



# World War II Poems by Pete Ray

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# The B.S.A Folding Bicycle

Whilst teaching at the now closed Museum of Science and Industry in Birmingham, one of the more intriguing exhibits on display was a B.S.A. Folding Bicycle. I could imagine a 1940's newsreel commentator using his enthusiastic, excitable voice in a plethora of patriotism and wartime propaganda, as he described this unusual mode of warfare to cinema audiences. I have penned the following verses about an imaginary officer's barking advice to his parachutists, on the use of the B.S.A. Folding Bicycle.

*" Fold up your B.S.A. bikes, lads.  
Attach the silk parachutes tight-  
You and your bikes drop together, lads,  
In a raid over France tonight!*

*Lubricate and work the joints, lads,  
As you prepare for the silent fall-  
Your bike will drop upside down, lads,  
Wheels-first does no good at all!*

*Haul in those long puppet strings, lads,  
Detach your own 'chutes quick-  
Crouch as you assemble your bikes, lads,  
Speed, undercover is the trick!*

*Pedal like billy-o then, lads,  
Do not use bicycle lamp-  
Aim for the dry, beaten tracks, lads,  
Steer clear of the mud and the damp!*

*Jerry will be surprised, lads,  
At the pace of the drop and escape-  
As you cycle as a unit to the front, lads,  
Over the occupied French landscape! "*

**Pete Ray**

(1990, Modified March 2007)

# Cat Burglar

Love this blackout!  
The closed curtains,  
The total shadow,  
The redundant lights;  
But above all else,  
What excites me is-  
The sound of the sirens on bombing nights!

Love the haunting whine!  
The signal to slink  
Along deserted road  
Or darkened street;  
But above all else,  
What pleases me is-  
The exit of families on hurrying feet!

Love the empty houses!  
The unlocked doors,  
The easy pickings  
Of personal wealth,  
But above all else,  
What thrills me is-  
Sneaking with secret, silent stealth!

Love the unobserved getaway!  
The distracting din,  
The bliss of theft,  
The causing of harm:  
But above all else,  
What sickens me is-  
The Copper's hand upon my arm...

Pete Ray  
(Dec 2007)

# Chink Of Light

One lamp switched on-  
A low-wattage bulb,  
A candle on bolted, grey steel;  
The flame reflected on a metal table,  
The Morrison shelter,  
Where mother laid our meagre meal.

There was a reluctance  
To chat or to converse,  
Listening for sirens and the fearful drone  
Of approaching bombers-  
Hitler's aerial attack  
On England, so isolated, alone.

A sudden rapping on  
The solid oak portal  
Then bellows of 'Open this door!'  
A warden challenged,  
Parents sighed, quite shocked and  
Serviettes tumbled to floor.

Mr Joyce strode past mother,  
Heading for outraged dad;  
Accusing him, '...a chink of light  
Through blackout cloth...'  
Mom's eyes welled tears  
But protested that she'd put it right...

The gloating warden, in his stride,  
Demanded the respirators-  
'To check the boxes and masks.'  
Father recoiled and clenched his fists,  
Mom's hand went to his arm,  
Whispering, 'Let's just do as he asks.'

The adult masks were fortunately folded,  
Pristine, scrupulously clean,  
Ready for immediate use;  
The warden grumbled, murmured and mumbled,  
Finding nothing adverse-  
For tarrying he had no excuse.

We hoped and prayed he wouldn't report  
Our miniscule glint,  
That sliver of light,  
Which could have alerted,  
Those cruel German pilots  
And the Luftwaffe's awesome might.

Pete Ray

(7th Feb 2008)

# Floss And The Baby Gas Masks

Mrs Phillips next door to us,  
'Floss', she liked to be called,  
Had triplets, all born within two hours,  
The nurses were all appalled.

All three were ugly, just like their mum  
And loud, their cries were like shouts,  
The boy grew up smelling like cabbage,  
The girls both reeked of sprouts.

Once when they were two years of age  
Floss set off to the store  
To claim her rations and stand in a queue,  
But her pram sagged near to the floor.

A bag, an umbrella and three baby gas-masks  
Hung from the contraption on wheels;  
The triplets bobbed their heads up and down  
Like three identical seals.

A siren sounded- Gas Attack!  
And Floss was forced into action,  
Pulled on her own mask terribly quickly  
Improving her looks just a fraction.

She panicked and looked at the bawling brats,  
The smell of soiled nappies was acute,  
She grabbed one of their masks, then grabbed her Tommy  
And shoved in the wailing young brute.

She strapped him in and belted him up  
Then forced in six pumps of air,  
Repeated the process with Madeline and young Floss,  
All done with the minimum of care.

The triplets were bellowing, taking minimal breaths,  
Their nappies were gradually filling;  
She hung the masks on the sides of her pram  
And prayed she'd get home, 'God willing.'

Big Floss unlocked her door and unclipped the babes  
Then carried them into the hall,  
The masks came off, they all survived,  
Despite the rather close call.

The tears still flowed but the masks lay silent,  
They had done their jobs well, no doubts  
Yet when Floss removed hers there was the unmistakable odour  
Of poo, of cabbage and sprouts.

Pete Ray

(24th Feb 2007)

# I Thought I Was Going On Holiday

Grey, buttoned coat, too long in the sleeves,  
Hand-me-down from one of the twins-  
Derek, or maybe Dave.  
Hem needs sewing, one pocked ripped;  
Gas mask and label, both hanging on string,  
In tears amid reassuring grins....

Suitcase my father's from the First World War,  
Spare pants inside, spare shirt and grey, spare socks-  
Once Derek's maybe, or Dave's.  
Shoes new, but utility;  
Laces, just learned to tie,  
Waiting nervously 'til the lady knocks....

Look like a parcel bought for Christmas,  
Without the brown paper wrapping-  
From Derek, possibly, or Dave.  
A gift for an unsuspecting guardian;  
Nails cut, ears washed, hair brushed,  
How I hate it when mom is flapping....

Conscious though, that she doesn't want me to go,  
Tears falling onto patterned dress-  
Derek's here too, and Dave.  
My nose is running, salt wet in my eyes;  
Flannel rubs at the corners of my lips,  
Mustn't go to the station a mess....

An only child, I'll miss my mom,  
And my best friend, my Teddy-  
Yes, Derek too, and Dave.  
I'll try to be brave and remember my manners;  
Say 'please' and 'thank you' and 'Grace',  
But still need a wee before I'm ready....

Herded together along the road,  
Have to stand up on the tram-  
With cousins Derek, and Dave.  
Journey too short to Snow Hill Station;  
Goodbyes too soon, too many others around,  
The platform too, is such a terrible jam....

Wanted to stay home, thought I was safe,  
The Morrison shelter would suffice-  
Like for Derek, and Dave.  
Blanket, pillow and Teddy to hug tight;  
Cage to protect, all made from steel,  
Though it always seems colder than ice....

Now I'm travelling to I know not where,  
To the house of a total stranger-  
No Derek, or Dave.  
Alone, aggrieved, alarmed, afraid;  
Too stubborn to cry, or cling, or wail,  
Leaving my mother in imminent danger....

The train pulls out, how will I know  
If my mom is killed in a raid?  
Or Derek, or Dave?  
Miles away in a village school, maybe?  
Fields and lanes and so far from my home,  
How could I go to my family's aid...?

Children weeping, some laughing, some numb,  
The heartache palpable now I'm alone-  
Without Derek, or Dave.  
A label, a suitcase, a box, a stray;  
A vagrant, an orphan, a migrant, a waif,  
God forgive mom for what she has done....

**Pete Ray**

(Feb 2007)

An evacuee leaves Birmingham....

# Nits

Hustled, hurried, harangued-  
Waif-like  
Lonely boy;  
Pushed, poked, provoked,  
Clinging to a toy.  
Alone, anguished, affronted,  
Demeanour suggests he is coy.

An evacuation label hangs creased and limp  
Around young Freddie's neck, on strings,  
His cheap, scored, battered suitcase treasured-  
To loose, broken handle he clings.

Unbrushed teeth yellow and crooked,  
Breath stale, gums blackened and sore;  
Malnourished, his bones are under-developed,  
Worsened by this rationing war.

Yet marking Freddie as different from others  
Is the complete absence of hair,  
Crudely scissored to virtually bald,  
Making other children stare.

His head had been rife when he was checked,  
Before leaving the city by rail,  
The only real cure was to shave his head-  
A remedy sure never to fail.

The condition was thought to lead to Typhus  
And drastic action was needed;  
When Freddie was scalped, it was generally agreed  
That the danger had significantly receded.

So here stands Freddie, tearful and forlorn,  
Unwanted by each villager-host;  
Obviously unhealthy, rather a poor risk  
And pushed from pillar to post.

He wets his bed, he cannot read,  
He has barely attended school;  
The government should have realised  
Freddie was no exception but the rule...

Distressed, disturbed, disoriented-  
Abandoned solitary boy-  
Ignored, impoverished, ignominious,  
Weeping on his toy;  
Unattractive, underprivileged, uninvited-  
For Freddy, no warmth or joy...

Pete Ray

(Dec 07)

# Pillboxman

Dusk.

Barely a movement here,  
Just the apologies for waves  
Slapping on hardening sands,  
Stranded kelp and broken edges of shattered shells,  
Across the moonlit beach, which Mothecombe spans.

Cool.

Barely a sound here,  
Just the swish of marram,  
Erect in abandoned dunes,  
Complaints of crows  
And scrabbling claws of invisible rodents,  
Adding to the most discordant of tunes.

Row.

Barely a splash now,  
Just the dip of oars  
Slipping beneath darkening sea,  
Creaks of prow  
And sharpening rushes of nervous breaths-  
Aching muscles force gasps from me...

Moor.

Barely a delay now,  
Just the wring of rope  
Tightening around rusty pole,  
Hoots of owls  
And scraping boots of desperate footholds,  
Anchoring myself, to fulfil my role.

### Pillbox.

Barely a comfort here,  
Just the anguish for peace,  
Quickening through heart's erratic beat,  
Beads of perspiration  
And frowning lids of straining eyes,  
Anxious camouflage would remain discreet.

### Duty.

Barely a rest, now,  
Just the lookout for enemies  
Appearing on distant water,  
Throbs of excitement  
And itchy desire of triggered fingers,  
Aimed and committed to unquestioned slaughter...

Pete Ray

*Mothecombe beach's pillbox nestles still, just above sea-level but below a high cliff, with what looks like its own ring of rocks as a tiny harbour. I wanted to be the Pillboxman...*



# Rat Heater

The army chef greeted a passing Sergeant,  
Baton tight under his arm,  
Stirring porridge with wooden spoon,  
Surely no reason for alarm?

Chef checked the consistency of the stodgy mass  
And cast an eye to the urn,  
Steaming briskly on that icy morning,  
Though the Sergeant's expression was stern.

The army Sergeant barely waved back,  
Baton ready and poised to strike  
The metal frames at the feet of men's beds,  
Privates and Corporals alike.

The Sergeant spotted a window ajar,  
At the rear of the kitchen, a store;  
He marched across to close it tight  
When movement inside dropped his jaw.

Brown rats played and teemed on the oats,  
Which the men were expected to swallow,  
Urine and droppings defiled the cereal  
And the Sergeant's response was hollow.

The three-striped Sergeant slammed the window closed  
And marched straight back to the cook,  
'Have you seen what the rats have done on the oats?  
Get in there and have a good look!'

Rats scurried away as the pair entered the room  
The Sergeant's face reddened and recoiled  
But the cook said the men would never find out,  
Nobody noticed when the oats had been boiled.

The Sergeant, incredulous, reported the cook  
To officers of higher rank  
But nothing was done about the rats on the oats  
And the Sergeant had no-one to thank.

The cook escaped punishment, the rats ate the oats,  
Urinated, dropped faeces and ran amuck,  
The Sergeant kept quiet and never ate porridge again  
But the detestation of vermin stuck.

A week or so later, the Sergeant entered the barracks  
To awaken the men with his stick  
But as he prepared to strike the first soldier's bed,  
He froze at the scene, feeling sick....

The soldier slept with blanket to chin,  
Keeping head warm with woollen fatigue-hat,  
But across his mouth, the Sergeant was horrified to see  
Was a large, brown sleeping rat.

The baton swooped down on the bed's metal frame,  
The rat scurried away through a door;  
It had found the warm air expiring from the soldier's mouth  
And had spread itself over his jaw.

The Sergeant, disgusted, explained to the soldier  
Who wiped his hand across both mouth and brow,  
Yet all the chap said in response to the news was,  
'It had to keep warm somehow....'

After the war had long been over,  
The pair met in civilian hats  
And when asked by the officer what job he was doing,  
The Private replied, 'I catch rats....'

Pete Ray

(Feb 2007)

This actually happened. My father was the Sergeant. It took place at Ballykinlar  
Camp, Northern Ireland.

# Respirator

The underside of my brown cardboard box  
Sanctimoniously instructs one thus-  
'OPEN OTHER END'- it's gouged like Braille,  
For those with no common sense among us.

On the obvious lid in large-block letters  
For the fatuous, 'TOP' is written;  
To aid the blind, or when in total darkness,  
To prevent such lives being smitten.

The sizes differ in my family home,  
'Smalls' for me and my brother,  
A 'Large' for my father's enormous bald-head  
And a 'Medium' for my mother.

Practice made wearing the foul-smelling rubber  
An everyday, inconvenient chore  
But when my brother and I return from work,  
We hang them on the lavatory door.

I don't like the tin containers, I prefer a box,  
We even have a mask for the dog;  
I hate wearing mine but I did one night,  
When Brum vanished in engulfing, grey smog.

I kissed my girlfriend once, whilst wearing mine,  
It wasn't a fate worse than death,  
As our filtered extremities nudged together,  
I avoided her really bad breath.

We rub a little soap on the insides of the windows,  
To prevent them from misting up inside  
But my brother left his glasses on once-  
They got jammed and we laughed 'til we cried!

I took the *box* into work one day  
But the foreman formulated a hunch;  
He made me open the lid and show him inside,  
Where I had stashed my lunch.

Mine has no elastic but awkward cloth straps,  
And flimsy rubber, which could tear,  
Unlike those made for air raid wardens,  
Or the Mickey Mouses that young children wear.

Miserable wardens often rap on the door  
To check not only the *blackout* but masks;  
'They must be carefully folded with canisters in holes'-  
One of the irritating, mundane war tasks.

I saw a mask on a horse quite recently,  
Ridden by a 'toff' in his respirator too;  
He was the Master of the local fox-hunt,  
In his finery, a deep shade of blue.

Jodhpurs, boots and an aristocratic air,  
The bounder trotted and cantered between rocks;  
He'd be shocked if the odds were evened however  
And a machine-gun was given to the fox...

Gas masks have become quite a burden,  
Especially as it has come to pass,  
That although the Germans have bombed and burned our city,  
They haven't attacked us with gas!

Pete Ray

(Dec 2007)

# Siren

Turning over. Restless.  
Sleep unattainable.

Waiting....

Awaiting the imminent wail,  
Which shocks  
Without fail  
To raise me from  
Fitful repose.

Lying prone. Perspiring.  
Eyes wide.

Waiting....

Awaiting the inevitable scramble,  
Which ensues  
Without preamble  
To take Hitler's next  
Formidable dose.

Descending stairs. Clumsy.  
Reactions hazy.

Waiting....

Awaiting the abhorrent silence,  
Which terrifies  
Without essence  
To dampen the spirit-  
Fear extreme.

Crouching low. Hiding.  
Breath rapid.

Waiting....

Awaiting the distant drone,  
Which hovers  
Without tone  
To pre-empt an attack:  
Fuhrer's scheme.

Covering ears. Shaking.  
Cold searing.  
Waiting....  
Awaiting the potent force,  
Which explodes  
Without pause  
To censor its victims'  
Frightening demise.

Shedding tears. Desperate.  
Rubble falling.  
Waiting....  
Awaiting the errant device,  
Which slaughters  
Without malice  
To deflate the soul;  
Fatalities rise.

Burning skin. Helpless.  
Smoke inhaled.  
Waiting....  
Awaiting the remote possibility,  
Which pervades  
Without probability  
To recover the senses;  
Finality near.

Fading life. Hopeless.  
Pain invasion.  
Waiting....  
Awaiting the grim silence,  
Which shrouds  
Without preference  
To steal my life,  
Forever dear....

Pete Ray

(February 2007)

Hiding under the stairs. Another life lost. World War 2, Home Front.

# Warden

Heavy coat is hauled over hunched shoulders  
As sirens curdle the soul;  
Black helmet chin-strapped, bag swung around neck,  
Door opens on night dark as coal.

Pavement deserted, searchlights scan  
As approaching aircraft drone;  
Stepping out, sunk in navy raised-collar,  
He shivers an unintentional groan.

He hurries past neighbours' houses, blacked-out,  
Checking for stray chinks of light;  
Eyes too watchful, get used to the gloom,  
Cowl dims torch, restricts his sight.

Explosions nearby make him shudder, whilst  
Checking a street-shelter door;  
As the unseemly stench of stale urine wafts out,  
A woman writhes on the brick-dust floor.

He stoops to pacify or administer First Aid  
But finds fractures to left leg and arm;  
He calms her, identifies her, labels her wrist  
And comforts her, now sheltered from harm.

He eases his arthritic frame to the street  
But assistance is not easy to find;  
Then DETONATION, RUMPUS, flare and roar!  
Sluggish, grimacing, doom fills his mind.

Shrapnel fragments erupt from the source  
Of a shell's discharge nearby;  
The warden is flung backwards into the road  
With a shrill, exhaustive, plaintive cry.

He lies bleeding in agony from a stomach wound  
Of fatal proportions, torch still gripped in hand;  
Helmet scratched, strapped red to his skull-  
Disorientated, he's unable to stand.

Billowing smoke chokes a charring throat,  
Mouth moves in silent appeal;  
A burning, putrid, perplexing din  
Consumes the tangible and all is unreal.

Dribbled blood, dried maroon on his chin,  
Mouth contorted in violent death-throes;  
Torch in clenched hand, shelter key on the ground,  
Medic gently holds blistered lips closed....

**Pete Ray**

(February 2007)

ARP Warden saves a woman and gets killed himself.