

NORWICH – A SHATTERED CITY

Steve Snelling

During two nights of intense bombing in April 1942 Norwich suffered its worst ordeal of the war as Hitler targeted the cathedral city for destruction as part of his vengeance campaign designed to lay waste Britain's cultural centres.

Known as the Baedeker raids, the German bombers tore the heart out of the city, turning the commercial centre to a near wasteland, and leaving entire streets in ruins.

Yet, ironically, though there was heavy loss of life, with over 200 deaths caused by these raids alone, the majority of the city's most historic buildings, including its Norman castle and cathedral, escaped the bombs and the fires that ravaged so many shops, factories and homes.

The author has made much use of records in the National Archives together with Mass-Observation diaries held at the University of Sussex to tell the full story of a ruthless bombing campaign that continued into the summer of 1942. His research, combined with vivid eyewitness accounts, offers a fresh perspective on the raids as well as setting them in their proper historical context.

Illustrated with more than 170 photographs and other images, the book presents a graphic portrait of the suffering and the stoicism displayed during an assault from the air that changed the face of Norwich forever.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

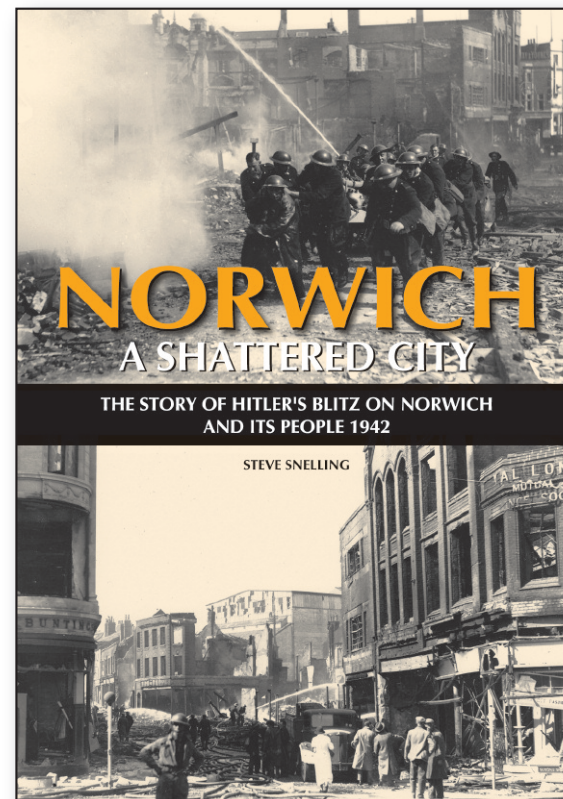
Steve Snelling is a freelance writer and journalist with more than 35 years experience of working on newspapers and magazines in Norfolk. For the past eight years he has edited and written for the *Eastern Daily Press* Sunday supplement and *Eastern Daily Press* Saturday magazines. He recently left the newspaper as an assistant editor in order to concentrate on writing books. His previous books include *Gallipoli*, *Passchendaele and the Naval VCs*, *Over Here: The Americans in Norfolk during World War Two*, and *Images of Norwich*.

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Right: UXB heroes. Insp Edwin Buttle, head of the city's Bomb Reconnaissance Department, on the left with his assistant, PC Neville Ball, on the right, with members of an army bomb disposal team (via Archant).



Left: Time for a break. Firemen enjoy mugs of tea at the back of their City Hall station. The fire fighters earned high praise for their efforts to tackle the blazes that engulfed parts of the city centre (Norfolk Fire Service archives).



Firemen damp down amid the tangled girders of Curls' department store (Archant).

Smoke pours from the Caley's site in the centre and from the devastated shopping area around Curls, bottom right, in this RAF photograph taken at 7am on April 30 (via Archant).

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Above: One of the city corporation's gas decontamination squads prepare for war during an ARP training exercise.

Top right: The Corporation Electricity Department rescue team practice air-raid drills shortly before the outbreak of war.

Bottom right: A prefabricated wooden building is set alight in front of City Hall as part of an ARP exercise in the summer of 1939.

Below: ARP workers at an underground warden's post in the city.

WAR COMES TO NORWICH

Town clerk and Norwich's Civil Defence Controller Bernard Storey (Archant).

City Engineer Horace Rowley who was responsible for air-raid shelter construction and corporation rescue parties (Archant).

additional handout was lakewarm. Even at the height of the Munich crisis, when ARP services were mobilised, trenches were being dug in Chapel Field Gardens and gas masks distributed at a rate of 200 per hour. Civil Defence remained a contentious issue. Victor Harrison, destined to become the city's chief warden at the outbreak of war, condemned the inadequacy of the city's air raid precautions, describing the ARP committee as the "Cinderella of the council". "It had almost been dismissed and disintegrated and its members had been half ashamed to confess they belonged to it," he said.

The Eastern Daily Press took up the cause, railing at the delays and urging "bold support" from everybody for the overture "spread up" promised by the council. "Eventual" preparations followed as the country teetered on the brink of war. But with trenches being dug by lamplight through the night the city remained woefully short of wardens. Where volunteers by the thousand had been expected only 400 had come forward. "One could scarcely think of a worse reflection upon the public spirit of the average man and woman in Norwich," declared an outraged EDP.

Munich had given fresh impetus to ARP recruitment nationally, but, so far as Norwich was concerned, it continued to fall short of requirements. By March 1939, two months after the government's Guide to National Service urged everyone in the country to volunteer for service of some sort, the Civil Defence organisation in Norwich was still 2,000 volunteers under establishment. For those who had rallied to the cause the month of

training that followed were intense as the men and women of the city's "fourth arm" learned to cope with all manner of bombs, gas attack and shelter organisation. Specialised sections practiced rescue techniques in the ruins of a fire-ravaged factory while other units focused on first aid, communications and gas decontamination skills.

With war drawing ever closer belated emphasis was placed on providing protection from the expected bombs in the form of domestic and public air-raid shelters. In mid-August, the first of the ubiquitous Anderson shelters, named after its designer Dr David Anderson, was delivered. Erected in five hours by corporation workmen, the pre-fabricated corrugated iron shelter stood behind City Hall as a model to be replicated in thousands of gardens throughout Norwich. Under the direction of Towns Clerk and ARP Controller Bernard Storey, a bookish yet plain-speaking north countryman only a year into the post, war preparations took on ever-greater urgency. That same month stiers were tested and full-scale Civil Defence rehearsals carried out, but a pronouncement made on August 29, just five days before the outbreak of war, that "Norwich ARP was ready" was far from the truth.

Not only were the wardens' and fire-watching services under-organised, but the city's ARP infrastructure existed only in skeletal form. On the day Britain went to war, corporation labourers in Norwich were struggling to make-up for lost time. Trenches were being dug, warden's post were under construction and the City Engineer,



Example of a double-page spread.