

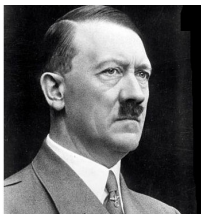
I decided to write this stuff when Finn, my grandson said that he didn't know that I had been in the Air Force whilst I was telling him of when I visited Stonehenge. I have never kept a diary so that all of this story is based upon memory and as a result is only those bits that occur to me as I write. The title "It's only a game" became my answer to people who took the Civil Service too seriously and came to me with a crisis that I could put into proper context.

1. Ages 0 to 11

I was born on 21st May 1938 in 29 Victoria Street, Northwood, Hanley, Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire. Victoria Street was built at around 1840 to accommodate working families in the coal and pottery industries. It was a street of terrace houses with two rooms at ground level and two bedrooms, no bathroom and an outside lavatory. My parents were Alfred and Emily Roper and I had an elder brother Leslie who was 14 years old at the time. The Spanish Civil War was in full flow. I didn't know much about the Spanish civil war but the bare facts are these. General Franco an ultra right wing dictator led a military rebellion against the government. He was supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. It didn't affect me a lot. In Germany when Herr Hitler heard of my birth he mobilised his Wehrmacht troops along the border of Czechoslovakia, saying that he had no intention of doing anything nasty that might upset a little English boy. László Bíró patented the ballpoint pen knowing that it would be useful for me in future years and in my honour the first Superman comic was published. In September Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain came home from a meeting with Herr Hitler



Mum Les & Mike



in Munich waving a scrap of paper saying that Hitler is a good and honourable chappie and would not do anything to upset a young English boy. Adolf Hitler graced the front cover of Time magazine as their "Man of the Year", being the most influential person of the year. In 1939 German troops marched into Poland and Britain declared war on Germany on 3rd September.

In March 1942 my father was killed by a collapse of the supports in the mine where he worked. My only memories of my father were sitting on his knee whilst he did a drawing of a horse and when he tried to put me into a bath whilst I was still wearing my socks. The bath usually hung on the wall outside, it was brought into the house, placed in front of the fire and filled with water and all the family took turns to bathe. Towards the end of the war Hitler tried to kill me by dropping a bomb. I was quite safe though as mother and I were inside a neighbour's air raid shelter. In the morning we went to see where the bomb had landed only to discover that Hitler had bombed our chip shop. The war ended in 1945. A huge bonfire was lit in Victoria street and trestle tables were brought out with more food than I had ever seen. Food rationing was in force during the war and it did not end until 1954. My brother Leslie was in The Royal Navy and should have been demobilised in 1946, however he had contracted tuberculosis and was put into a naval hospital at Chatham, he was later transferred to a hospital in Stoke on Trent and died in January 1947. I was nine years old at the time and was not considered old enough to attend a funeral and



Brother Leslie

was only told of his death some time afterwards. As there was only Mother and myself in the house since 1942 I became very independent, Mother was out to work all day, six days a week and I was at school from the age of five. I used to spend some time with a neighbour who was no relation but I called her Aunty May and also with another neighbour Shirley Haynes. I also had a house key from a very early age and I spent a lot of time reading a twelve volume encyclopaedia and listening to the radio. Dick Barton Special Agent was my favourite programme. When the Eagle comic with Dan Dare came out I bought the very first one and became a member of the Eagle Club. That first comic in clean condition sold in 2010 for £700. My Uncle Arthur kept a barbers shop just up the road and I had free hair cuts until I started to work. On Saturday mornings I went to the public baths in Hanley where I paid for some soap and a towel and had my weekly bath in a huge cast iron tub.



In Northwood the Potteries dialect was spoken by all and at Northwood Church of England Junior School we had a teacher, Mr Wooley who came from London. He had difficulty understanding some of the children and he used to ask me to translate for him. Because I listened to the radio a lot I was able to speak the Kings English as well as the Potteries dialect. One day Mr Wooley asked Tommy Adams

“What did you do on Sunday Thomas?”

“Pleed dine the cut wi me meat.” Tommy replied

“What did Thomas say Michael?”

“He went down to the canal with his friend Sir.” I replied.

“Thank you Michael”.

I wrote a few plays for the school and helped out the other pupils with reading. I had a bit of trouble with girls, Mavis Grocott and Kathleen Adams, who were both bigger than me used to steal my school cap and make me kiss them in order to get it back. Because it was a Church School and I had a voice like an angel, the vicar Reverend Hugh Marsh

Bowers (we called him Swampy) made me join the church choir.

The good part about this was that I got a very good breakfast (bacon, cheese and oatcakes) at the Verger’s (Mr Birks) house on Sunday mornings. The Nativity play saw me walking down the

aisle of the church with Mavis Grocott as Mary and me as Joseph. My opening line was “Lean on me Mary as the day is long and we have travelled

far” Mavis being much bigger than me almost made me collapse.

I played football and cricket for the school. That’s me on the far right of the football team. Gwyn Jones’ dad took Gwyn & me to watch Stoke City occasionally when Stanley Matthews was playing. He never took us again after Matthews left in 1947 to play for Blackpool. The City was in mourning.

