

THE BELFAST BLITZ

John Potter



NORTHERN IRELAND
WAR MEMORIAL
HOME FRONT EXHIBITION

EASTER TUESDAY, 15th April 1941, was a public holiday. People were out enjoying themselves, taking a penny tram ride to Bellevue, families visiting the Zoo, and the girls and young men dancing at the Floral Hall. People went down to Greencastle to walk by Belfast Lough shore, or caught the train from the Belfast and County Down Railway station across the river to travel to 'Bangor and back for a bob', while others cycled to the seaside resort. There was a big match at Windsor Park, Linfield against Distillery.



So far the country had not been much touched by the war, although it was 20 months since war had been declared. German reconnaissance aircraft had flown over the city, taking photographs of the docks and surrounding towns, including Lisburn.

A week earlier eight bombers had carried out the first attack on Belfast. The City was not prepared. No previous warning had been given. The

enemy aircraft were part of a much larger force diverted from their intended target, Clydeside, where thick cloud made accurate bombing impossible. The planes carried out attacks in the docks and shipyards, dropping large parachute bombs from 9,000 feet. The bombing was very successful. A timber yard in Duncrue Street was set ablaze. Ranks flour mill by Pollock Dock was destroyed. The last bomb fell on a shed in Harland and Wolff, where 50 fuselages of the new Stirling bomber were



stored. They were all destroyed, along with the tools and jigs. Inevitably bombs fell in surrounding streets. St Patrick's Church on the Newtownards Road was burnt out. Some 13 people were killed and 81 injured.

Despite the fact that it was seven months since the air raids had begun on cities in Britain, there was a woeful complacency about the likelihood of air raids on Belfast by the Northern Ireland government and Belfast City Corporation and, in consequence, amongst the ordinary people. Now it was too late, for Belfast was the least prepared city in the United Kingdom to meet the threat of an air raid. There were fewer than half the anti-aircraft guns required to defend the city, too few searchlights and barrage balloons and no night fighter aircraft. The Air Raid Precaution wardens (civilians) and Auxiliary Fire Service were under strength. There was no emergency water supply. There were only sufficient air raid shelters for a quarter of the people. The shelters were badly designed, with brick walls and concrete roofs. If a bomb fell nearby, the walls were liable to collapse, bringing down the concrete roof on the occupants – as happened in several instances.

A plan to evacuate children to safe areas in the country had failed. Only 3,000 had taken up the offer and many of the children had come home again.

Yet for the Germans Belfast was an increasingly important strategic target. During the Second World War, the tonnage of shipping built at Harland and Wolff was the largest of any shipyard in the world. Some 145 warships were built, including two cruisers, three aircraft carriers and 38 corvettes, plus numerous merchant ships. In addition 500 Churchill heavy tanks (as used by the North Irish Horse in North Africa and Italy) were built. Short and Harland produced 125 Sunderland flying boats and was about to go into production of the new

Stirling bomber, eventually turning out 1,200, sufficient for a hundred squadrons. Mackies, where half the labour force were women working eight-hour shifts seven days a week, was turning out millions of rounds of ammunition. The Ropeworks made camouflage nets, while a factory in Carrickfergus was a major centre for parachute production.

That Easter Tuesday night Belfast was the principal target for the Luftwaffe. Some aircraft came from airfields in North France, following the coast of the Irish Sea. Others came from Holland, crossing the North of England, turning north on sighting the Isle of Man. Across Britain visibility was generally poor. Many of the aircraft were directed to other targets. Some 160 reached Belfast, turning onto their run in over Larne and heading down Belfast Lough.

At 10.40pm the sirens sounded in the city. Some people went to the shelters. Many more hid in the coal store under the stairs or took refuge under a kitchen table. The trams stopped running. Passengers coming from the Floral Hall got off and walked. Some took refuge in a shelter and were killed. At 10.45pm the first wave of bombers dropped parachute flares, some 300 of them, lighting the street as bright as day. The city was covered by nine tenth cloud combined with a smoke screen obscuring a square mile of the shipyards and docks.

Gaps in the cloud base were too brief to enable the bomb aimers to identify targets. A brief gap gave them a glimpse of light on water. It seems that they assumed they were over the docks. In fact it was the city waterworks in North Belfast and their bombs fell on residential areas. Subsequent waves followed them.

The raids went on for five hours. The raiders dropped 29,000 incendiaries. If you were quick, you could put one out with a bucket of sand but many stuck in gutters or on the roofs of empty buildings, and nobody knew they were there until they set the building alight. In addition there were 674 high explosive bombs, amounting to 200 tons of explosives and 76

parachute land mines. They exploded in mid-air if they touched anything on the way down and were the most destructive. The terraces of mill houses, not strongly built, collapsed like a pack of cards.

The worst damage occurred in the working class areas of North Belfast, Duncairn and along Cavehill, Crumlin and Antrim Roads. Victoria Barracks, a strategic target, was virtually destroyed. The York Street mill, one of the largest in the



world, was severely damaged. One wall fell on an adjoining street killing many people in their homes. Shankill Road and Falls Road escaped lightly but in Percy Street (off Divis Street) a bomb caused an air-raid shelter to collapse, killing 30.

At Harland and Wolff the boiler shop was destroyed and cranes toppled. 40 members of the workforce were killed. In Shorts four almost complete Stirlings were destroyed.

At 1.45am a chance bomb destroyed the central telephone exchange at the junction of Oxford Street and East Bridge Street, cutting off communications to the anti-aircraft operation room in the Senate Chamber at Stormont, with the result that contact with the gun sites was lost. Worse, the trunk lines to London, Glasgow and Liverpool were cut and it was hours before the authorities across the water realized the severity of the raid. In response fire fighting equipment was later sent over. Meanwhile a message was sent over the railway telegraph to the Irish government, which sent 13 appliances and 70 crew from Dublin, Drogheda, Dun Laoghaire and Dundalk to reinforce the local fire brigade.

At 4.55am the all-clear was sounded, the air raid wardens ringing hand-held bells where the electricity had failed. The people came out of their shelters and houses to count the cost, which was tragically heavy.

People besieged the bus depots and the GNR station in Great Victoria Street (the only one still in operation), to get buses and trains to escape from the city. 3,000 went to Dundalk, 5,000 to Dublin. At least 100,000 had got out of the city by 29th April.

The dead were collected in ambulances, military vehicles, furniture vans, coal lorries, even Corporation bin lorries and taken to temporary mortuaries at Falls Road and Peter's Hill Public Baths where they could be identified. Those whose bodies were not claimed were transferred to St George's Market. On 21st April the unknown dead were taken in military vehicles to be buried in massed graves in the City and Milltown Cemeteries. Bodies had to be searched to establish whether there were any medallions or rosaries which could identify them as Catholics, in which case they were buried in Milltown. Thousands of mourners lined the streets.

Blitz grave,
City Cemetery
(below)

Blitz grave,
Milltown Cemetery
(bottom)



There is no accurate figure of the number of dead. Official statistics released in October 1944 stated 745, but that number did not include servicemen and women and the members of an anti-aircraft gun site attacked deliberately at Newtownards airfield, killing 10 young Inniskilling soldiers who were guarding the site.

A later analysis listed 858 dead. Whatever the actual figure, the fatalities were the highest in any single raid in the United Kingdom, apart from London.

People were afraid that the Luftwaffe would return. All through that Spring and Summer families walked into the hills, up to Castlereagh, Gilnahirk, Falls Park,

Glengormley, the grounds of Clonard Monastery and Cave Hill. It was impossible to count the numbers. The estimate of 20,000 was far too low.

The people were wise to have got out. The Germans, dissatisfied with their failure to cause more serious damage to the strategic targets, did come back – on Sunday, 4th May 1941. A fine, cloudless night with a bright moon made for ideal conditions for bombers. Shortly after midnight 204 enemy aircraft attacked the city. The bombing was accurate, with no need for flares this time. 237 tons of explosive and 96,000 incendiaries were dropped. The worst hit areas were East Belfast and the city centre, Bridge Street, High Street and Waring Street. St Anne's Cathedral had a narrow escape. The Great Hall in the City Hall was gutted, the roof gone. At Harland and Wolff shipyard, three corvettes were burnt out. A transport ship loaded with military supplies, was sunk. Two thirds of the workshops were devastated. Full output was not restored until November. At Short and Harland aircraft factory, there was widespread damage, causing three months delay in production. The water mains were old and hydrants broken. Again, 13 Irish fire brigade crews came from Dublin and Dundalk. Fires were left to burn themselves out. A German pilot observed *We stared into a sea of fires, the like of which we had never seen before.*



During the night of 5-6th May, a small force of two or three bombers, attracted by the fires still burning in the Ropeworks, dropped bombs which devastated, and in some cases completely destroyed, the adjoining streets.

A parachute mine drifted down to detonate beside two air raid shelters, killing 14 of the occupants and wounding forty.

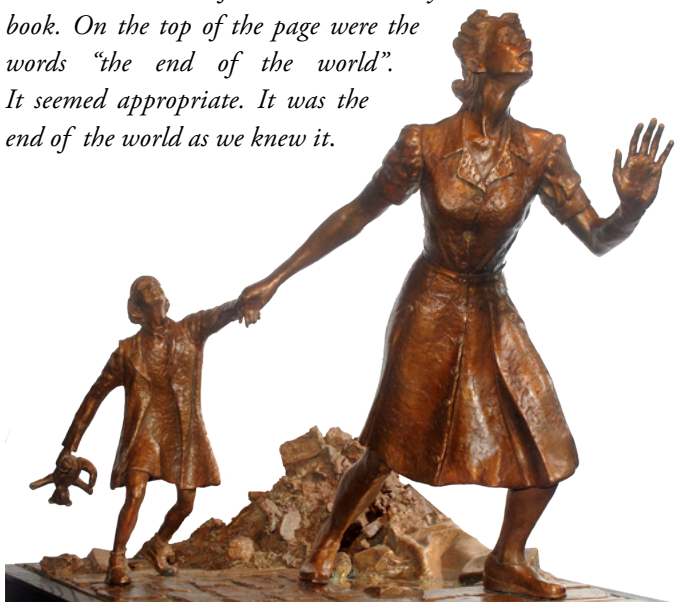
In all in those May raids, 191 people had been killed, half of them women and children.

The aftermath of the air raids in April and May was terrible. Of the housing stock, 3,200 houses were destroyed, 4,000 were rendered uninhabitable and 56,600 suffered some damage. In all half the city's housing was affected. 15,000 people were rendered homeless.

In the War Memorial gallery there are 913 names on the rolling screen recording the fatalities arising from the Blitz. Taking into account those who were never identified (154 in the City Cemetery) and the servicemen and women not listed, the total dead must be in excess of 1,100. The dead are remembered by a bronze sculpture, *Blitz Memorial* by Carolyn Mulholland (see cover). The centre piece in the gallery is another bronze sculpture, *Blitz Survivors*, by John Sherlock.

A nurse at a hospital in Stranmillis recorded in her diary on the morning of 5th May *the smell of burning was in the air. The grass was strewn with blackened and charred paper. There was a sheet from a child's essay book. On the top of the page were the words "the end of the world". It seemed appropriate. It was the end of the world as we knew it.*

Blitz Survivors by John Sherlock





Major John Potter MBE was born in 1925 into a military family. His father, Lieutenant Colonel Claud Potter, had commanded one of the artillery brigades supporting 36 (Ulster) Division in the last year of WW1.

Major Potter was educated at Marlborough College, Wiltshire. He served in Queen's University Officers' Training Corps and in 1944 followed his father into the Royal Artillery. He served in India, the Suez Canal Zone and Germany. On his retirement in 1970, he joined the Ulster Defence Regiment and was Regimental Secretary at the time of the merger of the Regiment with the Royal Irish Rangers in 1992. He is the author of *A Testimony to Courage*, the Regimental History of the Ulster Defence Regiment.

On leaving the Army Major Potter became a trustee and curator of the Northern Ireland War Memorial. He was instrumental in assembling the Home Front Exhibition which is on permanent display in the War Memorial Gallery.

The author wishes to acknowledge that the statistical information is taken from Dr Brian Barton's book *The Blitz; Belfast in the War Years*.

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