

LEAKY GAS BAG OVER THE CANAL

By Roy Webster

The Boy Roy and his Old Man had completed an early dawn operation gleaning residual grain on a recently-harvested wheat field, gathering the wispy remnants of the cereal crop to augment the poultry food rations for their flock of fifty laying Light Sussex pullets.

Now they were relaxing and enjoying the remainder of their Saturday morning fishing on the North Walsham, Dilham Canal 100 yards downstream of the Tonnage Bridge anti-aircraft gun site when their attention was diverted skywards from the gently flowing water by the unmistakable rat-a-tat-tat sound of aerial gunfire penetrating the low cumulus cloud base from a south westerly direction "Look out Boy, I think there's a Jerry plane around Norwich.

Better head for cover in case its heading this way and you run off home and warn mother," cautioned the Old Man, a veteran soldier of world war one who had just managed to survive the Nazi Heinkel bombing the newly constructed RAF Coltishall Fighter Station in 1940 by diving among other workers into a welcoming slit trench by the half built runway.

Now, a year later, the Battle of Britain was as good as won by our peerless pilots in Fighter Command but still the Luftwaffe flew the odd daylight raid, targeting military establishments and factories playing a vital role in the Allies war effort. The Old Man was therefore taking no second chance with The Hun and ushered The Boy towards the gap in the hedge, opening access into the oak and elm sheltered green lane leading to their cottage.

Suddenly the cause of the commotion came into view. It was not a stray enemy aircraft but a fully inflated barrage balloon, one of many such air defence measures supported by vertical steel cables intended as effective hazards in the flight path of enemy bombers. But this hydrogen filled menace had broken free from its moorings on the outskirts of the City of Norwich. And it appeared to be heading their way, the source of the machine gunfire was a solitary Hurricane aircraft from one of the local RAF stations, sent up to shoot down this wind drifting hazard that suddenly endangered not only our own aircraft but local populations as it trailed its dangerous, frayed cable ends across the fields, perhaps encountering residents of vulnerable domestic housing along its flight path.



The single engine fighter plane was having little success in dealing with the menace for this balloon was proving more stubborn than a Nazi bomber. The pilot probably realised he did not carry the heavy artillery required to bring down this giant gas bag and thus broke off the attack and headed back to base. This brought an angry response from the Old Man. "It seems the RAF have given up and are prepared to let this monster do its worst as it heads out to sea. But look. It's losing height and could hit our house," he suddenly yelled with indignation. "Warn

Mother to get out and take cover behind the big fir tree. Tell her there's a loose barrage balloon coming towards her... and it will be there in a matter of minutes." He added."

The Boy galloped down the lane and flung open the door. "Mum, Mum," he hollered. "You've got to come out and take cover. Dad says there's a balloon going to hit the house." The woman was slicing carrots and onions, preparing an evening meal of moorhen and pigeon stew. "Balloon, what balloon? Don't be stupid. Can't you see I'm busy?" she bellowed.

"This damn food rationing is getting me down," she muttered irritably, for it was only yesterday she had queued for an hour for a parcel of off ration goat meat, which to her chagrin, the butcher had sold out of just as she entered the shop door.

"No, really, Mum. There is this big balloon. It's coming over the water towards us. A plane has been trying to shoot it down. Dad says you have to take shelter behind our fir tree", The Boy bawled as he bolted out of the door.

The Boy's mother wiped her hands on the dish cloth and followed. But, once outside, two more

aeroplanes suddenly appeared on the scene, after the Hurricane had disappeared. These were twin-engine Beaufighters, armed with heavy-duty cannons, firing explosive shells that met with considerable success when they hit enemy aircraft, rolling stock or fast-moving sea vessels like motor torpedo boats.

The two pilots circled the balloon taking turns to fire salvos into the outer fabric of this obstinate break-away gas filled monster trailing its dangerous frayed cable ends across the fields scattering a gang of land army girls from their task of harvesting carrots.

Suddenly, a deafening detonation thundered across the sky. One pilot has scored a vital direct hit. The shell had found its mark with sufficient forceful heat to explode the hydrogen gas with earth-shuddering intensity. The balloon visibly sagged, reminiscent of a giant sumo wrestler, flung to the canvas for the umpteenth time.

This sudden loss of weightlessness prompted this errant wanderer to descend more rapidly. But, more importantly, it had suddenly changed course, the explosion veering its direction away from the family home to drift the final stages of its journey along the canal straight where the Boy had re-joined his father.

"It's going to hit us, it's going to hit us!" shrieked The Boy. "No it's not. Look, it's settling on the marsh" responded the Old man calmly.

With the family having lifted their fingers off the panic buttons, The Boy Roy and the Old Man returned to their fishing to catch three pristine perch for the home table, grilled as a tasty starter to the main evening meal.

The balloon episode had blown up a hair-raising diversion from the daily, challenging grind of feeding hungry people (and chickens) – tasks that were often more easily said than done by the seriously hampered civilians of a warring nation. But by hook or by crook and improvisation of living off the local land and water, working families were managing somehow to get by on was later described by nutritionists: "as the healthiest diet of the century!"

A verdict not entirely endorsed by many a "her indoors" struggling valiantly to stretch meagre war time food rations - that would have fulfilled one consumer's staple diet demand for just one day in peace time- into lasting a whole week.

After 74 years of peace in our time have the problems facing the poor and needy been resolved? Millions of cash strapped UK families in this 21st century now depend on charitable free handouts from a growing number of national foodbanks organised and administered by caring volunteers, often acutely saddened by dealing with heart rending examples of our national disgrace of raw poverty among almost countless mothers and children. Many of these poor people can never reach, let alone enjoy, the marvellous new family recreational facility of the North Walsham, Dilham Canal.

Needy coarse fish anglers who wish to retain their catch for the family pot may still keep a limited number of freshwater fish from the Broads' well stocked free fishing banks of tidal rivers but no longer from privately owned venues e.g. the North Walsham, Dilham Canal and private non tidal rivers and lakes where none of any species may be retained, alive or dead as a strict conservation rule.

It also seems the old post war days when a coarse fish angler cum poacher could secretly pack a folding four ten shotgun with a home made cocoa tin silencer, in the fishing rod holdall in the hope of bagging for Sunday dinner an item of fur or feather during the cycle ride home from the waterside in the evening twilight, are also long gone. OR ARE THEY? Answers on a post card!