

## Blitz photographer: George Swain was unfit for military service, but his courageous determination to make

To look at the photographs is to view a vision of Hell and to embark on a jolting and jarring journey through a disfigured, distorted and deeply disturbing landscape close to home. Here, where once familiar terraces have been reduced to ugly hills of rubble, broken walls tilt at crazy angles and drunken roofs take on the strange appearance of an expressionist nightmare.

Looking at these fractured and forlorn homes, some opened up like dolls' houses to reveal sagging ceilings and plaster-smothered bedsteads, I find myself conjuring a mind's-eye image every bit as incongruous as these unsettling yet weirdly compelling photographs.

It is of the slightly built, bespectacled, middle-aged man who took them, pedalling like fury towards the very fires most sane people were fleeing from as incendiaries rain down and the erratic crump of high explosive reverberates down blacked out and deserted roads.

A while after, George Swain would write of that hare-brained ride into the centre of a Norwich choked with smoke and flames.

"Flares were hanging in the sky and red tracer bullets were making spurts and lines of fire everywhere," he noted. "Bombs were whistling down. One, particularly close, threw me from my bicycle – or perhaps I threw myself off – and I dived through a garden gate.

"Something that felt like a sandbag slumped on top of me and said: 'Sorry, old man'. We got up together and I rode on..."

Almost 70 years on, his daughter can't help laughing at the thought of it all.

"I know it's hard to believe," says Judy Ball, "but that's the way he was and that's exactly what he used to do. When most people were heading for the nearest air-raid shelter, he was off on his bike to take photographs."

I was visiting Judy at her home at Eaton, on the outskirts of Norwich, as part of my ongoing research for a book I am writing about the 1942 blitz on Norwich, a quest which has already drawn experiences from countless EDP readers.

To the chimes of time moving on, we pored over pictures of the past brought to life by memories that remain as fresh and vivid as if the events had occurred yesterday.

As well as the shattered homes and burning factories there are more personal photographs. One shows her peeping out of an underground shelter. Another has her displaying her 'siren suit', a one-piece, overall costume made by her mother and designed to be flung over her night clothes the moment the air raid sirens wailed their grim warning. And then there was the one her father took of her standing outside her front door, face hidden behind a gas mask, clutching a similarly attired teddy bear.

If ever a single photograph captured the horror and madness of total war it is surely this one simple image.

"That was early on," she says. "I was about four. We used to have to carry it to school. Don't remember ever wearing it during the raids, but we always had to have them with us. I was lucky. They never bothered me, but some children were frightened of them."

In fact, like her father who admitted to being scared only after the raids and never during, Judy has no memory of being nervous of the bombing.

"I think your mind must block out certain things. While I say I can't remember ever being frightened, I



# Poignant legacy of

think I must have been. But there was no such thing as counselling in those days. You just had to get on with things and carry on.

"I do remember my mum shaking when we sat on the cellar steps during one raid.

I asked her why she was shaking and she said, 'Oh, I'm cold'. She didn't admit until years later that she had

actually been shaking with fear."

More of her father's pictures spill out from a couple of boxes, each one bringing with it a baleful tale of destruction; a wrecked air raid shelter in Exeter Street, an ARP notice still attached to the cracked and crumbling wall; a policeman standing lonely guard over the ruins of a once-popular department store in Orford Place and a bomb-blasted bus, its roof ripped off as though by some malevolent tin-opener, astride Surrey Street station.

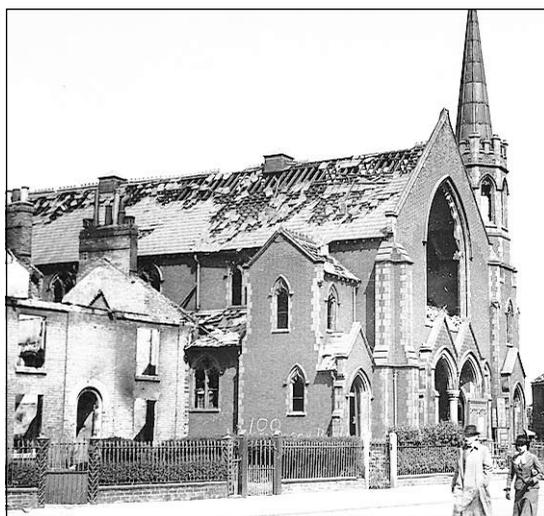
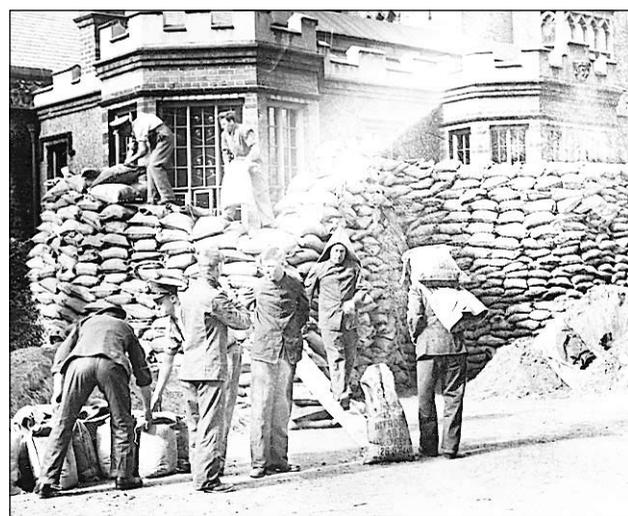
"My abiding memory of the raids is of one particular night when we were living in Mill Hill Road," says Judy. "Four or five houses further down the road had gone up and Mum and I were standing in the middle of the road,

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a pictorial record of Norwich's wartime ordeal by fire has resulted in an enduring legacy, writes Steve Snelling



**Wartime scenes of Norwich destruction: Left, sifting through the debris of bombed building in Rupert Street. Above, an unexploded bomb in King Street. Above right, a blazing building in St Stephen's. Right, the aftermath of the bus station in Surrey Street being bombed. Below right, the bomb-ravaged Dereham Road Baptist chapel. Below, a wall of sandbags being built to protect the Shirehall. Inset far left, photographer George Swain's daughter, Judy, and her teddy bear in gas masks.**



wartime history.

From the plume of smoke pouring from Boulton and Paul's factory 15 minutes after it was bombed in 1940 to the moment the city's most notorious UXB was raised from the depths of Theatre Street and from the destruction wrought in Vauxhall Street a year later to the disastrous incendiary blaze that swept through Bond's in June 1942 and on to the inferno that destroyed Harmer's clothing factory in 1943 and the VE Day celebrations that spread across Gentleman's Walk in May 1945.

Prevented from joining up because of a duodenal ulcer, George served as an air raid warden and was a member of the Royal Observer Corps, while still managing to run his highly-successful city centre photographic business in partnership with his sister, Muriel.

While weddings and studio portraits, in which Muriel specialised, were the mainstay of their work, George somehow found time to tour the worst-affected areas of the bombing in what would become one man's matchless pictorial blitz chronicle. Some of these found their way into the local newspapers, while others were officially sanctioned as part of government commissions to photograph the effects of bomb damage, his images forming part of the evidence for detailed post-raid analyses.

Not all of those commissions, however, could be taken up. A note in the National Archives has him declining one government contract on account of his camera equipment being damaged – by enemy action!

In fact, the bomb had ripped the back out of his studio and resulted in one of the most bizarrely tragic experiences of his extraordinary war career.

"I was in my studio, in St Giles, loading my camera when the Hippodrome, next door, was hit," he later recounted. "Esmond Wilding was taking over the management of the Hippodrome that week, and he and the retiring manager were standing on the stage-door steps when the bombs fell. The stage manager and the owners of a troupe of performing sea-lions were in the indoor shelter... The bomb killed the stage manager and the sea-lions' trainer, blew the two house managers down the steps without hurting them... and lifted the stage of the theatre into the air. The stage supports fell, but the stage remained four inches above the normal level.

"From inside the theatre came a terrible sound – a wailing worse than the whistle of the bomb. It was from one of the sea-lions which the bomb had released. I shall never forget the noise it made, flapping its ungainly way through the dark, empty theatre, crying for its master..."

There were other occasions when George found himself not merely an observer but a participant in the drama of events.

"At various times," Judy recalls, "he got involved in rescue work. The camera simply got put down while he helped parties trying to free people trapped in the wreckage of their homes.

"Another time, when we were living in Park Lane, I remember being out with Dad when an enemy aircraft came over. It was very low and I think it may have been the one that machine-gunned along Unthank Road, but what I do remember with certainty was Dad throwing me on the grass."

With that she smiles and shrugs, before adding: "It hardly seems possible."

In many ways, she is right. So much of what occurred 70-odd years ago in the streets of Norwich and countless towns and cities across the country all but beggars belief, and it is thanks, in no small measure, to her father and the greatest of all the city's war photographers that we have pictorial proof of the full extent of Norwich's incredible ordeal by fire.

**For more of George's pictures of bombed Norwich visit [www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle](http://www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle) Steve Snelling is in the process of writing a new history of the Norwich Baedeker raids which is scheduled for publication in the autumn.**

**To see more of George Swain's outstanding wartime photographs take a look at the permanent online exhibition of his work on the Norfolk County Council's website at [www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk) – you can search the site by entering George's surname.**

# danger and devastation

wondering if our house was going to escape because the wind was fanning the flames. We seemed to be surrounded by fire..."

Maybe it was the same night, or a night very much like it, that her father had described when he cycled towards the worst of the conflagrations, capturing forever, at no little risk, some of the most iconic and terrifying photographs of the wartime blitz on Norwich.

They include his unforgettable images of the fire-wreathed Wincarnis works in Westwick Street where the flames were of such an intensity that they actually scorched his camera. Factories on both sides of the road were ablaze, "the heat and noise defying description" in George's own words.

Judy rates those pictures as the most remarkable among so many memorable shots taken during the course of the war.

"The heat must have been just horrendous, absolutely horrendous," she says.

The pictures taken that night, the morning after and throughout the big raids that followed during the course of what became known as the Baedeker blitz not only helped define and shape our impression of the aerial assault on Norwich during the second world war, but established George Swain's reputation as the foremost of all the city's wartime photographers.

Others produced exceptional work too, notably Edward Le Grice whose photographs of the incendiary peppered cathedral and fire-

ravaged Woodlands Hospital were published in a wartime booklet, *Norwich: The Ordeal of 1942*. But George was the only one who succeeded in capturing the full horror of the raids while the destructive fires they ignited were burning at their fiercest.

Nor, if truth be told, could any of the other fine photographers compete with him when it came to the sheer breadth and immediacy of his images.

It was though he had some sixth sense when it came to bomb incidents. Either that or an enviable network of contacts. But time after time, he seemed to be on hand to record for posterity the most important, most heroic and sometimes most tragic moments in Norwich's