

Title (up to 20 words) - The Dark Days

Strapline (up to 40 words) - This was the bomb that smothered my town in its black smoke

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) - Being a Monday, it was wash day. And much to the joy of everyone on Beach Road in Llanreath, it was a glorious day. A beautiful, light, bright day. I was just hanging all of the nappies out on the line; Pamela was only a baby at the time, and Ena was nine, bless them, and discussing the mess our babies make with Annie next door. Blonde hair and the most startling green eyes, always immaculately dressed in the latest fashions, even for a new mother, Annie Munroe was the centre of our community, and the person who helped keep everything together and everyone calm. I cannot count how many people she helped, and I couldn't possibly describe how welcome she made everyone feel.

There had been other bombings and attempts to harm us, but absolutely nothing like this. The oil tanks were built before air warfare was even considered, so they were perched on hill tops, always looking like they were too large to sit on the peaks. I remember that the dockyard had closed in around 1925, or maybe 1926, but Pembroke Dock was still an important military base you see, and it had the army barracks and the naval oil storage depots. One of the earlier bombings I remember was one that targeted the oil tanks at Pembroke ferry, and rumour had it that one tank had been hit but the bomb didn't go off. I never knew what to make of that story though, it was so easy to get caught up in 'oh did you hear about this?' and then realise that it was a load of rubbish. At about 2 o'clock, we heard them. I suppose lots of us were used to them by now, the low rumbling sound, almost grating but not quite. They reminded me of oversized flies, the buzzing surrounding everything when they are there, but it suddenly goes silent when they are gone. They came so, so low, seeming like they were going to crash into the hills. We could see the German planes massive overhead, and Annie would come to say that she could see the German pilot in his leather helmet.

It could only have been around thirty seconds later, when we heard a whistling of the bombs falling. All we could do was watch as they came ever nearer to our homes, and the oil tanks sat atop of the hills. Everything in slow motion. My mind frozen. Closer and closer. Closer and closer.

Until...

The loudest and biggest explosion I had ever heard.

Plumes and plumes of smoke flowed up, as one of the twelve tonne tanks caught alight, and the blaze spread. This cloud was so utterly enormous that people believed that it was seen from Swansea. I really did feel for the firefighters, who seemed to have adequate protection then, but now I realise were so poorly equipped. They were nothing more than men off the street who trained locally, and their kit was nothing short of a boiler suit, a pair of wellie boots, and the tin hats that the soldiers wore in the war. It was in the moment that I saw them running towards the flames that I realised. My husband Robert would have been one of those men, if he hadn't have returned to his unit a couple of days before, after a week at home.

The heat from the fire was smothering. No one wanted to leave their houses that night and I stayed longer than most. My first thoughts were of Pamela and Ena, who would not know what was happening. And I doubted myself. I really did. It was an impossible decision whether to stay put in my home, where we felt safe, or leave – to somewhere that might have been safer. I knew that Annie had evacuated, although her husband Albert was one of the very few people left in the town, carrying out his duties as the village air raid warden. The majority of the town had also left. I think I recall Annie telling me that she ended up with scores of families bedding down on the Barrack Hill because they simply didn't have anywhere to go. Our town wasn't just a military base. It held all of our homes and memories, and because Llanreath was such a tightly knit community, many families only lived a couple of doors down from each other. Why would they have anywhere else to go?

It was an awful waiting game. Somehow knowing we were in danger but also somehow we knew that we weren't being directly targeted so our homes were mostly fine.

Although, every time the tanks flared up with an awful roaring noise, our home trembled violently. It was like being in a house of cards and waiting for it to fall apart.

Finally, with my two daughters, I moved into Pembroke.

We packed small bags, as we were going to move in temporarily with Enid, who I knew was already overrun with children and toddlers, but she was my closest friend and loved a busy house. As we were leaving, and I shut the front door behind me I noticed that all the paint was peeling off and this was no different as we walked through the town. The heat from the fires was so intense, that the paint on the window and door frames had blistered and melted.

The blaze lasted for eighteen days, with the sky turned as black as night in the middle of the day, but the blaze so large that it was possible to read the newspaper at night, just from the orange glow.