

**Recollections of D-Day, June 6 1944—
a personal perspective.**

Rousay Astronomer, John Vetterlein, looks back.



With Uncle Phil, Hornchurch, 1942

I was born in 1935 and spent the years of the Second World War on the eastern fringes of London. Quite early on we were evacuated to Ipswich, Suffolk—about 55 miles from our home—but since that town was bombed within forty-eight hours of our arrival my mother decided to return saying, “One might as well be bombed out at home as in anybody else’s place”. The London blitz did not affect me directly though we had relations living in the East End. Our turn came with the V1 flying bombs and V2 rockets.

During the lead up to D-Day my father was training intensively as a member of the RAF’s ground control team. Much of this was lost on me at the time since we were struggling with the pummelling we were receiving from the air.

On June 10 1944, my mother received a telegram which I have before me and that featured in my facsimile account (see below). The telegram reads: I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR HUSBAND 1192615 FREDERICK CHARLES VETTERLEIN WAS EMBARKED ON A VESSEL WHICH WAS SUNK AT SEA ON THE 8 TH JUNE AND MUST BE REGARDED AS MISSING. ANY FURTHER INFORMATION RECEIVED WILL BE COMMUNICATED TO YOU AT ONCE.

On the 15th June the Air Ministry wrote to my mother by letter. The second paragraph reads: “Your husband was on board a landing-craft which was torpedoed in the English Channel on that day, by an enemy “E” boat. A number of survivors from that craft has been reported but there is unfortunately no news of your husband.” The following day, mother had word from the wife of a fellow airman in father’s unit that my father may well have survived.

My mother wrote to the Ministry and received the following reply dated 23 rd June: “I am directed to refer to your letter of the 16th June, 1944, and to thank you for information contained therein relative to your husband, Leading Aircraftman Frederick Charles Vetterlein. Confirmation of your husband’s safety has not yet been received in this department but urgent enquiries have been made and as soon as any further information is available you will be informed.”

There was no further communication from the Air Ministry. Instead, a few days later, my father appeared on our doorstep—literally!

In the preface to my account I state: “Were we to believe the evidence of our own eyes? Was this all too, too solid flesh indeed Vetterlein F C 1192615?”

The events on D-Day fell out something as follows. Seeing that the ship was badly damaged and on fire, my father took to the water. He was a powerful swimmer and so detached himself from the wreck before it blew up. He was eventually picked up by a vessel which then proceeded on its way, but which apparently had no combative role in the proceedings. This ship moored off the Normandy coast overnight (it too had sustained some damage).

The following day my father was transferred to a merchant vessel and returned to England where he was treated for his injuries at a hospital on the Isle of Wight.

My father managed to write a brief account of his experiences (dated 9 June) and which I published in facsimile under title *The Storey of No. 1192615* (2007). Apart from damage to his hearing and some minor abrasions, my father's escape was fortuitous in many ways. Had he landed on the Normandy beaches with his unit intact who is to say he would not have become one of the thousands of victims of the invasion?

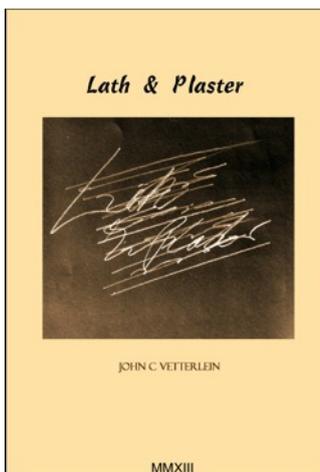
Having recuperated my father was returned to active service. Some little time later he was sent to what was euphemistically called the theatre of war where he was involved in "mopping up operations". He was eventually demobbed (slang for demobilization) on October 14 1945.

We had endless discussions about the war and its implications. Inevitably the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan entered into these exchanges. I distinctly recall my father saying to me that at least I would not have to fight in a war as he had done. Why? Because a war involving nuclear weapons would be too grotesque to contemplate. My father fervently believed he had fought in the "war to end all wars". By the time he died in 1983 he had seen that dream shattered.



With Dad, Ilford, spring 1944

The spring of 1944 gave us little opportunity to see father, his leave being limited due to training schedules for D-Day itself. However I do recall a short time together, the three of us listening to music, in particular a recent acquisition on 78 rpm a recording of Dvorak's 9th Symphony (then known as No. 5 "From the New World"). Music had a great impact on my early years such that there are works I find difficult to recall (my brain is a store of great music) without being precipitated into an emotional crisis.



The war years were a nightmare, one in which we lived from day to day not knowing who might have survived the previous twenty-four hours—friends and acquaintances dead, buried under the rubble from a bomb strike, others injured with faces unrecognisable.

Non est nisi est . . .

Sunlit apples drink to the dying day,
nettles play host to butterflies,
we, a universe apart, construct antipathies
and turn them into war.

Lath & Plaster - A child's History of the War.

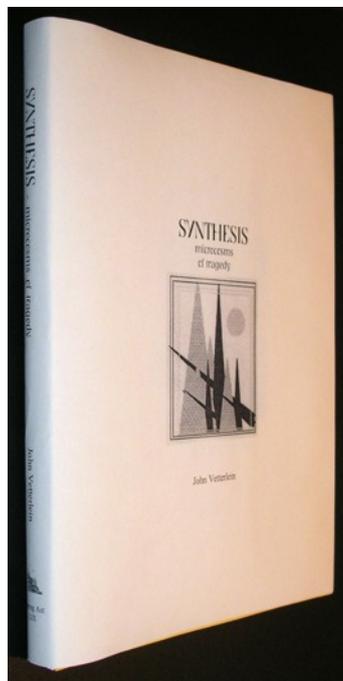
War! War, my son is what it is all about. Prepare yourself.

We were all children of the war, my contemporaries along the street and my cousins near and far. Strange that we scarcely ever discussed what the war was about, we just accepted it. War's metamorphosis crept up upon us. One day I was with cousin Margaret in Epping Forest skipping thorough the fallen leaves of autumn—next, my father was in uniform, or so it seemed. What a transformation from a casual, frayed old outfit (worn most Sundays) to the blue uniform of the Royal Air Force. (In war the killing should be done according to certain, specified rules.)

The World War II Veterans for Peace, at the 2014 November ceremony in Whitehall, read out my short poem *Cenotaph* from the collection of war poems entitled WAR (2007).

November 2018 saw the publication of *Warring On*, a 145 page collection of poems dedicated to the above mentioned Veterans.

I am the author of 21 novels, 7 volumes of short stories, 23 poetry collections and a number of plays for radio. Much of my writing has a war theme, the two novels *Synthesis—Microcosms of Tragedy* (2007) and *Lath & Plaster—A Child's History of the War* (2010) emphatically so.



Cenotaph

The voice of the “Unknown Soldier”?

They come to my tomb with their words
and their tributes, guns firing,
war 'planes over-flying.

They come to my tomb to remember
the countless dead fallen through war.

As they stand in silence at the Cenotaph,
wars raging all around,
nothing shakes their faith nor their spirit.

They will come and come again
to “honour” me, and between time
stir the potion that will ensure
there'll always be more bodies
to pile on top of mine.



John C Vetterlein
Orkney 2019 June