

A Hextable Tragedy, The Morning After, And The Birth Of A Blue Plaque

Let us go back in time to the morning of the 15th March 1945.

I'd like to tell you about my two sisters who were then living in the family bungalow on Top Dartford Road, which was my own home in later years.

The girls had got themselves ready for another day at the school in the village, which is now the Church building from where we've just come, across the road.

On nearing the school, the girls became aware of a great deal of activity, and much devastation, in front of them.

They were quite used to hearing bombs, and all the other noises of war, and had even seen the effects of bomb blasts, including ceilings down in their own home. But, never before, had they seen anything quite like this!

Before they got to the school gate the two girls were approached by some of the school staff. One of the teachers explained briefly what had happened and, with tears in her eyes, she also told them that some schoolchildren had been killed. My sisters, and a few others who they'd met on the way, were all turned around and instructed to return home.

You will all now be aware of what had happened, which was that a German V2 rocket, a much more lethal weapon than its predecessor, the V1 flying bomb, had dropped from the heavens. This weapon had been powered from a launch site across the Channel at up to 3,600 miles per hour. The rocket would also have attained an altitude of between 50 to 70 miles above the Earth. Fate had decided that this particular weapon was to end its journey in the centre of Hextable, resulting in the loss of ten lives and causing much devastation. The rocket in question is recorded as having come down at 27 minutes past eleven the previous evening. German V2 rockets were lethal tools, which travelled at supersonic speeds, and they could not be heard prior to impacting on their unsuspecting victims. These rockets were 46 feet long and weighed about thirteen and a half tons.

Anyway ... we return to those children who had attempted to attend school the "morning after" ...

After much discussion amongst themselves, and the sharing of snippets of information, the schoolchildren dispersed to their homes in a much less joyous mood than when setting out for school that morning.

My sisters' names are June and Iris Meakins ... June has recently died, after living virtually all of her life in Hextable. Iris is now living in Swanley, but, I'm pleased to say that she is sharing this moment with us today ... **please give everyone a wave Iris!** The girls were 12 and 10 years old respectively at the time of the incident.

June was particularly upset about what she saw and the things she was told that day. She would always shed a tear, even in later life, when the subject of the German rocket attack was raised. Both girls have always remembered the two unfortunate boys from the school who were killed ... these being Brian Ludlow who lived in one of the cottages in Main Road, and David Coomber who lived at the house named "The Haven". Brian Ludlow had been one of the infants at the school, and David Coomber had been in the same class as June. June also recounted seeing our uncle ... Arthur Powell, who was better known as "Uncle Son", at the scene carrying out his duties as a Civil Defence worker.

Uncle Son would not speak much about the tragedy in the ensuing years. It seems that when he came home he did recount a few things to his wife and that was all.

Another of the unfortunates who perished that night was Marjorie Jean Carter, who was 17 years of age and also well known to my two sisters. The story goes that Marjorie had attended a local dance that evening, and she had not long been back indoors when the rocket fell. I often look at Marjorie's grave when tending my own family's graves in St Paul's Churchyard, Swanley Village.

The total death toll was as follows:-

Marjorie Jean Carter (already mentioned).

Horace Coomber, Margaret Coomber and David Charles Coomber (already mentioned) of "The Haven".

Ellen Margaret Ludlow and her two sons, Peter John Ludlow and Brian Thomas Ludlow (already mentioned).

Mary Ellen Mitchell (mother of Ellen Ludlow).

John Albert Williams and Violet Gladys Williams.

MAY THEY ALL REST IN PEACE

Where do I come into all this?

I was a 'product' of the early post war years and, when growing up, I was fascinated by the stories told to me, mainly by my sisters, about the war years. Consequently, I've never forgotten about the V2 rocket incident and have, in recent years, regularly spoken to my own son about it. It was he who persuaded me to do something to commemorate this almost forgotten tragedy. The outcome being that I made a decision to sponsor a blue plaque. The plaque was procured a couple of years ago, in conjunction with the Hextable Heritage Society, of which I am a member. It has been cast using the name of the Society upon it.

Since taking delivery of the plaque, Hextable Parish Council have shown great interest, and kindly given the project 100% support. Consequently, we are today holding these two combined ceremonies for both the blue plaque and the memorial garden.

Unfortunately, because of a delay in securing a suitable place to mount the plaque, my eldest sister June is no longer with us to witness today's events. However, on a positive note, it is fortuitous that we are actually commemorating this occasion on a 'Milestone' anniversary ... the 75th! If things had gone to plan, it may have been done on the 74th, which doesn't have quite the same impact.

The location of the plaque is as near as possible to the actual site of where the rocket came down, and now compliments the wooden memorial tablet already in place within Five Wents Memorial Hall ... where all the names are listed.

Before “signing off”, I really must add, that I am honoured to have in attendance with us here today, three relatives of some of the unfortunate victims from 75 years ago. May I give a warm welcome to Sue, Janice and Len, three siblings, who are cousins of the two Ludlow boys, also nieces and nephew of Ellen Margaret Ludlow, and grandchildren of Mary Ellen Mitchell.

My duty is done ... thank-you All.

John Meakins

Hawley Kent

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