

“They returned to discover their block gone.”

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, 26 May, 2022

“Home Front”

Word Count: 750

Years ago, on a family visit to London, wife and her mother took our elder daughter, in her posh frock, to High Tea at Harrods. I shepherded the younger two to a place I thought would meet our son’s boyish interests. We took the tube under the Thames, exited at Lambeth Road. He instantly knew he’d like this part of our family vacation when he saw the 15 inch guns from two famous British ships on the front lawn of London’s Imperial War Museum. The World War I gallery scared him. We toured through a terrifying replica of a front-line trench, complete with sounds of soldiers, machine-guns, bombings. My wife’s South African grandmother during WW1 lost nine brothers, eight in the infantry, one who became a pilot after being gassed in the trenches. They weren’t picky.

Our son found less interesting the gallery which I found surprisingly the most fascinating. It was an entire gallery devoted to the Home Front during both wars: the plucky music (“run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run...”), rationing, air raid wardens, fire brigades, back yard shelters, the sacrifice required. The privation, displacement, the death of innocents due to a racist country’s tyrannical, fanatical, and propaganda fueled nationalism.

Here in the United States the Home Front hasn’t been particularly recognized, us far from war’s front lines, with the exception of that rebellion by insurrectionist residents from southern states. Even then, the home front was Richmond, Vicksburg, and Atlanta, those home fronts suffering their folly and sinful embrace of slavery rather than Chicago, Philadelphia, Albany. Although, New York did experience a riot where angry residents blamed their black neighbors and went mad and attacked them. Moderate estimates run as high as 1,200 murdered. 3,000 black residents were made homeless. Black churches, orphanages, schools, shops were burnt to the ground.

My wife’s mother recounted a home front story. Frustrated by living in safety in the states, despite working for British Intelligence, she resolved to return to her beleaguered country. She did so on a troop ship escorting orphans back to London in 1944. By that time, given the V-1 rocket’s unpredictability, these buzz bombs, the populace rarely ran for cover during an air raid. There was no cover. One evening her friends hired a baby-sitter and went to the movies. An air-raid occurred. They returned to discover their block gone.

The Home Front. We paid our price too. My mother’s hometown, Westfield, New Jersey, would mourn dozens of its soldier sons from that war, including the older brothers of mom and her sister’s playmates.

My grandmother, Florence, volunteered at the Red Cross. As a younger woman she rolled bandages for the Red Cross for the soldiers of World War I. Her rich sisters never did understand why grandma would spend time doing this. For World War II, she worked in the office assisting families gain information about their loved ones. Grandpa George, after he was rebuffed by the Army as being too old to enlist in the infantry, helped with contributions and drives. George and Florence also sent food packages to George’s Aunt Phillis in Newcastle, England.

One Christmas during the war George promised to bring home the Christmas tree after work. Libby was excited and eager for this big event. When he finally arrived, he presented the family with a pathetic scrub of an evergreen tree. Libby, prone to tantrums, threw a fit which would usually result in a smack. George was brilliant but erratic. Never could admit he was wrong. Stubborn and opinionated. Not an easy man to get along with. Libby's fit would never be tolerated. George quickly took her aside, sent her to her room, and told her to write a story about a girl her age who wouldn't have a Christmas tree because of the bombs were exploding around her.

"Best lesson I ever had," said mom.

In the middle of the war, when events looked bleakest, twelve year old mom wrote a prayer. "My Prayer, By Libby Young: Father lead us day by day, Guide us in the Holy Way, Give us strength and make us pure, Help us from temptation's lure, Grant us courage, help us win Over carelessness and sin. Let us cherish once again Peace and happiness – Amen. Libby Young, July 23, 1942, 'the year of terror.'"

A pretty good prayer for us to pray nearly 80 years later. Since the home front has come home, since we are fighting a familiar foe, could we pray this again?