



**MARCH OF SHAME:** The surrender that consigned thousands of East Anglian soldiers to 3½ years of brutal captivity under the Japanese 70 years ago.

# How Norfolk counted cost of war home and abroad

**THE END WAS NEAR AS A CONVOY OF CARS** approached Bukit Timah crossroads in the late morning of Sunday, February 15, 1942. Barring their way was a small party of East Anglians who watched their unannounced approach with wary and growing suspicion.

Only 18 days had passed since their ill-starred arrival to bolster the last-ditch defence of Singapore Island. And, in that time, things had gone from bad to worse. Far worse, in fact, than anyone could have possibly imagined.

Japanese forces, which had already out-thought and out-fought British, Australian and Indian troops in their headlong advance down the mainland of Malaya, had surged on to the island and captured vital water supplies.

A crumbling defence characterised by chaos and confusion was already on its last legs when East Anglian territorial units, hastily diverted to Singapore in its dying hour, were plunged haphazardly into the fighting.

But even then, with the prospect of ignominious defeat and humiliating surrender staring them in the face, it all seemed beyond belief, too incomprehensible for words. All of which goes a long way towards explaining the reaction of the small party covering the blockaded crossroads at Bukit Timah.

Commanded by Bill Oliver, the East Anglian soldiers, who had spent an irritating night under mortar fire from unseen Japanese troops, were already on their guard when they spotted the cars coming from the direction of Singapore.

Anxiety quickly turned to horror as Oliver realised that the strange things fluttering either side of the leading car

In the first of two articles, **STEVE SNELLING** looks back to the 48 hours that shaped Norfolk's experience of the second world war 70 years ago.

were a white flag and a Union Jack.

The convoy stopped short of the roadblock and a British officer stepped out of the first car and told the bemused troops to remove the barricades. Oliver's retort was an angry one. "What the bloody hell are you doing with those flags?" he said, poking his revolver into the officer's ribs.

Emotions were running high and, years later, he admitted that he contemplated shooting him "then and there". But by then the cars had disgorged more people, one of whom pleaded: "Don't shoot Brigadier Newbigging..." The same man, who turned out to be the colonial secretary of Singapore, explained they were carrying surrender terms for the Japanese.

Still not satisfied that they weren't part of some traitorous ruse, the East Anglian officer held them under armed guard until the "awful news" was confirmed. The last he saw of them was eight little figures "disappearing up the road, carrying two white flags and two Union Jacks".

The dispiriting scene signalled the closing act in a catastrophic campaign and the culmination of 48 hours of high-



**GRIM AFTERMATH:** St Benedict's in Norwich after the bombs rained down.

“**The accuracy of some of the German attacks was sufficient to leave an indelible mark on Norwich and 70 years on the scars of those terrifying reprisal raids are still apparent in the ill-matching post-war rebuilds that grew out of the city's myriad bomb sites...**”



level decision-making that would forever transform the experiences of thousands of Norfolk people and determine how, to this day, we remember the second world war.

Unlike the grim events on Singapore Island which were played out in the full glare of the world's media, the first of these portentous pronouncements was not reported to the public at large and yet would set in train an irrevocable chain reaction that resulted in the heaviest and most sustained attacks suffered by the county during six years of conflict.

It took the form of an Air Ministry Directive, issued to Bomber Command on Saturday, February 14 even as the struggle in the nation's bastion of empire was drawing to a wretched conclusion.

Inspired by the RAF's growing strength and coupled with the introduction of advanced new navigational aids, the instructions issued to Britain's bombing force marked a major change of policy that would have far-reaching and controversial consequences for the

conduct of the war and terrible repercussions for the citizens of a host of English cathedral cities, including Norwich.

For the St Valentine's Day directive ushered in an altogether more intensified and ruthless assault on Hitler's Reich with a concentrated assault on Germany's will to wage war. No longer would the RAF focus its efforts on largely futile attempts at precision-bombing. Instead, maximum effort would be employed in delivering destruction and misery to the doors of the enemy's civilian population.

Concentrated incendiary raids by hundreds of bombers were the order of the day.

"The primary object of your operations," ran the directive, "should now be focused on the morale of the enemy civil population and in particular, on the industrial workers."

This was the birth of what became known as 'area bombing' and the blueprint for a relentless assault on Germany's cities that would turn the



Nazis' industrial heartland into a wasteland by the war's end but would fail in its main aim of bringing the conflict to an early end.

The plan was to turn Germany into a nation of refugees, forced to flee their ruined cities with a consequent knock-on effect on war production. To achieve it, Bomber Command set about launching a series of attacks which, according to official historians of the war, were designed "to render the German industrial population homeless, spiritless and, as far as possible, dead".

Least there be any doubt about intentions, Sir Charles Portal, chief of the air staff, wrote to his deputy on February 15: "Ref the new bombing directive: I suppose it is clear that the aiming-points are to be the built-up areas, not, for instance, the dockyards or aircraft factories..."

In fact, Arthur Harris, who took over as chief of Bomber Command just a week later, was in no doubt whatsoever. The man who had stood on top of the Air Ministry building during the London

blitz and famously remarked "they sowed the wind and now they are going to reap the whirlwind" was about to deliver on his promise.

Accompanying the Air Ministry directive was a list of 'primary industrial areas' to be attacked. They included such industrial cities as Essen, Duisburg and Cologne. However, Harris chose to select a target from an 'alternative' list for his first demonstration of the fearsome potential of fire raiding.

The Hanseatic port of Lubeck was chosen not because of its military value, but for its vulnerability to large-scale incendiary destruction. Harris made no bones about it. With its medieval street plan and mass of timber-framed houses, the north German city was, in his words, "more like a fire-lighter than a human habitation".

The result of the attack carried out on March 28-29 was devastating.

The 300 tons of bombs, almost half of which were incendiaries, laid fiery waste to almost 50pc of the city.

**FIGHTING FIRES:** Above, left to right, the destruction in Norwich following the second Baedeker raid 70 years ago; the ruins in Westwick Street as Norwich pays the price for the RAF's area bombing policy over Germany; and the smoke-shrouded wreck of Caley's once-magnificent chocolate-making factory.

Nazi leaders were stunned by the ferocity of an attack against what they saw as a relatively 'soft' target, a defenceless city of great cultural significance. Josef Goebbels, the Reich's arch propagandist, was shocked by the "awful bombardment".

Railing against "the British craze for destruction", he reckoned 80pc of the old city had been lost in the "general holocaust", including many buildings of historic interest.

Similar attacks a month later on Rostock, another lightly-defended tinderbox old city, prompted further outrage. But, by then, Hitler had already been stung into action.

A new air offensive was ordered as reprisal for the RAF attacks delivered under the St Valentine's Day directive. Towns other than London were to be selected on the basis of wreaking "the greatest possible effect on civilian life". The onus was to be on soft targets.

"Like the English," declared Goebbels, "we must attack centres of culture, especially those which have only little anti-aircraft [guns]."

"Such centres should be attacked two or three times in succession and levelled to the ground..."

First on the list of tit-for-tat targets in what became known as the Baedeker Blitz was the city of Exeter and was followed, in quick succession, by similar well-directed attacks on Bath and then Norwich.

The assaults on Norfolk's historic capital carried out over the course of two nights at the end of April marked the beginning of a terrible ordeal that lasted into the summer.

By the end, the attacks had killed or injured a little under 1,000 citizens and rendered many more thousands temporarily homeless.

At its peak, the incendiary attacks, which ravaged a sizeable chunk of the city centre, prompted the kind of 'self-evacuations' that the RAF's bombing was hoping to bring about in Germany.

However, despite official fears to the contrary, morale among Norwich's battered population did not crack, though there were some who were led to question the rationale behind a Bomber Command strategy that invited such retribution.

The most commonly-heard complaint went along the lines of: "What a silly business this all is. They bomb us, we bomb them, and where does it get us?"

In reality, the scale of attacks were poles apart. Where the over-stretched Luftwaffe could muster fewer than 50 aircraft a time for their attacks, the RAF was sending out hundreds and, famously, on one occasion in May, more than a thousand.

Even so, the accuracy of some of the German attacks was sufficient to leave an indelible mark on Norwich and 70 years on the scars of those terrifying reprisal raids are still apparent in the ill-matching post-war reconstructions that grew out of the city's myriad bomb sites.

The destruction that was a direct result of Bomber Command's February directive left many people with their abiding memories of the war; emotionally-scarring memories of survival against the odds, of heroism and self-sacrifice and of harrowing human tragedies.

Hundreds of people like schoolgirl Heather Harcourt emerged from dank, corrugated air-raid shelters to find their streets reconfigured by bombs, neighbours dead and their own homes opened up like a haunted doll's house.

With such devastation came some of the most iconic images of Norfolk's war – Rupert Street reduced to mounds of rubble, bomb craters deep enough to swallow double-decker buses, ancient churches gutted by fire, the tangled remains of Curl's department store and the tottering, smoke-shrouded remnants of Caley's once-magnificent chocolate-making factory.

But even as the city was enduring its trial by fire a far greater tragedy was being played out on the other side of the world that would blight the lives of many more Norfolk families.

■ **Tomorrow: The story behind East Anglia's futile sacrifice.**

**REX HANCY**  
IN THE  
COUNTRYSIDE



Taverham,  
February 13

## Trying to make a mealtime out of molehill

Molehills are popping up over this row of gardens, much to universal annoyance. Some are extremely large. These do not yet mark breeding sites, merely indicate the immense amount of soil being displaced by the underground workers.

A list of happenings in her South Norfolk garden from Janet Negal describes a fresh molehill with two birds in attendance – one a blackbird and the other a fieldfare. Both heads were tilted to give the birds the best possible angle to observe any slight movement in the fresh soil. Who knows what could have been greedily accepted, a worm, a beetle or any other soil-dwelling invertebrate? In the event, Janet saw both birds having to leave unrewarded.

We know the fieldfare was a visitor coming to us to spend a few mid-winter weeks, but what about the blackbird? Was it a local resident or one from the large flocks which appeared at the very beginning of the month? We too had a garden full of blackbirds, male and female for quite a while after we had witnessed a male-only preserve for some time. Birds in both gardens were busily tossing fallen leaves and pieces of plant debris about looking for invertebrates. Clearing up too soon can easily destroy much nourishment for our avian visitors. Getting the timing right is a matter of very delicate judgment.

I must confess to more than a hint of jealousy when I read her sighting of three bullfinches. Decades have passed since we saw the last one to visit us here. Janet and husband Pat used binoculars to watch two males and one female pecking at the old dried-up blackberries still clinging to the brambles in the hedge. We all know from experience that blackberries are packed with seeds and would make a welcome cold winter's day snack for a bullfinch.

The males then flew to a nearby cherry plum tree where they set about the developing buds with gusto. There lies the problem. I know Janet and Pat do not begrudge the bullfinches a meal or two at the expense of a proportion of the potential blossom. Fruit-growers are often less tolerant. The bullfinches when they used to call in here were always on the soft fruit bushes though we never failed to gather good crops in the summer. Perhaps the bushes were too full for their own good so needed a certain amount of bud thinning out. Well, I like to think so.

The cherry plum should soon be in flower to grace our bleak winter hedgerows. The clear white, simple blossoms are a very welcome and cheering sight.

### WHERE TO JOIN

- **Norfolk Wildlife Trust:** 01603 625540
- **Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society:** 01603 457270
- **RSPB (East Anglia):** 01603 661662
- **Norfolk Ornithologists' Association:** 01485 525406
- **British Trust for Ornithology:** 01842 750050