The Great Folkestone Air Raid

Friday 25th May 1917 – the terrible First World War air-raid that blasted the seaside town of Folkestone into a new age of violence

The date: Friday 25th May 1917. The time: 6.22pm.

It was a beautiful early summer’s evening and for the people of Folkestone the start of a seaside holiday weekend. In bustling Tontine Street children were playing while their mothers chatted and queued outside Stokes Brothers the greengrocers. There had been wartime food shortages and a new delivery of potatoes had just arrived. A crowd had quickly gathered as news got around. Shopkeeper William Henry Stokes, my great grandfather, and his staff were doing brisk business.

The mood was surprisingly carefree. Despite the terrible death toll on the Western Front just a short distance across the English Channel, the actual violence of war had had little direct effect on the town. The sound of distant explosions caused scant concern to the shoppers outside the Stokes grocery store that evening. It was just the military practising at nearby Shorncliffe Camp. Or so they thought.

Suddenly there was a terrifying roar as a German aircraft swept out of the skies and dropped a massive 50 kilogram bomb onto the street beside the gathering throng. There was a flash of light, a deafening explosion and a moment of searing heat as the blast ripped through the queue, completely demolishing the Stokes Brothers shop and setting fire to a broken gas main.
The Stokes Brothers shop before the bombing. My great grandfather is pictured centre right

In a moment the scene had changed from that of a peaceful, balmy evening in the summer sunshine to one of terror and unspeakable carnage. The shop was completely flattened. All that was left was a mass of splintered wood and masonry. Inside William Stokes, lay dying in the rubble. His 14-year-old son Arthur (my great uncle) was terribly injured but still conscious and, though his legs were shredded by shrapnel, he managed to crawl into the street. Arthur would die in hospital three days later after gangrene set into his wounds. Two members of staff, teenage book-keepers Flora Rumsey and Edith Eales, were also fatally injured. They were both just 17-years-old. Also in the shop was William’s brother Fred (my great great uncle) who would never recover from his wounds and died 17 months later.

Outside, the street was strewn with the dead and dying. The eerie silence that had followed the explosion was soon broken by the moans and cries of the injured as survivors picked through the broken bodies, severed arms, legs and even heads looking for their loved ones. The police, fire brigade and ambulance service were soon on the scene tending to the injured, comforting the bereaved and helping those survivors whose lives had been shattered, utterly changed in an instant. Some would eventually find a way back to a semblance of normality. Others would be destined to live their days physically and/or emotionally crippled. Sixty one people had been killed by that single bomb and many more injured. Both the attack and its effects were unprecedented. Folkestone had never experienced anything remotely like it before.
My great great uncle Fred Stokes died from his injuries.

Although by 1917 it was a garrison town full of soldiers and the embarkation point for thousands of troops heading for the front-line, Folkestone's civilian population was strangely complacent. The townsfolk were largely convinced that they were safe. Quite how blasé people were is perhpin underlined by a contemporaneous account by a Mrs Coxon who describes the “exquisite summer’s day” and how interested she is in “a very l flight of about twenty aeroplanes circling and pirouetting over my head.” She talks of watching their “graceful antics” happy in the misconception that at last Britain was “up and doing”. The idea that they could possibly be enemy planes didn’t occur to her until a bomb dropped killing a woman walking along the road behind her. The military had done little to protect the town. There were no anti-aircraft defences and no efficient warning systems. Previous attacks from the air had been by Zeppelin airships and had never specifically targeted the little Channel Port before. What’s more Zeppelins were easily shot down.

However the German High Command had a plan. They secretly developed long-range bombers and on 25th May 1917 a squadron of state-of-the Gotha GIV planes laden with bombs set off planning to attack London. The flyers made it to the capital but, discovering it shrouded in low-l cloud, turned south and followed the South Eastern and Chatham railway line down to the coast, targeting the railway hub at Ashford and Royal Military Canal near Hythe on the way. Fortunately air warfare was in its infancy, many of the bombs were duds and damage was limited. In Hythe for example 16 bombs were dropped but only two people died.

My great uncle Arthur Stokes, 14, also died.

But the last gasp attack on Folkestone as the 21 Gotha’s prepared to head back across the channel raised the eventual death toll to horrendous proportions. In all 97 people were killed – 79 civilians and 18 soldiers, mainly Canadians stationed at Shorncliffe camp. It changed the town for there was a tangible loss of innocence. Among the dead there were many children, 27 in Folkestone alone. Terrible stories emerged of families destroyed. The youngest fatality was Walter Moss, just two months old, who died in Tontine Street from a terrible wound in the chest. His mother Jane also died. It is believed that her legs were torn off by the blast. They were the family of Private George Moss a Cana
soldier serving with the Labour Battalion. Poor George was a member of the Salvation Army and had ambitions to become a chaplain. He signed up to fight the good fight in August 1914. By the end of the war he had lost four brothers, a cousin, his father-in-law and his wife and son.

Another child victim of the Tontine Street bomb was 10 month old William Norris who died alongside his mother Florence and his two-year-old sister also named Florence. Their father, a local mechanic, would return home to the incomprehensible news that a simple shopping trip resulted in the loss of his entire family. There were other horrors too. As the clear-up operation began and police and volunteers literally scooped up body parts in buckets, the head of little girl was found on the doorstep of the Brewery Tap pub next-door to Stokes Brothers. For decades it rumoured that, however much it was washed and scrubbed, the bloodstain could not be removed. A simple natural discolouration of the stonework had been turned into a symbol of death and, by extension, a portent of doom. For years certain people crossed the road rather than walk that door.

My great grandmother Jane Stokes

Many had issues to deal with. My own great grandmother, William Stokes’ widow, Jane, lived to be 90-years-old, but went to her grave still racked with guilt over the fact that her husband had already come home that evening but had returned to the shop because his tea wasn’t ready. I can remember my great grandmother as a very, very old lady who lived with my great aunt. She died shortly before my third birthday. She had also of course lost a brother-in-law and a grandson in that single raid. None of them were meant to be at the shop at 6.22 that evening. The world of the survivors was haunted by so many ‘what ifs?’

Not surprising then that the bombing was rarely mentioned when I was growing up. In retrospect I realise there was almost a vow of silence about the subject. I can only of course speak for my own family who, although the raid was commemorated with a memorial plaque and an event that was central to Folkestone’s recent history, approached the subject with a collective stiff upper lip, a survival technique that would no doubt horrify contemporary mental health experts. The struggle of the post First World War years hardened their resolve. As William’s granddaughter, my 90-year-old mother Joyce Miles, explained to me just the other day: “They had been through one dreadful war and knew there was probably another one coming. They wanted to get on with their lives rather than dwell on the horrors of the past.
The Stokes Brothers shop was quickly rebuilt after the attack and the business continued with little said on the subject of the bombing. There were so many imponderables. My grandfather William Stokes Junior for example survived the Great War because he was serving with the Royal Engineers. Had he been at home selling potatoes it might have been a very different story and of course I wouldn’t be here to tell the tale.

The Stokes Brothers business continued trading until 1985 when an arsonist broke into the shop one night and set fire to both himself and premises. He died and Stokes Brothers was razed to the ground. As News Editor on the town’s local paper I personally covered that story. At the time it felt as though the Stokes family business was in some way cursed but the empty site that has remained undeveloped ever since seems curiously peaceful place. Maybe its demons have been laid to rest.

I am writing these words just a few days after the victims of the 25th May 1917 air raid were remembered at a special centenary commemorative event in Folkestone attended by descendants of those who were killed. This poignant event included a church service and the unveiling at 6.22pm – 100 years to the minute after the fateful bomb dropped on Tontine Street – of a commemorative plaque in the town’s Garden of Remembrance. Relatives young and old of those who were killed and injured came from all over the country.
6.22pm the precise time the fatal bomb fell on Tontine Street

Sadly the commemoration was made even more thought-provoking because it took place just days after the murderous terrorist attack on Manchester Arena although a very different kind of bombing, also resulted in the death of a large number of children.

Many who were present will not realise that the centenary commemoration only happened thanks to the tireless efforts of Margaret Care – a distant cousin of mine, the great granddaughter of my great grandfather’s brother Fred Stokes. Crikey, that was a bit of a mouthful but I’m not sure the any other way of saying it. I had never met Margaret before last week but we had exchanged emails over the past three years as she tracked down relatives and negotiated with the authorities over what form a commemoration could take.

With the help of Folkestone historian Martin Easdown, bags of gentle enthusiasm and dogged determination, Margaret made it happen. She modest soul but I hope she gets the recognition she deserves. Organising the memorial event was a huge undertaking. I am pi that this thoughtful, caring, diligent woman is a relative.