop. I noticed that a lot of people got off the bus at the next stop so I had to make a quick decision as to how many people in our queue would get onto the bus and if I was not one of them, I would run up to the next stop, a distance of 300 yards. I considered this to be part of my training, much to the amusement of the people on the bus, and this became an accepted feature of a boy running with his schoolwork bag and, of course, his gas mask!

I was pleased to have a visit from my parents so that they could meet Mr and Mrs Morgan and see for themselves how well we were being looked after and fed. My parents also went to see my sister Joan on their visit to Wales.

To conclude these brief notes, I should perhaps say that it had always been an ambition of mine to join the Royal Air Force as an apprentice and I sat the examination to do so in 1941; however, the chaotic conditions and the uncertain future at that time was such that virtually all instructors were required for operational work and hence the apprenticeship scheme had more or less closed down temporarily. I was extremely disappointed at this, but my father knew a master at the Dockyard School who recommended me for an apprenticeship with the Admiralty. So I duly sat an examination for this and was successful in obtaining a five-year apprenticeship in electrical engineering. I returned to Sheerness not sure about what I would do in the next step of my life but certain that my time at Borden Grammar School had laid good foundations, for which I was very grateful.