

Annie's story

World War two started 3 months before I was born in 1939. I found myself with my British father and German mother in Central London. Very young children take what comes without question, so I did not question the horrors being dealt out such as air-raid warning and all-clear sirens (both ear splitting), ambulances constantly passing by, also with sirens, sharp whistling as bombs were dropping and then the explosion, unavoidable panic and fear of being hit, seeing the next day great holes in the ground with dirt, dust, stench all around and often half of a house leaning perilously with furniture hanging down.

If I didn't question the horror I certainly felt it and still do - to this day the sound of a siren floods me with adrenalin.

I recall a day when my mother desperately needed to buy bread and vegetables, so taking me and my brother in the stroller, made for the shop. As we passed underneath Putney Bridge she heard a whistling close by and started to run. I picked up her fear. A man flung open his door, grabbed all of us plus the stroller and dragged us into the safety of his house. Luckily the bomb missed us, but it was a very near miss.

While thinking about my story, this little poem wrote itself:

This isn't normal,
It's not the same,
What's going on?
How did it all happen?
Shhh, my child,
Nothing stays normal.
Just embrace the unknown,
It rests within you
To sail through the storm!

One terrible aspect of the war was the frequent absence of one or BOTH parents. My mother and we children had extended periods of hospitalisation. My father joined the Navy when Hitler declared war on Russia, leaving mother with two very young children. Her thick German accent made her an instant enemy to her neighbours. She was reduced to riding the Underground Railway for some contact with other people. This has me in tears to this day.

The consequences of all this wartime trauma has remained with me all the 80 years of my life and at times still raises its ugly head.

Arriving in Australia in 1981, I was enchanted by the beauty of this country and the friendliness of its people. I was shattered when John Howard declared war against Iraq in 2003.

All my previous passion surged up again and I discovered that many other Australians shared my desire for peace on Earth, with some even singing about it! I jumped at the chance of joining what instantly became known as "A Chorus of Women". 'Lament', our first song which we sang in the foyer of Parliament House, expressed what brought us all together - the abhorrence of waging war and the terrible suffering that this would cause millions of innocent people.

Another aspect of Australian culture which struck me to the core was the one-sided nature of Anzac Day celebrations, which seemed more about glorification of war than remembrance of the fallen and all the suffering war causes.

I had to DO something! It must have been a miracle that Graeme Dunstan appeared on the scene early in 2011 with his stunning 'Lanterns for Peace' and I latched onto him immediately. We put together a small team of enthusiasts including a number of Chorus women, making lanterns, designing and printing flyers, writing and rehearsing music. In no time the Anzac Eve Peace Vigil was born and it has become a Canberra institution. The Vigil is most remarkable for the space it creates for grieving, and the truly peaceful, warm and friendly atmosphere it generates. I believe it reveals our true human nature which always longs for peace and harmony.