



Ray Fisher, pictured a year after being rendered homeless by the Baedeker blitz, remembered shaking 'uncontrollably' as a deluge of bombs fell around him



Eric Jarrold, pictured here as an air cadet, remembers carrying his bike over smoking rubble in the centre of Norwich

Baedeker's name to be forever associated with the vengeful rain of destruction ordered by Hitler and vehemently endorsed by his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.

Incensed by the trail of destruction left by British bombers, he fumed: "Like the English, 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; then the English probably will no longer find pleasure in trying to frighten us by their terror attacks."

That same night – April 27/28, 1942 – having already targeted Exeter and Bath, the Luftwaffe set about making real his threat against the citizens of Norwich.

For a population who had gone nearly a year without a single raid and before that had suffered only sporadic small-scale attacks the ferocity of that pathfinder-led assault was truly shocking as

made clear by the vivid recollections gathered by Jan.

We lost pretty much everything

Typical of them was the record of Ray Fisher. Like many others, he and his mother had grown so "complacent" of the alarms which had frequently proved to be false that they ignored the sirens. "All this changed," he wrote, "on the night of Monday 27th April 1942."

Hurrying into his family's Anderson shelter in Helena Road, he recalled how he began "to shake uncontrollably" when the bombs began exploding all around, the experience made all the more terrifying by the "high-pitched whining" of the diving aircraft.

His fears were not eased by the sound of debris "raining down on the corrugated iron roof of the porch over the shelter door". He found out it "difficult to put into words" the impact of the continual noise "that battered our ear-drums", but the "ferocity of the fires" ignited by the showers

of incendiaries that followed in the wake of the high explosive bombs was such that "the red glow... could be seen by my aunt and uncle living 40 miles away at Castle Rising".

Ray and his family emerged from their battered shelter to find themselves bombed out and swelling the dazed army of evacuees. Returning to Helena Road a few days later to salvage what ever possessions they could recover from the wreckage of their home, he discovered "a scene of utter devastation".

"I remember seeing many of my comics (Hotspur and Champion) strewn around in the rubble, the pages blowing in the wind," he wrote.

"Although we were able to recover a couple of books that had not been damaged, all our furniture, crockery, personal effects, photographs and toys had been destroyed. It must have been devastating for my parents to stand there looking at the destruction around them,

knowing that all their belongings, which they had saved hard for, had now been reduced to scrap."

Even then, however, they were luckier than some. Where once had stood a terrace of houses was now a vast bomb crater fringing the site of the shelter which had, in all probability, saved their lives.

Ray later discovered that three 500 kg bombs had struck Helena Road, killing their next door neighbours and four others in one fell swoop.

The death toll

They were among 158 men, women and children to die that night, a death toll that grew to 225 two nights later when a second raid inflicted greater damage to the city's commercial centre.

Among the victims in Helena Road was one of Eric Jarrold's school friends. The former teenage Civil Defence messenger, who provided Jan with one of the most comprehensive accounts of the raids but sadly died before the book's publication, recalled

venturing along roads "reduced to heaps of rubble" and passing "wrecked buildings which until two or three hours ago had been St Augustine's School".

On the morning after the second raid, he remembered travelling through a desolate city centre on his way to the City of Norwich School in Eaton Road. "I had to wheel or carry my cycle over the rubble... in Orford Place and St Stephens," he noted. "It was all smoking ruins, something I shall never forget."

Those two attacks, together with a third, incendiary-heavy, raid in June that came within an ace of destroying the city's 800-year-old Cathedral would test people's endurance to the limit.

At times during Norwich's prolonged ordeal it seemed to Government researchers from the Ministry of Home Security that the population's morale was close to "breaking point". They pointed to growing up absenteeism from work and rising rates of desertion among fire-watchers as well as alarming numbers of people quitting the city.

Officially-styled as 'self-evacuees' but better known as 'trekkers', they reportedly amounted to between 11,000 and 40,000 people who, as Jan writes, "could not bear to remain in Norwich" for fear of the consequences of further attacks.

The "urge to escape", as she puts it, was "very strong" and resulted in such scenes as that described by David Radnedge who wrote of "the long trail of families walking along the Dereham Road" in search of "the shelter of the Ringland Hills for the night in case the bombers returned".

One of those who joined the nightly procession out of the city was six-year-old future Lord Mayor Ralph Gayton. He had already lost his aunt and three cousins, one of whom, at three months old, was the youngest victim of the raids when he and his mother found themselves accompanying their Knowsley Road neighbours on the 'trek' into the countryside.

Part of what Ralph Mottram, the distinguished writer and quasi-official historian of the Norwich Blitz, called a "melancholy spectacle", they simply "filled a pram with blankets, clothes and food, and made the long walk out of the city to Harford Bridge". There, where it seemed safer than home, they, along with many others, "slept in a field, under the stars".

"The very idea that the Baedeker raids would make life so awful in the cities bombed that people would petition the Government to stop the bombing of German cities was hopelessly naïve and unrealistic," says Jan. "And, of course, though people moaned and groaned nobody did call on them to stop. Things didn't work like that and so, to that end, the Blitz was a complete and utter failure."

The Terror Raids of 1942: the Baedeker Blitz, by Jan Gore, is published by Pen & Sword, priced £25