



Civilians were called into action on the home front and in many cities they undertook vital important and dangerous roles.

Birmingham's BLITZ

Steve Richards presents excerpts from his book *The Luftwaffe over Brum: Birmingham's Blitz from a Military Perspective* and here details the harrowing diary entries of a volunteer ambulance driver.

In the autumn of 1940, Claudia Frances Renton was 57 years old and the mother of eight grown-up children. She lived in Mary Road, Stechford (one of Birmingham's eastern suburbs) with her husband and youngest daughter, Peg. In October 1939, being a car owner, Claudia had offered her services as an ambulance car driver. The following year she enlisted in the Mechanised Transport Corps (MTC) and continued to work in a similar role.

The second half of October 1940 was a testing time for Birmingham with its residents, workers and civil defence being on the receiving end of 217 tons of high explosive bombs and around 20,000 incendiaries. Morale might have been worse had the general public known to what extent the German bombers were having a free hand. At this stage there was virtually no defence against the night raider. A German pilot participating in these night attacks commented: "The raids were all quite routine, like running a bus service."



Claudia's Diary

What follows are extracts from her journal, as written in the middle of October 1940. "I arrived at 7am and Mr Cansell [the section chief] rushed me off at once to an incident and so relieve those who had been there all night. It was in Bishop Street/Gooch Street.

Several [people] had been buried in cellars there and gas and water pipes had burst too, so the poor beggars had no chance.

"I saw them bring about 15 out, one at a time, and I helped to tie them up in their shrouds. Oh the terrible sights! As we were fastening one up and examining her, thinking her dead, she turned her head and opened her poor, swollen black eyes and asked for a cup of tea. She was rushed off to hospital (after a sip or two of tea). But it was so sad to see the people standing about waiting for their children and mothers to be dug out. One poor man was only allowed to see his daughter's shoe – they wouldn't let him see her to identify her – she was too terrible to look at. I followed him into his house, the rescue men had to nearly carry him, and his wife was weeping in her apron. I patted them and took their hands and said: 'Let it comfort you to know she was killed outright, she wouldn't have suffered.' 'Oh do you think so, Ma'am?' the old lady said looking up from her apron. I said: 'Yes, most certainly.' She said: 'Those are the most comforting words I have heard.' As I passed through the barriers where hundreds of people were, they called to me: 'God bless you for what you are doing.' I couldn't keep the tears back." ▶

RIGHT: CLAUDIA IN HER FORMAL MTC UNIFORM.

LEFT: THE SCENE IN EDGBASTON STREET NEAR TO THE BULLRING, BIRMINGHAM, FOLLOWING A RAID.

Only Survivor

"One woman came clambering up from the back of ruins with her face all cut and coat torn. She had found her own way out somehow. It was just like someone rising from a grave for such it was. Five of the rescue-men went over the pile of ruins to get her and helped her over into the street where such a cheer went up from the crowd at sight of her and a man ran forward and kissed her and another boy too.

"One white-faced lad, about 17, had been standing around looking at each corpse as they were brought up. Then seeing one he cried: 'My Mam' and went away. I wanted to go after him but I was too busy, I couldn't leave.

"A lot of the dead could not be identified they were so knocked about. We searched their pockets for any sign of identification but in some cases it was hopeless. I was there from 7am until 1.30pm and still they had not dug them all out. Being the only one in khaki such a lot of people evidently thought I was in charge, for they came to me, ever so many parsons among them and I sent them into the homes of the bereaved. One gentleman gave me a very low bow and raised his hat, then came and



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"Some kind old workman came following me about with a jug of tea and a cup. I refused often, then in the end simply had to have it to please him. That was a ghastly grim business and made one realise what war is.





OPPOSITE TOP: CLAUDIA RENTON IN THE GARDEN OF HER COTTAGE AT CHIPPING CAMDEN.

OPPOSITE BELOW: A FORMAL OCCASION WITH MAYOR WILFRED MARTINEAU OUTSIDE BIRMINGHAM COUNCIL HOUSE IN SUMMER 1941. CLAUDIA RENTON IS SECOND FROM THE RIGHT TOGETHER WITH ANOTHER MTC AMBULANCE DRIVER.

LEFT: A 1932 MORRIS OXFORD SALOON CAR AFTER IT HAD BEEN CONVERTED FOR USE AS AN AMBULANCE. ALONGSIDE IS CLAUDIA POSING IN HER PROTECTIVE CLOTHING, WHICH WAS TO BE USED IN THE EVENT OF A GAS ATTACK.

BELOW: BOMB DAMAGE TO HOUSES IN VERA ROAD, YARDLEY, DURING NOVEMBER 1940.

“About the next night after that, there was a heavy raid around Stechford and Yardley. Two or three houses in Vera Road were down. A bomb fell [near Claudia’s home] in Mary Road. I was in the hall at the time and it felt as though the lounge and dining room were falling together – the hall seemed to sink; I gripped the door of the dining room. Several of our windows were broken with it. Just round the corner from Richmond Road three or four houses were down. Seven children and a father were all killed in one house. Our night shift had to turn out and the seven children were all laid out under our shed. The garage where we get our ARP [Air Raid Precautions] petrol was completely to the ground, and lots of houses in Bordesley.”

End of October

“During the last week or two there have been awful raids in Birmingham. Shops and factories down everywhere. Fires going all night. On Saturday night I stood in the veranda watching the bombs dropping over Birmingham. You would see flashes lighting up everywhere, then ‘bang’, the bomb had dropped, and a t r r r r r r r r – the building falling, collapsing like a pack of cards or toy bricks.

“I am not on night duty, but those who were went out. A bomb dropped close behind the escort car (which would have been mine had I been on) and it raised it high in the air, and down it came with a bump. The driver thought it was all-up.

“Our ambulances picked up a lot of dead from the Picture House, Stratford Road, and had to take them to mortuary where

floors were full of dead people, hundreds of them I was told, they just took them in and dumped them down – no one there to receive them, and a girl of 20 had to help carry them in.”

Night attacks on Coventry and Birmingham during mid-November 1940 resulted in hundreds of deaths and much damage to factories, houses and the general infrastructure. The night of 14/15 was the infamous strike on Coventry and, during the same moonlight period, Birmingham suffered heavy raids on the 19/20, 20/21 and 22/23.

December 18, 1940

“So much has been happening to poor old Birmingham the past month and more, and I have not had the least inclination to write it down, but I will recall just a few of the experiences, giving description of one week only. About five weeks ago I went to Coventry to give my off-duty day to help in any way I could. No traffic at all was allowed past Stonebridge, but being in uniform and having our sectional flag on car I was allowed to pass without even showing my identification cards. In fact, the policemen made way for me.

“When I got to Coventry I could not tell where I was, every street and building was down to the ground, all gutted, smoking and smouldering. It was a pitiful sight to see the Cathedral down. I reported to Police Headquarters and there were hundreds of people ▶





bombed. No one had been near him, only neighbours to give him food. He was too weak to stand. The doctor had seen him and said he must be got away somewhere – but where – all hospitals were full. I had to climb over piles of bombed buildings to get to him, so I knew it would be a stretcher case to get him out. I [called] for an ambulance, but the whole place and ambulances had been bombed – in fact all of them had. There were ambulances from other towns working, but where?

“I went to the address of a refuge home given me and found it was just a chapel and filled with children, no place for the poor, dying old man. Then I found this first aid man who helped quite a lot. We found the sister of a First Aid Post who promised to send an ambulance for the old chap when one returned and the first aid man said he would go and see that it was done.

waiting in queues to get a hearing – homeless people. A way was made for me by police and I walked straight through and offered my services. I was sent to hospital, and from there was given a list of people to look after and find homes for. The addresses of refuge homes were given to me but as all phones were down it meant actually going to these places to see how many they could take, and it was so difficult to find the places and all roads blocked.

“I got hold of the first aid man from Courtaulds who was also on the same job and he was a great help in showing me the way. We found the slum district we went for, and the people there were just sheltering under bits of corrugated iron; their walls, ceilings, doors and windows were all out and if the beds were left they were drenched with water, bricks and rubbish.”

Overwhelmed

“One old man in particular, he was nearly dead, he was sitting in a chair by a fire; his fire grate was left but no walls around it, and there he had sat since the place was

ABOVE: ONE THIRD OF GERMAN MINES DROPPED IN THE COUNTY BOROUGH OF BIRMINGHAM FAILED TO EXPLODE. HERE, A ‘DUD’ 1,000KG PARACHUTE MINE IS SEEN IN A RESIDENTIAL AREA. (VIA NIGEL PARKER)

RIGHT: THE DAMAGE SUSTAINED BY THE METRO-CAMMELL CARRIAGE & WAGON FACTORY AT WASHWOOD HEATH FOLLOWING A MINE EXPLOSION DURING THE ATTACK OF DECEMBER 11/12, 1940. (AVERY HISTORICAL MUSEUM)

OPPOSITE: THIS CREW FROM KG55 PARTICIPATED IN A NUMBER OF ATTACKS AGAINST BIRMINGHAM. (VIA MARTIN REISER)



"In the meantime I took several old people and children to refuge homes. It was most pitiful the things they wanted to take with them from their destroyed homes. There was no water, gas or food in the town. The people were being fed by mobile canteens and when a lorry arrived with loaves on, it was surrounded and soon sold out. The miles of people waiting for buses to get them away carrying their pet cats

"I had to climb over piles of bombed buildings to get to him, so I knew it would be a stretcher case to get him out"



and canaries and pots and pans and all kinds of things, where they were going goodness knows, they didn't know themselves. They were all black from the bombing and no water to wash, yet you could see and hear rushing water at the bottom of all bombed premises.

"The Ministry of Information had a van there driven by one of our MTC ladies, and he was speaking through a loudspeaker telling the people all their children were to be at such a place at such a time to be taken away at once, they feared an epidemic, and he said no one must use their lavatories. There were craters everywhere and I saw a van had run down one and a car in another, so I had to leave Coventry before dark, leaving all the desolation behind me."

Little or No Rest

"The next day I was on duty from 3pm to 10pm but sirens went and rain started and we are not off duty until the all clear goes, even if it is all night. So this Tuesday [November 19] night raid started early, bombs dropped all around this school (our post). Every house in the street at the side of school (Drummond Road) was struck and several on fire. The screams and shrieks of the people were only drowned by bombs falling all the time. Every morning we expected this school to go too. Many ARP posts have been struck. We were all sent down into the cellars, and the men called up as they were wanted to go out. Many of them returned on the verge of collapse and looking so black and sooty that you would hardly recognise them as the ►

RIGHT: CLEARING BOMB DAMAGE IN BIRMINGHAM, CIRCA 1940. (MIRRORPIX/GETTY)

BELOW: A JUNKERS JU 88 OF KG51 ABOUT TO DEPART FROM ITS BASE AT ORLY, FRANCE, BOUND FOR THE MIDLANDS IN NOVEMBER 1940. (WW2.COM VIA AUTHOR)

OPPOSITE: KING GEORGE VI INSPECTING FIREMEN ON HIS VISIT TO BIRMINGHAM AFTER A BOMBING RAID IN DECEMBER 1940. (MIRRORPIX/GETTY)

full-of-life fellows they were when they went out. Young Oakley from Stechford was one, when he returned he could not speak, sweat was pouring down his black face. He had been fire-fighting. There were fires, fires everywhere you could see – brighter than day and sunshine. Many of the rescued people were bandaged up and sent down into the cellars with us – poor things suffering from shock.

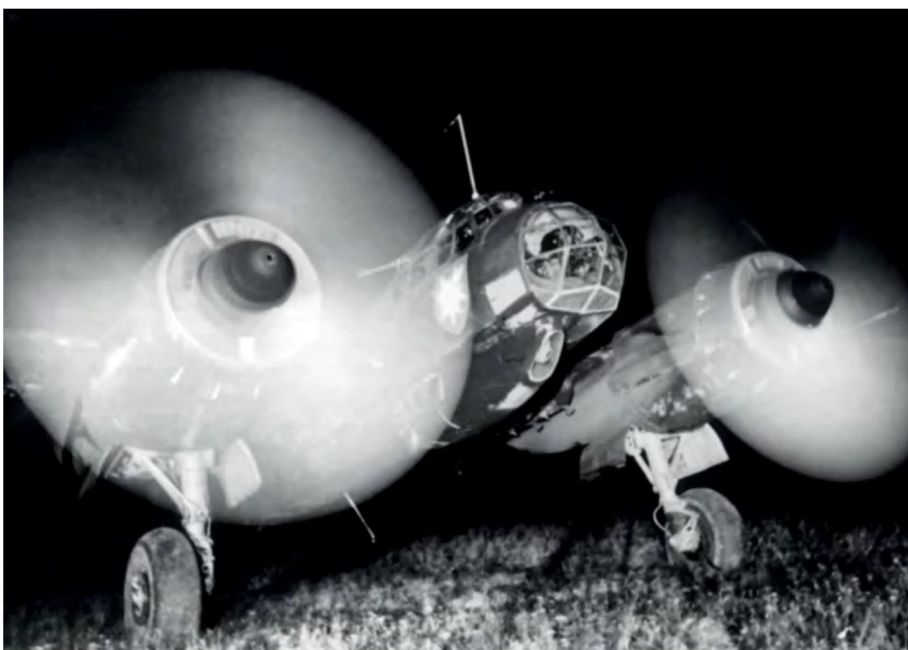
“Then the call came down for Mrs Renton. So I climbed up through the trapdoor and followed the ambulance to Cherry Wood Road in my own car. The Post Office had been bombed and was burning – in fact, everywhere was. People were trapped under a house, so the men took the stretchers and clambered over the fallen building to get them out. I had to stand by the ambulance and pass anything they called for. More screaming bombs fell around me; lights blazed from every window as the glass and blackout fell out as houses crashed. I was spellbound and not afraid as I watched walls bulge, then collapse.

“I had a man with cut eye to take to first aid for treatment, and the way I had come was all blocked. I had to

go another way then found a house right down across the road. Two men helped me to move some of the bricks to get over, I thought every minute the car would overbalance. Then I got through and another bomb in front of me blew down one of the big green standards and cables for trams, and a fire started. I had to drive between fire and craters and over these overheated cables. Whether they were dangerous or not I knew not, but thought the rubber tyres were non-conductors and I also had rubber boots on and so I got back to depot with my patient. Then I had to return to scene of incident. Still they had not got people out, they could hear cries and a baby crying. I said: ‘Let me come, let me help,’ but they said no, it was a case for Rescue Squads who knew their work. We may have done more harm by trying to untrap them, more would fall on them. So I rushed away to report a rescue squad was needed; it was sent at once.”

Terrible toll

“Our men were returning all from different places, and were all on the verge of collapse. Many did. One driver told me, only yesterday, that if he had been sent out again he would be in a lunatic asylum by now. That terrible night has played havoc with our personnel. Such a lot have turned the job in since then; one of our men drivers had been four years in last war, yet said that all those years put together he never saw half as much as he saw in Bordesley Green that night. He has been off ever since and we hear he can never face it again. Every



“There were fires, fires everywhere you could see – brighter than day and sunshine”

time he hears a bomb drop he shrinks into a corner on the floor and cries, and they dare not leave him. Yet he was a hardened old soldier.

“I got home about 3.30am. I felt like patting myself on the back for coming through it so well, yet I could not sleep. I worried about those trapped people and wondered if they had been got out alive, and regretted I was unable to lift the tons and tons of bricks under gunfire and bombs. I had only been back a few minutes when the school, our depot, was struck.”



safety. It was pouring in torrents all the time, but luckily no bombs dropped near me. But it was even worse than driving between fires and bombs the night before, for all Birmingham was ablaze then and we could see where we were going.

"I was feeling pretty rotten but went on duty next day as usual, but when the raid started about 7pm I just about collapsed and knew I could not go through another night of it, so just said I was going home, where I arrived in a state of collapse. We had a 12-hour raid that night. It was dreadful, the bombs were so near. It seemed each one was for us. It had been a terrible raid and lot of people killed and trapped."

In a state of nervous exhaustion Claudia took herself off to Chipping Camden, Gloucestershire, where she kept a rented house. The idea was to rest for a week, but that didn't go to plan. "The first night I heard the planes going over, hundreds of them. I thought each was for Birmingham and maybe Stechford and Yardley and I could not rest. I got up at 3am, dressed and went back. The terrible suspense was worse than being actually in the raid.

"After 2½ weeks I came back to the depot yet felt I could never stand any more; the people here talking about the raids made me go all hot and trembly – I gave a week's notice. I was asked if I would give it another trial; orders had come from Headquarters that no women were to be sent out at night unless it was very urgent. So here am I, hoping I can stick with it and feel I have done something worthwhile." ▶

Hard Times

"The next night was inky black and I had to drive a patient to hospital. It was so dark that when I got there I had to get out of car and feel for gates to drive in by. I had to wait 2½ hours for that patient; they hadn't a bed or would have kept her. While I was in, bombs were dropping. In all my life I shall never forget that drive back in the blackout. There was not a soul or a car about, and it was so black you could not see the outline of buildings. Bombs had been dropped the way I had come and there was a white tape across a crater. If I had been going any faster than five miles an hour I could not have seen it. No one about to ask, and I tried several routes with the same result, all blocked until I found myself going round in circles. Surely some guardian angel took the wheel that night for after about two hours I got back to Stechford and





Protracted Ordeal

On the night of December 11/12, Birmingham sustained another attack which was recorded as being its longest of the Blitz, lasting 13 hours. The raid was in two distinct phases with about 80 minutes separating them. Among the ordnance which fell were a couple of dozen parachute mines that had a fearsome blast effect. Fortunately, about half had failed to explode.

"There was a bad raid last Thursday and I was on duty from 2pm until 3am and when I got back there was Peg sitting up for me. The morning after I went to town. It took me two hours to get there and two to get back by car, for whole streets were bombed and it was a pitiful sight to see the homeless people just gathering what they could find of their homes. No water or gas for a week

ABOVE: KING GEORGE VI DURING A VISIT TO A BLITZED BIRMINGHAM IN DECEMBER 1940. (MIRRORPIX/GETTY)

*"So once more I close
and hope for the best...
God save the King
and all of us!"*

anywhere and people had to wait their turns in queues for water and water carts. The three nearest depots to ours have all been bombed down to the ground. They are Kings Road, Tyseley; Montgomery Street, Small Heath and Anthony Road, Saltley. There are huge craters where these depots were, and a lot of casualties among the personnel. The cars in yard were turned completely over and the ambulance [was] like a concertina. I prefer sitting in my car during a raid to sheltering in the cellars, but after seeing these cars, no more [going] in cars for me.

"There goes the bell time – 7pm. In a minute lights will go out and we must assemble in the hall with our kit and tin

hats on ready to be called upon to go out if raid is around here. So once more I close and hope for the best, and next week it will be Xmas – God save the King and all of us!"

Better times were ahead for Claudia – she survived the war and lived to be 85.

Thank you to the family of Claudia Frances Renton for their kind permission to use these extracts from her diary. ●

Further Reading:

This feature is based on extracts from the book *The Luftwaffe over Brum: Birmingham's Blitz from a Military Perspective* by Steve Richards (ISBN 978-0-95637-083-9). The 144-page softback has an RRP of £19.95 and is available from: www.birminghamair-raids.co.uk

