

So this was England! I might have known it if only by the chill damp air that raised goosepimples all over me as we pulled into the harbor of one of England's most southern ports--Portsmouth. Though the time was early fall the breeze that whipped across the huge harbor presaged imminent winter while the cloudy, friendless sky looked more like the spawn of winter than of early fall.

Here was one of the ports that in 1940 was minutely expecting the brunt of Hitler's invasion forces. The whermacht did not show up but the luftwaffe did and for almost four years it plastered the city. When the German planes stopped coming in the spring of 1944 the robot bombs took their place and for three months until the fall of the French Normandy coast took their daily toll of English lives and property.

I was routed out of my bunk ala Kretchmer style at six oclock the day after arrival and told to get read to go to London. Naturally it did not take me very long to acquiesce in the decision. An hour later six of us were in a little English train station buying third class tickets for lack of enough British pounds between us to make first class.

The distance to London was about sixty miles with the cost about equal to a ~~smili~~ similar ride in an American train. I found the English trains a bit slower--it took two hours to make the trip---but more comfortable than our own. The

coaches were two-thirds the size of our own while the freight cars were only a half the size of ours. We have a standard sized freight car for general purpose use; the English have special freight cars for special purposes. Painted lurid green, red, and orange colors the passenger cars contrasted strangely with our own more conventionally colored ones.

The English countryside appeared beautiful to me but the towns were drab and dismal looking despite earnest attempts on the part of almost every householder to brighten things up with shrubbery and grass plots on each open space. The homes were standardized ones of brick, monotonously the same with adjoining backyards separated by brick and board walls. They had housed--most of them--generations of Englishmen. Many of these homes had small green houses at the rear stressing what seemed to me to be an innate love of nature on the part of these Britans.

Sitting in the same section with us was a British sergeant, a man of about thirty-five I should judge. He reflected typical English reserve by maintaining an aloofness that was carefully shattered by us with the ulterior purpose in mind of eliciting information pertinent to our London visit. We opened up a hole in the dike for thereafter he engaged us animatedly all the way to London the subject matter being his very own social theories on a variety of subjects. To me he typified most of the Englishmen I was later to meet. The Englishman is well-read and has definite opinions on almost any topic of current interest. Particularly have they philosophies concerning social problems--one of the choicest of which are the artificial class lines that

today under the socialist government are thinning rapidly. Both the sergeant with whom we talked and the well-read guide who later showed us about London castigated the social system of England. The sergeant in particular lauded the American system of free schooling where every man has the opportunity to get a higher education. The distinction between the average Englishman and the average American seemed clearcut conversationally. The average American instead of becoming stimulated by politics or war or sociology seems to regard these subjects as purely academic and to be engaged in only in the classroom. I could see why it is that Britain has produced so many able statesmen in the course of world history and why it is that a nation so small has played a part so large in moulding that history.

London ~~is~~ itself was in better condition than I had expected to find it. We arrived a mere two weeks after the last of the robot bomb raids; a month later V-1's were to start. The urban transportation system was in good shape with both the subways and surface buses making their regular runs. Hundreds of taxicabs, ancient, black little hacks, scurried about everywhere. Private automobiles were exceedingly scarce. The business establishments displayed few if any signs identifying their shops and the drought of modern store fronts accentuated the drabness.

We had a difficult time getting a room. It was a weekend and hundreds of others, civilians and soldiers alike, had the same idea. Two of us broke away from the others

and went on our own. In a short while we located a room in a hotel five minutes walk from the @ptown section of London. There was no heat in the place, no towels, and, of course, no soap. But there was running water and four dollars apiece brought us a double bed with blankets. We carefully unpacked our toothbrushes, laid them away, and left for the rest of the day sightseeing bound.

Our noon luncheon at the officers' Red Cross Club probably represented a bit more than the average Londoner was eating that noon. For 35 cents we got two strips of bacon, some navy beans, pickled beets, two small potatoes, and a bit of custard. It impressed upon ^{us} ~~only~~ the hardships that the English had put up with for more than four years.

~~Almost everywhere we went this feeling was forcibly impressed upon us.~~ Almost half of the British women on the streets were in uniform of one sort or another. Only old men were left in London to run the civilian jobs. Restaurants had not seen milk or ice cream since before the war. All ~~of~~ clothing had been rationed for three years while many children for the first time in their lives had tasted lemons and oranges this summer when the sub campaign had eased enough to permit a few luxury cargoes to get through. The blackout was still in effect as it had been for four years. And no part of London had escaped the blitz of early 1940 or the robot blitz of this past summer. How fortunate we Americans had been I thought more than once to myself as I surveyed wartime England. I wondered whether the American people would remember the war long enough to make a few sacrifices

several years hence to prevent another.

We had left the ship at seven in the morning and were expected back at noon the next day, so we had no time to waste. At two-fifteen that afternoon we began a tour of London in an English cadillac together with three army officers and another naval officer. Included in the itinerary were what every American G.I. in London has written home about: Buckingham Palace; the admiralty building; Westminster Abbey; No. 10 Downing Street; London bridge; London Tower; and St. Paul's cathedral, second largest only to St. Peters in Rome. Six weeks previously I had inspected comparable lengths of world cathedrals as marked out on the floor of St. Peters and had noted this fact about St. Paul's.

At this point a word about the bombing of London. No district had escaped the fury of the German attack. This we had seen coming in on the train. Between the air blitzes and the robot bombs over a million homes were destroyed not to mention business district property. Everyone seemed to have a story on their lips about how close they had come to death--but it was not bragging, only matter-of-fact since the pitted city plainly had offered many opportunities to commune with death.

The blitz of 1939 among other things had wiped out one square mile right in the very heart of London itself. The Germans had intended to wipe out at one stroke the entire financial district of London--akin to Wall Street. For two solid ^{days} ~~nights~~ they blasted away at what they thought was this financial center center of the British empire, By the end

of that second day the British spitfires gained control of the sky and reduced the German attacks to more inaccurate night affairs. When the smoke cleared from these two days of attack one square mile had been blasted to rubble just as surely as if workmen had leveled every building within the area. The Germans announced at the time that London was to all intents and purposes blotted out including their objective---the financial district. But Lloyds of London and the other famous British banking ~~h~~ houses had lived to do business again for the German luftwaffe had almost but not quite done that very thing. They had missed the financial section but by two blocks. Saint Pauls cathedral which spells the beginning of the district stood only a quarter block away from the end of this square mile of ruin, but was virtually untouched. Had the bombers accomplished their mission the effect would have been tragic for Britain. As it was the Germans missed by a ~~hair~~ hair and thereafter failed to get another unimpeded shot at the important sections of the city. The bombed-out ~~area~~ section has been cleared of the rubble and now stands ready to be rebuilt starting on V-day.

Ironically in one spot of this desolated sector stands the ruins of a small British chapel. Like most British edifices it had been built to house something sacred in British history. This one had happened to shelter an ancient Roman wall dating from the year 39 A.D. The modern and strong chapel had gone the way of the rest of the buildings, but the 1900 year old wall thumbed its nose at

the German bombs and survived without a scratch~~z~~ intent on adding at least another century to its age.

When one surveys the ruins of London and the defeats that preceded and followed the sky battle of Britain, he can hold only respect and admiration for a nation that had been beaten but refused to admit it and struck back again and again until it had reversed what had been an almost hopeless situation. The "blood, sweat and tears" of Churchill must have been shed by every British family. Bombs are no more choosier than death in seeking victims respecting neither age, sex, wealth or health. The British have all shed tears of blood and their grief ~~had~~ has brought them all closer together as suffering is wont to do.

But even wartime London has to have some relaxation and the theatres were playing to larger crowds than ever but at earlier hours. We enjoyed Uncle Harry and came out of the play at eight-thirty to find ourselves in the almost stygian dark of a London blackout. Life or limb not being safe I decided that since most of London closed down after sunset I might as well follow suit which I did. My Texan friend continued about the city for another hour or two enjoying the rare sights that Picadilly affords the errant nighthawk.

The next morning we routed ourselves out early and not waiting for breakfast we headed for home--the ship-- anxious to get aboard where we could once again get a good meal and toast ourselves out of the chill English damp that clings to one like glue.

When I look back upon my several brief but interesting associations with the Englishman I have this to say of him: he is definitely a high-spirited character, interesting to talk with and well-read. He is innovative and resourceful, but does not go all out for new ideas. He may develop new ideas, new inventions but is hesitant about carrying them out to their logical and complete conclusions. He is not apt to become discouraged and is always the optimist when down. The average Britain I talked with does not want to fight another war nor does he believe it to be necessary if we carry out this one to the final conclusion, whatever that might mean. The United States and Britain must stick together is his thought. They should never have been parted in the first place but for the stupidity of a few statesmen of the time. We must believe that a lasting peace can be achieved and struggle towards that goal not becoming disillusioned and bitter.

And so a few days later I bid adieu to the Island Empire that has been called a nation of shopkeepers. As I took my last look at the ruins of the port city over the stern of the ship I mentally saluted the courage of these shopkeepers in preserving their country to continue its tradition of history and progress long after this unpleasant episode of the 1940's has become another chapter in the tomes of history.