

Extracts from a letter written by Nan Wheeler in 1942

During the 1939-45 war the English Speaking Union of America bought, furnished and equipped a cottage in Barham for the use of all the Girls' Clubs in Dover, Deal and Folkestone, to enable their members to have a short break from shelling, bombing and other horrors of war. Nan Wheeler visited the cottage, called "White Cliffs", with parties of Girl Guides and Sea Rangers.

In 1942 she was asked to write a letter on behalf of the Girl Guide Association to the American people responsible for funding this project. The following are extracts from her letter.

"Some of us are Air Raid Wardens, some Fire Brigade workers, some First Aid Party, as well as our day-time jobs, and to know that we need not scramble out of bed, drag on slacks and sweater, snatch a tin hat and rush to our Post for goodness knows how long, or how many times a night, is just "paradise".

Sunday morning sees Edith waking us with cups of tea. In a short time we are ready for church where we arrive for

8.0 am Holy Communion. The villagers are very friendly and speak to us as we make our way home to a breakfast of bacon, tomatoes, fried bread *and* eggs (!) which Evelyn's mother kindly sent from their home. Some of us had almost forgotten what they looked like! ... We ... climb the hills to a wood. In a clearing there we have a very beautiful ceremony at which Phoebe and Nan are enrolled as Rangers. Around us we find wild strawberries



Our 'home':
"White Cliffs Cottage",
Barham,
now in private
occupation

and modest wood violets, quite three months out of season. ... With our spread we have some cider. Our first drink is a toast "To our friends in America". In the afternoon we walk to a nearby farm where a Ranger friend of ours lives. It is called "Heart's Delight" and is a perfect Kentish farm, living up to its name. There are oast-houses, where the hops from neighbouring hop-fields are roasted, and stretching away up the hillsides are the orchards. ... Tea over, we wend our way round the village, then return "home" to ... pack up the goods, and say "bye-bye" till next time. Oh! how we wish we were there for at least a week!

... that visit will always stand as a landmark in our passage through the war. It gave us much relief from strain. Although after thousands of alerts one ignores them, yet there is always the sub-conscious thought that there is nothing to prevent a shell just where you are, or hurling death from the skies on those you love so much. Our eyes had become accustomed to noticing a flash over the Channel: we started counting, and when eighty had been reached we dodged into shelter – or carried on – or else knew nothing at all. Our ears have become attuned to the burr, burr, burr of bombers' engines, the pop-pop-pop of machine guns, and the swish of a bomb, and we know it is tin hat time. Now however, we see more of your Air Force or ours, or together, about. We listen to ascertain whether they have gone just to the French coast when we shall hear rumbles and our windows and doors will rattle as the Germans and their accomplices suffer for their pig-headedness. Every one of our party has known the horror of finding homes and precious belongings gone, or our places of work mauled about, or worst of all, the absence of workmates to whom we were talking only the day before and with whom never again will be shared the joys and hardships of our work. Then it is we pause and wonder, where does all this lead to, is it worth while., and why should innocent people suffer? But a feeling of revenge, mingled with profound sympathy

for those who may not even think about the whys and wherefores of it all, spurs us on to renewed efforts. We know that those who have given their lives would say it was worthwhile, and even little children must suffer, as a lead towards that glorious end when all people shall be free.

Accounts of blitzes, raids, etc. may be read in books, so perhaps a few amusing stories of incidents in raids here will be more unusual:-

A fellow some of us work with is very disabled and can only walk with the aid of a crutch. He had just left hospital after treatment, when a plane dived, releasing its bombs across the town. Our friend lay flat in the gutter and was quite unhurt. He tried to get up but had difficulty owing to his infirmity. An ardent First Aid Party member rushed up and ordered him to stay still. His protests were over-ruled and a whistle brought an ambulance which, in a few seconds, whisked the gentleman to the hospital he had left only a few minutes before, but this time, as he walked away, he left a gaping F.A.P. member and a smiling nurse.

A sneak raider dropped a bomb which sent shoppers hurrying into doorways. When they crept out the road was covered with pamphlets. Hurrah! a leaflet raid! Everyone swooped for a trophy, only to discover they were bills blown from a nearby shop.

A gentleman sold fish from a barrow outside the Museum in our Market Square. When an aircraft dive-bombed overhead, he popped under his barrow – not much protection! When he emerged, his eyes widened as he saw on his barrow in place of fish, two stuffed ducks blown from the museum!

Phoebe ran to the Fire Station to report for duty for the first time when the alarm sounded. She rang the bell outside for admittance, and alarmed the whole neighbourhood as a fire engine came rushing out and enquired from our frightened friend where the fire was? She didn't know she'd sounded the main alarm in error."