

Chapter 1

Post war depression in the 1940s

On May 7th, 1945, Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allied Forces. Hostilities in the European theatre of war came to an end, and Victory in Europe (V.E. Day—May 8th, 1945) was celebrated all over England. On September 2nd, 1945, Japanese negotiators formally signed the surrender documents aboard *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, and once more the world was at peace.

Demobilisation of servicemen stationed at home and abroad was a long process, but eventually my father, Peter John Page, Parachute Regiment Trooper No. 14016928, received his discharge papers at the Combined Airborne Establishment, Aldershot, on October 10th, 1946, and found himself back in civvy street. Eleven months earlier, I came into the world in the usual way. My mother, Doris Margaret Page (née Sleet), went into labour and was taken to University College Hospital, Gower Street, London. During what was later described as a ‘difficult birth’, I emerged at 4:00 p.m. on Sunday, November 25th, 1945; a long baby and weighing 9 pounds (4 kg). Apparently my hunger cries were the first ones heard in the nursery, and they were enough to launch all the other babies’ wails of attention. This was at the beginning of what was to be known as the “baby boom”.

Following mother’s recovery period, the new family settled into the small, but comfortable, one bedroom Victorian tenement flat—No. 128, Liverpool Buildings, Highbury Station Road, Islington N1. No. 128 was opposite and one floor below No. 139, the flat occupied by my maternal grandparents, George and Winifred Sleet. So it was convenient for Grandma and Granddad to visit and help with the baby chores. A short while later, the family moved to No. 120. The same as my grandparents’ flat, it was located on the top floor of the block that overlooked the old North London Railway lines, and provided an unrestricted view to the north. This was where I lived until November 5th, 1967, when I left home to go out into the wide world.

However, in this memoir the reader will be transported back between the years 1945 and 1958. A time when England was healing from the ravages of war, and an existence—in many cases—from hand to mouth.

I was born into what was popularly known as the ‘post war depression’ or ‘days of austerity’. Even as the nation was recovering from its war wounds, daily life during this time period was no bed of roses. The population was still subjected to various privations, two of the most direct being food and clothes rationing. Long queues were commonplace, and so, too, were the ubiquitous ration card books. To ensure a fair quota of certain foodstuffs were allocated to individuals, shopkeepers removed or cancelled the requisite number of stamps shown in the ration book following purchase of such items as eggs, butter and certain meats. One of my earliest recollections was peering from my pram in the United Dairies shop in St. Paul’s Road, Islington, at the wondrous array of dairy goods. To this day, the unique smell of the shop comes to mind, and the marble countertop and tiled walls a distinct memory. Mother would hold out her ration books to the shopkeeper and he would make the necessary adjustments. This was a weekly ritual.

Furniture and clothing for the less fortunate were available in the form of ‘utility goods’, symbolised by the identification mark of two adjacent solid black circles with a ‘wedge’ removed from them. Utilitarian, but affordable, these goods were designed for long life and manufactured using basic materials. For example, my high chair was a piece of utility furniture solidly made from simple turned wooden spindles and a shaped seat. Although not terribly elegant, my father’s ‘demob’ suit was very serviceable and gladly received.

Somehow, though, the rent and electricity bill had to be paid, and pennies set aside to feed the gas meter. For a young family with three hungry mouths it was a constant challenge to maintain at least a subsistence income. Moving into No. 120 Liverpool Buildings may have seen a slight reduction in the rent, as top floor flats weren’t necessarily the choice locations. The layout of the flat, however, was sufficient for our needs and consisted of the small central hall, living room, scullery, toilet, one small bedroom, and the ‘front room’ or parlour (which became my parents’ bedroom). The walls were painted with distemper (a yellow coloured liquid with a consistency similar to whitewash) and the floors were either covered in lino (linoleum) or, as in the scullery and toilet, painted bare concrete. Wooden trim was a variety of paint colours as applied by different tenants over the years, but more often than not it was dark brown.

Considering our lot in life we were fortunate, and even though the standard of accommodation in the Victorian tenement buildings wasn’t as high as those of the neighbouring estates of Laycock Mansions (Metropolitan Borough of Islington council flats)—built in 1926, or the Samuel Lewis Trust Buildings—fully constructed by 1910, we were at least comfortable. Bearing in mind that when Liverpool Buildings were erected in 1883 by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company, these model flats were a huge advancement in working class accommodation. With the exception of not being equipped with an actual bathtub, each flat was a self-contained unit complete with full town gas services, indoor toilet plumbing, sanitary refuse (garbage) disposal, cooking range, and laundry facilities. Open fireplaces in each room, built-in cupboards, cold water sink, and a coal bunker were also incorporated.

The immediate neighbourhood, too, was typical of the time, and the estate of flats formed a tightly knit community where most people knew each other. As years went by, however, the true essence of neighbourliness became diluted. Nevertheless, it was understood that children playing outside unsupervised were considered safe, and if any child did encounter a difficulty or injury, he or she would be looked after by a sympathetic neighbour and eventually taken home, no questions asked. Spontaneous street parties were organised on special occasions, and everyone contributed to them in one way, shape or form, including the hauling out of a piano for musical entertainment.

The early years

I have little recollection of my baby years, but I know it was a struggle for both of my parents during this lean time. Mum was at home raising me, and Dad, like many ex-servicemen, was constantly looking for employment. Even though casual work was available, the wages were poor and any benefits or ‘perks’ were totally out of the question. The scant income was directed towards the essential daily expenditures of shelter, food and clothing. Even home heating fuel was carefully budgeted because coal was still



Peter J. Page, R.A.F. Regiment, Holland, 1944



Doris M. Sleet, Liverpool Buildings, 1944



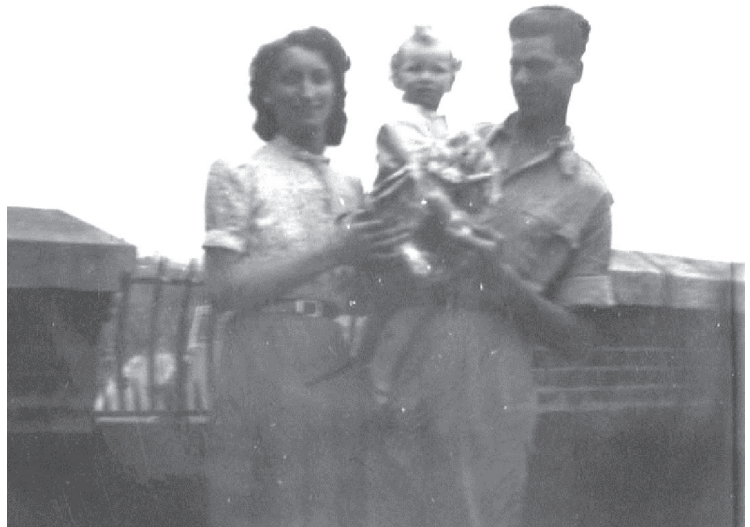
Barry J. Page, 5 Months Old, April, 1946



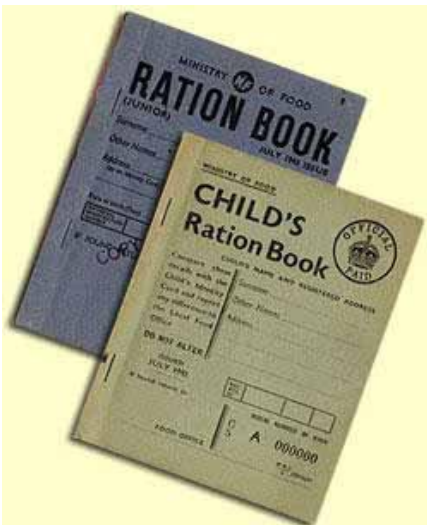
Barry J. Page, 17 Months Old, April, 1947



Liverpool Buildings from Liverpool Road, 1967



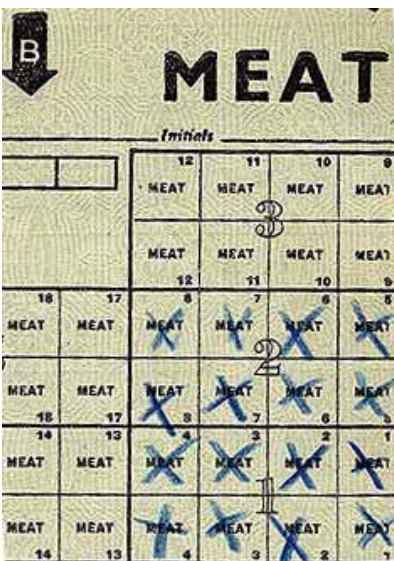
Family Group, Liverpool Buildings, 1946



General Ration Books



Typical Liverpool Buildings Street Party in Full Swing



Meat Ration Book Detail



Queue for Rationed Bread at a Bakery in Post War London

temporarily on ration, and the winters of 1945/46 and 1946/47 were excessively cold ones. There was the constant irritation of frozen pipes, and it wasn't unknown for my father or other neighbours having to break the ice that formed on the surface of the water in the big cisterns installed on the roof. Single-glazed windows failed to keep out the cold, and ill-fitting frames were packed with newspapers to stop up the draughts.

Despite the straitened circumstances, like many of their generation who lived through and survived the Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War, my parents were resilient and resourceful. Personal sacrifices were expected, and even though this brought about strained relationships, the family unit maintained its head above water and, in general, enjoyed a standard of living above the poverty level.

As a young wife and mother, Mum was in good company. She paved the way for both her older sister, Win, and best friend, Doris Felstead (née Randall), who were both pregnant with their first-born. Aunt Win gave birth to a daughter, Linda Dawn, on March 29th, 1946, and Doris Felstead also bore a little girl, Christine, later in the spring. With Grandma just a few flats away in the same block, Mum had a reliable baby-sitter on demand; often the odd occasion when my parents could escape to the cinema for the evening, and later when Mum started part-time work.

Raising a baby during the hard, cold winters of 1945/46 and 1946/47 proved extremely challenging. In the days of cloth napkins (nappies, diapers), the constant round of laundry was a true test of patience. This invariably took place in the scullery—an all-purpose room serving as the kitchen, dining area, washing and bathing area, laundry area and food larder—a ventilated chest sometimes called a food 'safe.' The flats were serviced with town gas, and part of the scullery was taken up with the gas stove. When the flats were built, the only gas outlets were for gas lighting. Meals were cooked on a large open range in the scullery, and all laundry requirements were met with the coal-fired 'copper' in one corner. The range had a tank on one side of the fire to heat water, and an oven on the other side—all self-contained and fairly efficient. The 'copper' had provision for an open fire beneath the tub to heat the water for the dirty clothes, and a hinged wooden lid which when raised allowed an old fashioned mangle to be installed. Somewhere along the road our scullery range was boarded over and the 'copper' was removed, so Mum could cook on the gas stove and use a relatively newfangled 'boiler', which may have been made by *Goblin*, for the laundry chores. The 'boiler' was compact and movable on casters, and it retained the mangle feature used for wringing the clothes of excess water. For stubborn stains, however, there was no substitute for the washboard, hard *Sunlight* soap and 'elbow grease.' This job was done in the cold water sink with the draining board used as a surface to rest the washboard. For extra whitening power, the little bag of *Reckitt's Blue* was added to the rinse water. Some shirt collars and other items requiring fabric stiffening were treated with *Robin* starch.

Washdays, usually every Monday, were indicative especially on sunny days when the drying lines that were strung across the flat roofs were filled with laundry blowing in the wind. Living on the top floor meant that it didn't take long to reach the rooftop. Mum would fill the big brown enamelled bowl with clean washing and attach each item with wooden pegs to the clothesline strung from iron hooks embedded in the chimney stacks. In later years, those same hooks supported a heavy rope that I would pretend as being a jungle vine (liana) and scramble hand over hand, Tarzan-like, along its length, with Dad nearby making sure that I didn't fall.

Dad's pioneering into the unknown

Dad was relatively fortunate and found employment soon after his demobilisation. He joined the Martin-Baker Aircraft Company in 1946 as a mechanic at the time when the company was experimenting with a revolutionary invention—the aircraft ejection seat. This was not a new idea, as the concept of ejecting pilots from crippled high-speed aircraft was trailblazed in the early 1940s by the Swedes and Germans with some success. However, James Martin, a feisty Irishman with an engineering mind, perfected the design of the forerunner of the current day aircraft ejection seat.

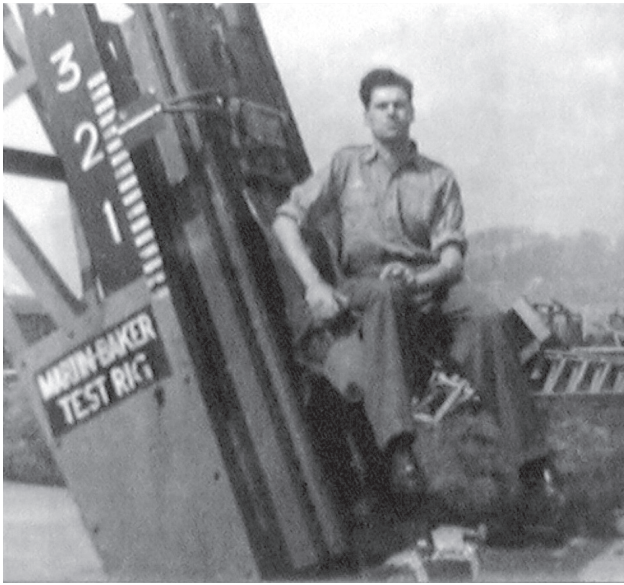
The Martin-Baker factory was located at Denham, Buckinghamshire, which was a significant commute from Islington. Dad had a variety of types of transportation, from Bonneville motor cycles to a Morgan three-wheeler, so at least he didn't have to rely on public transport. Even in the days of light traffic, however, the daily trips were still long journeys, and in all weathers.

Following extensive use of the ejection seat static test rig and crash dummies, live human tests were made with the ejection seat prototype. In the early days of 'live' ejection, Flying Officer Jack Scott piloted the jet engined Gloster Meteors used as the flying test beds. On 24th July, 1946, Benny Lynch, the chosen test parachutist for the first attempt at firing a human from a high-speed jet aircraft, successfully ejected at 320 mph (515 km/h). One year later, his second live ejection was equally successful. It was then that James Martin decided that the test responsibility should be shared, and Dad was selected as the second parachutist.

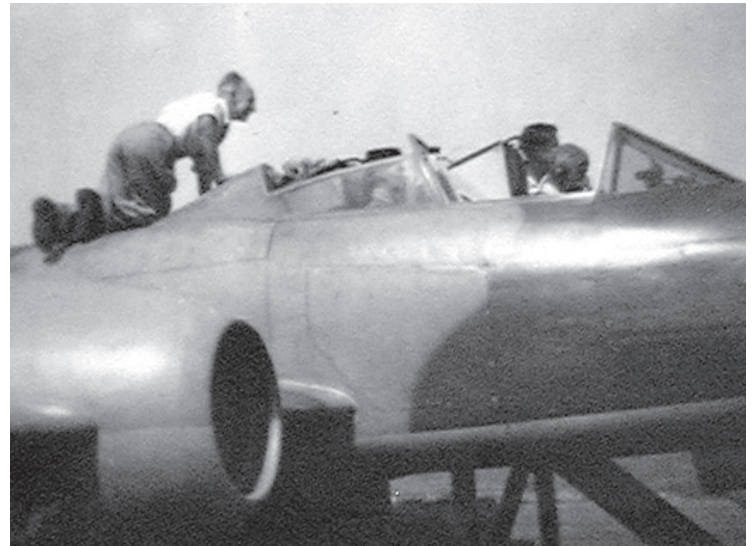
After a successful first live ejection at 200 mph (322 km/h) from the Meteor on 12th August, 1947, Dad was scheduled to make a second test two days later. Martin, however, withheld the fact that this test was to be made at over 400 mph (644 km/h). On 14th August, 1947, at Chalgrove Airfield, Oxfordshire, Scott piloted the Meteor with Dad in the rear compartment and accelerated to 460 mph (740 km/h). When the green light lit up, my father ejected into the fierce slipstream—and into disaster. With his feet torn away from the foot rests, he hung precariously from the seat. Somehow, his own parachute had deployed and flapped around, a useless impediment, and his only option was to float down six thousand feet (1829 m) under the seat's parachute. To the last, his luck ran out as the seat and occupant struck the concrete runway. The impact on his ankles, knees and lower body caused major trauma and spinal damage that brought on partial paralysis. Only after many months in a specially designed body brace was he finally able to live a normal life. The damage to his knees, however, was to bring increased grief in older age, and only knee joint replacement could alleviate the extreme pain and suffering—a legacy of the failed ejection seat test that necessitated Martin modifying the seat to prevent a repeat of the problem. Two weeks later, Benny Lynch used the modified seat to successfully eject from the Meteor at 505 mph (813 km/h).

An excellent description of the incident can be found in the book, *The Man in the Hot Seat*, by Doddy Hay—published by Collins in 1969.

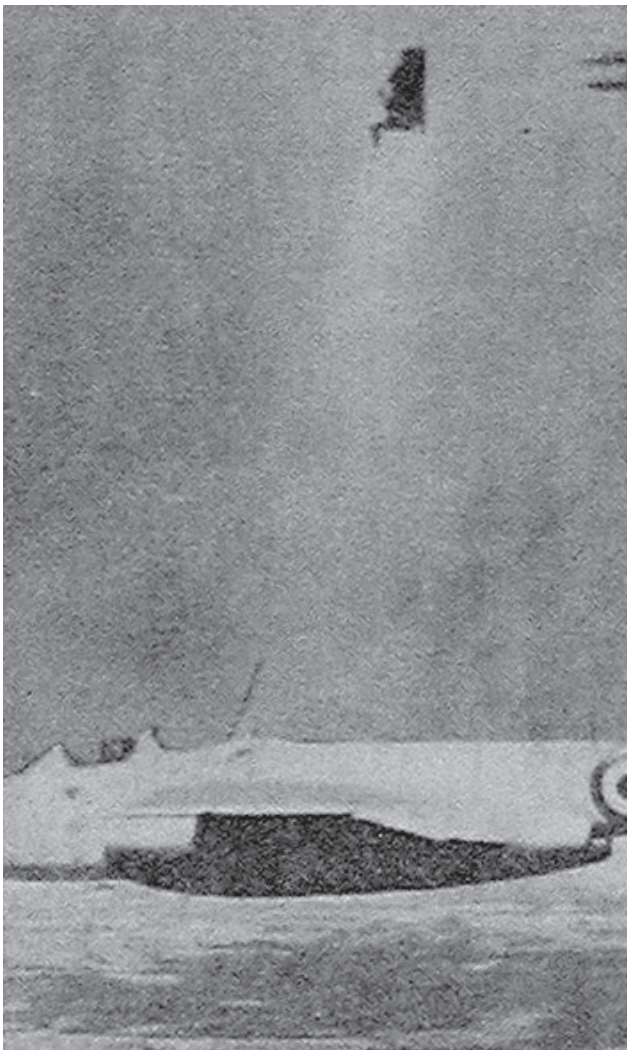
The specially designed brace was strapped to Dad's body to keep it immobile for nine months or more. It extended from his chin to the pelvic area and was extremely successful in its role as a life-support system. Before long, he was able to lift me high in the air and start to enjoy life once again.



Peter J. Page, Martin-Baker Static Test Rig, 1946



Peter J. Page, Gloster Meteor Test Ejection, 1947



Peter J. Page, Gloster Meteor Test Ejection, 1947



Peter J. Page, Special Body Brace, Islington, 1947



Barry J. Page, Toy Elephant, Islington, 1946



Barry J. Page, First Tricycle, Islington, 1947



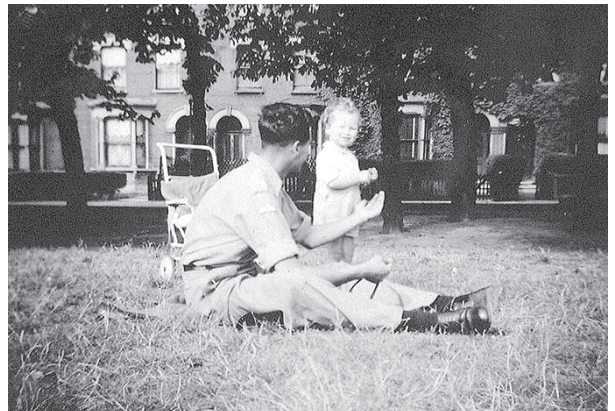
Barry and Mum, Hyde Park, c.1947



Barry and Dad, Hyde Park, c.1947



Barry and Toboggan, Islington, c.1947



Barry and Dad, Clissold Park, 1948