

Norman Aylmer's second letter to his sister Ida
27 September 1940

Dear Ida,

Thanks for your last letter. I'll start this second one whilst I still have some paper. To carry on where I left off.

The day after I last wrote, our chaps started a huge A.A. barrage. I was in the Ritz cinema with Marg, when the film cut off and the manager said "Here's that man again, anyone wanting to leave should go now and we will continue as long as possible". We decided to stay and saw the film round (Spencer Tracy in North West Passage). Suddenly the building began to shake and we could hear a terrific roar outside. The film stopped because the operator was in the top of the building and not safe. We went to the door but the manager said that we couldn't go out as it was too bad. Flashes were continuous and the ground was heaving. Shrapnel was coming down like rain. We went back and sat down and after a long time the all clear went so we made a run for it. We ran like hell and got as far as Cheltenham Road when it started again and we had to dive into a doorway until it was quiet again and finally made it home.

There were guns everywhere including things called "PomPoms" that fired like machine guns. A few nights later we heard about land mines being dropped on parachutes and a few nights later they dropped one near to our brother Ernie. That same night one came down in Cathall Road and was caught up by its chute hanging from a roof. It was 8ft 6ins long 2ft 6ins in diameter and weighed 2 tons. Had it gone off it would have destroyed about one hundred houses. A few nights later it was our turn. One landed on the Ragland pub and one in Grove Road near the petrol place. The explosions are terrific and unlike bombs there is no scream as they come down, just a sudden enormous explosion. There were two more the next night, Church Hill and Prospect Hill. Later that week more fell in the Forest Gate area and a Rover scout from your church St Luke's was killed. Did you know him? His name was Len Payne. One night when I was with the Browns, some incendiaries came down, one was next door to the Crightons. Mr Brown seeing the flames, dashed out and came flying back when a gun went off up the road. He muttered about not having a tin hat but then his sense of duty came forward, he grabbed our stirrup pump, put the washing up bowl on his head and tore off into the street. The bowl fell off when he got to the gate so he swore and left it there. By the time we all got to the fire it had been put out. There was a crowd of us. Whilst this was going on, a chap across the road was struggling single handed with a bomb in his bedroom that had come through the roof. The next night we had another big shower of incendiaries in Colchester and Peterborough Road, in the Hospital grounds and over in the forest. Nearly every night there is a terrific fire somewhere that burns all night and I got to work this week to find some more of Holborn, Red Lion Street Chancery Lane etc, burning. The fires in Chancery Lane are very bad, only black walls standing and screwed up chunks of metal that were lift shafts. It is much the same in many parts of London, especially in the East End. There are some enormous bomb craters over in the forest and lots of burnt areas.

A bomb fell in Lea Bridge Rd just near the water works and it blew a saloon car about 50 yards and it was on its back. Walthamstow has had it pretty bad. People say "Do you know if so and so firm has been closed?" "NO they have to find it before they can close it". If you want a lump of shrapnel I'll send you some in your next parcel. I was in bed last night when something came whizzing down and hit our side gate. I think it was only a shell cap.

Last night at about three a.m. I think a plane must have been hit because he let all of his bombs go, at once. The noise was awful. I don't know where they landed. Since I started this

seven hours ago we have had four raids and they have been right overhead each time. I am writing at work now. Have just got my two weeks' notice, only provisional as we don't know how much longer we can stay open.

Bought a few clothes this weekend as prices are going up again. Had a pretty good weekend with only eight raids since Friday. Fairlop Rd got a big bomb opposite the church on the corner of Wallwood. Three big houses gone!. Brown's Uncle Bert made us laugh the other night. All the evening he had been saying how he wasn't bothered by air raids and that he would go up to bed as normal. At ten o'clock sharp off he went pausing at the top of the stairs to say that it was just a case of getting used to them. At ten fifteen he was down under the stairs with the rest of us.

Had some work to do on Monday so didn't write. Went to sleep most of Tuesday because as soon as the Siren went on Monday night John and I went over to the hospital for stretcher bearing. We met Ramage and half a dozen Red Cross chaps. Our Rover crew has been helping at the hospital since the Blitz began. We were given supper at about ten thirty and then we three had to go on the first two hour shift at reception. Before we went we arranged our beds down in the basement and put our stuff on them to show that they had been taken. On the way through the basement we passed dozens of people sleeping as many of the staff stay overnight and use it as a shelter. Also some of the more mobile patients sleep down there and some staff bring there families, so there is quite a crowd. We sat on some trolleys waiting for any casualties and about one o'clock a girl came in with a piece of shrapnel in her jaw. Another girl had brought her in and a nurse asked me to find her a bed in the basement as it was impossible for her to go home through the raid. I took her down and she was frightened by the rows of bodies sleeping and the long dark tunnels with big groaning pipes and snoring bodies. There were no empty beds so I got to our three and found that someone had pinched mine so I gave her Johns. With no beds or blankets we decided to go home when we finished our shift. A pity because the action starts after the all clear usually. We wake the next shift then got our bikes and started off home.

We had hardly started when a great lump of shrapnel crashed down beside us so we dived back under cover. The planes were right overhead and the guns were going wild. After a time it cleared so we rushed round to John's. His folk are away so we got into his shelter at 2.15am. At 6am. his alarm went off as he goes to work before me. I then rode home and at seven Dad woke me as I had to go to work. So you see why I was tired.

By the way, I don't count the raids now as I got to 130 since Mum and Dad came up to you. I think that we've had eighteen since I started this letter. It is not often very bad during the day although once or twice we've had a real shocker. A little bit of London seems to disappear every day, but there's still a lot left. When I knock off at 5.30pm there is usually several hundred people lined up at every tube station in the hope of getting in for the night. Most people finish work, dash home and grab some food and blankets and dive for the underground. I wonder why some of them bother to come up at all!

Now I will try to give you some idea of the damage that has been done near home. There have been fire bombs just about everywhere. Also a number of Ack Ack shells have come down and exploded on the ground. There have been high explosive bombs all over the place: the hospital, Maple and the back of Popleton, Walwood, Fairlop, Hainult and the back of Chelmsford Roads. Quite a few houses down in each road. Forest Drive West has had a torpedo, quite a lot of damage. Leytonstone High Road, about a dozen H.E.s scattered around and two more on Union Road. About 150 houses wrecked near Dyers Hall Road and about 20 completely flat from one mine. An unexploded mine in Cathall Road and land mines in Grove Road, Easton Road, Church Hill, Prospect Hill, Forest Road etc. About 1000 houses are

uninhabitable in Walthamstow and much patching up is going on. There have been several H.E.s on the marshes and Lea Bridge Road, Leyton High Road and the area around the gas works is badly damaged.

I was in Baker Street near to Madame Tussauds the other day and many big buildings have been gutted and look awful. We may get tin hats over at the hospital but as they may have W.C. [Whipps Cross = water closet = toilet] stamped on them so I'm not keen! The fourth raid since 9am today is on now. High Holborn is still shut and is piled high with debris although they have been clearing it for three weeks. Cheapside and lots more roads are shut off, the top of Woolworths in Holborn (where Marg used to work) has disappeared although they have opened some of the shop below.

Got your card and letter last night. Regarding Len Payne, he was a warden and was on duty with another chap during a night raid. The planes had just gone so he and his friend came out of the shelter for some air. They suddenly saw a mine drifting down on a parachute The friend through himself onto the ground but Len tried to get back into the shelter and was caught by the blast and died instantly.

Going to get my new suit; blue grey. Pouring with rain today, first time for three weeks. Chingford has had lots of bombs since our Ernie moved there. A laundry and shops have been flattened. One raid today so far.

Will pack up now, hope to hear from you again soon.

All the best Cheerio
Norm.

P.S. Third raid today, bombs dropping close. Guns going mad. We have a great wall of lights at night now and they catch the planes in them.

P. P. S. Have just got back from work and found all of the front windows have been blown in. There is a huge crater in the school field opposite and because it is very deep in soft earth, we only have a few lumps knocked off the house. The house next to Mary Pearce has been burnt down but nobody seriously hurt. Sibly's the butcher in Lea Bridge Road has gone also Ruckholt School has been hit. I must stop writing and start to board up the windows. We are all alright. Norm.

P.P.P. S. Weeks later, went to work after a bad night of bombs and found just a big hole in the ground where my firm used to be. The boss was there and many of the older people were very upset. We were given hand written notice of termination and left addresses for our money to be sent home.