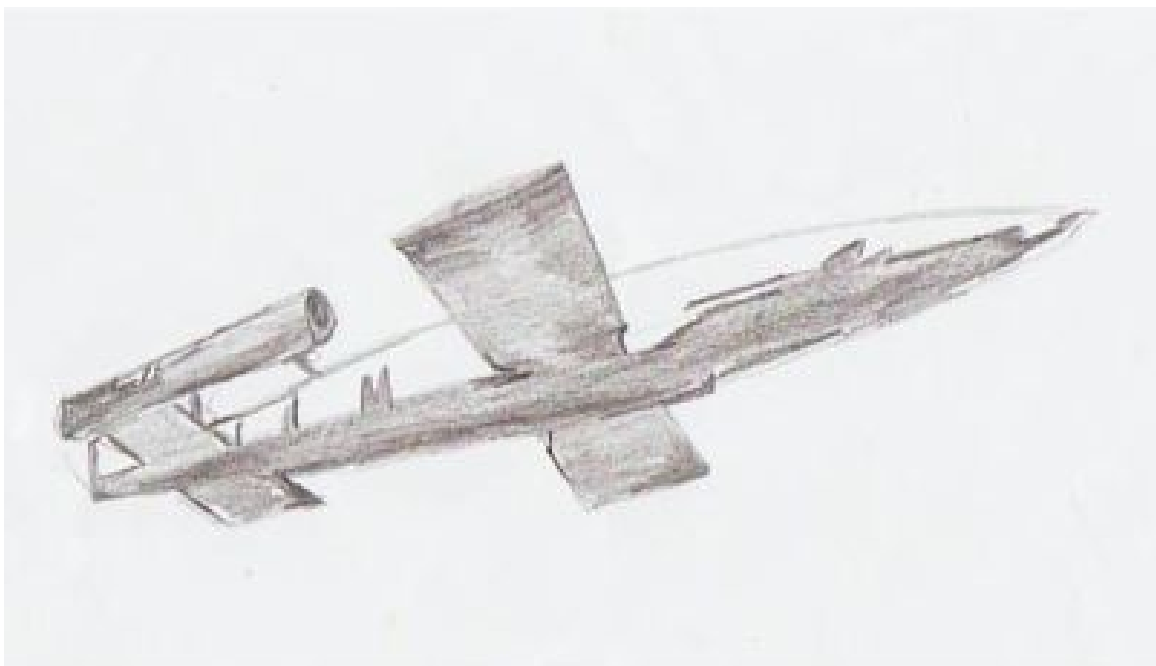


tír na nóg

stories

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the doodlebug

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a child's tale of the war

david white

2002 LONDON 2002

## **Tír na nÓg**

Tír na nÓg is described in Irish folklore as the ‘land of the forever young’. I have written the Tír na nÓg series of short stories for those who inhabit that land — at least in spirit. ‘The Doodlebug’ is the third story. The Tír na nÓg series can be found on my website:

**[www.davewhitesfield.co.uk](http://www.davewhitesfield.co.uk)**

## **Dedication**

### **To My Cousins Lewis and Brian Lesaux**

To celebrate making contact after so many years with my cousins Lewis and Brian Lesaux and their families.

### **And To the Third Generation after the War**

Nick, Jason, Florence, Beatrice, Jake, Jay, Stanley, Casey, Lily, Ella, Alfie, Rory, Grace, Amelia, and Rebecca, and those to come. . .

**Happy Christmas 2007**

## **“Auntie Mary’s”**

Auntie Mary, my mother’s elder sister of the glorious flaming red hair, a characteristic that was to re-appear in the family after skipping a generation, lived below us in the middle flat at 50 Lydford Road in Paddington.

It was the early fifties, and when my mother was at work we were in and out of “Auntie Mary’s” — as we called their flat. She would welcome us into her kitchen, the family living space, to a slice of bread and jam, an occasional treat of a biscuit, and, on a good day, a story.

As children, my sisters Mary and Jean, and I would sit down on the floor by the fire with my cousins Brian Ann and John. We hoped we would get a story before uncle Jim arrived home from work. It might be a story of Ireland — the banshee, leprechauns, headless horsemen. It might be of the war — the blitz, the blackout, the bombers, and the doodlebugs.



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## **Front Cover Illustration**

*The Doodlebug*

by Jake Bines (age 11)

## **Acknowledgements**

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And to Lewis for his photograph of the zeppelin bombing  
in World War One.

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# The Doodlebug

Jack Spratt could eat no fat  
His wife could eat no lean  
And so between the pair of them  
They licked the platter clean.

— traditional nursery rhyme

## Paddington 1950s

The bombs had come close. But our homes in Lydford Road survived the war unscathed. We saw what might have been our fate, as we passed homes devastated by the bombing, on our way to school through the neighbouring streets. It made us shiver.

KEEP OUT DANGER. Huge red letters shouted at us from the notices on the boarded up windows. Grownups told us not to go into the bombed houses, warned us of the many dangers. A mention of the word ‘bombsite’, sends Auntie Mary into prayer, stage-whispered and dramatic. “Holy Mary, mother of God...” Eyes raised to heaven, she beseeches the Blessed Virgin to save us from the clutches

of the horrors that lurked inside the bombed buildings. But it is the added threat of a good hiding, if we are caught trespassing, that makes us think twice.

The message is clear: for us, bomb sites are strictly no-go areas.



Figure 1: Margate: Houses bombed by a Zeppelin in the First World War

So, me and my mate Chubby, like commandos taking care not to be spotted, one on look-out the other forcing an entry, crept stealthily into the rubble bomb sites, our ‘adventure’ playgrounds after the war. It was just too tempting to enter what had once been places where kids like us had once lived, where there might be souvenirs, like the charred photo of little boy that I found in a bomb site round by Paddington ‘Rec’. This remnant of his portrait raised so many questions: Was he in the house when it was bombed? Was he still alive? Was he the same age as me? Why his house and not mine? Were we just lucky? So many questions.

On another visit to the same site, hoping for more clues about this boy Philip, (as I had named him, because he



Figure 2: A bomb is a bomb: Bombed house in the Second World War

looked, unmistakably, like a Philip) we searched out where the rooms had been: the kitchen, the toilet, the front-room and and the bedrooms. We climbed what was left of the staircase, and crept gingerly around the edges of rickety, broken floors, high above the rubble and the weeds, frightened to look down, and scaring ourselves silly with talk of finding a dead body or, worse still, a *live* ghost.

Out at last, we scrumpted a few unripe apples from the tree in the garden, and raced off, guiltily — swearing never to return — until, that is, the next time.

## How High Does a Doodlebug Fly?

Apart from a few fleeting memories, the reminders of what it was like in war-time come from two sources: Uncle Jim's hoard of facts and explanations, and Auntie Mary's thrilling and unnerving stories. And it isn't just her stories that are unnerving. In the same tale, she can be straightforward with a clear ring of truth, can embark on tongue-in-cheek flights of fancy, can playfully crack her own peculiar jokes, or mix in expressions of her deeply held, not-to-be-questioned religious belief. It is hard to know when she is serious or when she is pulling your leg. But that is what is so intriguing, half the fun. Spinning a yarn is what she does well.

When I ask her a question, to get her started on a story or to try to find out whether she is kidding us on, she stares at me with that 'I-know-what-you're-up-to' look, and then ducks and dives. If my questions drive her into a corner, she comes back with, "Ask your Uncle Jim. Don't be bothering me with all your questions." Perhaps I have to learn that questions like: "How high does a doodlebug fly?" are non-starters when tangling with canny Auntie Mary.

"How high does a doodlebug fly, Auntie?"

"Ask your Uncle Jim."

So I do.

## How High Does a Doodlebug Fly?

"Two or three thousand feet, that's about half a mile," is Uncle Jim's typically laconic reply. He is a goldmine of facts about the war. And with a goldmine you have to keep dig-

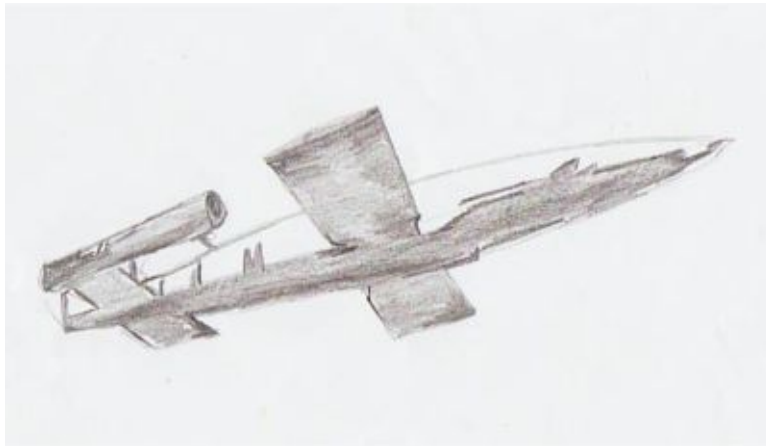


Figure 3: Doodlebug cruising

ging. If you are interested in facts and prepared to do the spadework, and I am, Uncle Jim is your man.

A radio ham, he built his own black and white television in his bedroom. An expert mechanic, he routinely takes his motor bike to bits and puts it back together again. When it comes to the ins and outs of bombs, Spitfires, doodlebugs and the deadly V-2 rockets, Uncle Jim is a whiz. But it is so hard to get him going. Question after question produces answers, but in dribs and drabs. Uncle Jim has the answers when pressed, but he can't tell a story to save his life.

And so between the two of them, Uncle Jim and Auntie Mary...

## **Gerry**

On one occasion, I thought he was about to launch into a story. He sounded as though he was going to take us on a journey like Auntie Mary does.

“The ‘little blitz’ started when Gerry sent over the first doodlebug in the spring of 1944...”

It sounded so promising — this intimate start — an answer

to one of my questions. And then... nothing. Gerry? At first, I thought it was an Irish name, someone he knew, perhaps. Then I guessed it was more likely to be the name of a German leader, like Hitler or Goering. In the end, I had to ask him who 'Gerry' was. It turned out to be a nickname for the Germans.

I waited in vain for Uncle Jim to weave his facts and explanations into a story, or perhaps, more fittingly, a history of the 'little blitz'. So, here is what Uncle Jim left me with. It's his-story:

## **Uncle Jim's War**

Gerry's V-1 rocket arrived in the spring of 1944 and heralded the start of the 'little blitz'. The V-1 was a rocket-powered 'buzz' bomb. It had a characteristic drone with a rapid flutter, because the jet engine that propelled it operated with a fast shutter action.

Londoners, in the face of mounting hardship and danger, and after years of Luftwaffe bombing, used their typically understated humour to nickname this new, truly terrifying weapon. They called it the 'doodlebug', after an Australian insect which emits a whirring fluttering drone. The 'drone' of the V-1 doodlebug could be heard ten miles away, and since it flew low, at a height of two to three thousand feet, on a clear day, smoke from its exhaust could be seen from far off.

The air raid sirens usually gave an earlier, more general, warning, but the terrifying sight of a doodlebug headed your way at a distance of ten miles gave you only two minutes



Figure 4: Doodlebug: Australian insect with a whirring drone

or so to take cover in an air raid shelter, or to duck into an underground tube station.

The V-1 was catapulted into the air to 'jump-start' its engine, usually from a launchpad on the French coast. Despite its 'toy-plane' appearance, with its small rectangular wings, it flew unmanned at 400 miles per hour, as fast as a Spitfire going flat out. Its engine was timed to cut out after a specified flying time, the time Gerry calculated it would take to reach London, and then, in dreadful silence, it would start its nosedive. Ten to fifteen seconds later, it exploded on impact with its doomed target. Seconds that were a fearful countdown for those potential targets in its path.



Figure 5: Doodlebug fired catapulted from a launchpad

## Tipping

The British defences did all they could to bring the V-1 rockets down before they reached their target. Those defending the south coast erected barrage balloons on wires, so that a doodlebug catching its wing on a wire would be deflected from its course. ‘Gerry’ replied by fitting the doodlebugs with wire cutters. The RAF were sent to bomb the launch sites on the French Coast. ‘Gerry’s’ response was to build mobile launch pads towed by lorries.

By the autumn of 1944, radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns were achieving increasing success in bringing down doodlebugs en route for London, their prime target. They exploded relatively harmlessly in open country, mainly in Kent. The success rate was as high as fifty percent. Aircraft flying at ever higher speeds had begun to intercept the doodlebugs. RAF pilots in Spitfires could catch up with a doodlebug if they dived down from a great height, using this extra velocity to bring themselves alongside the speeding missile.

They would then attempt the highly perilous tactic of wing

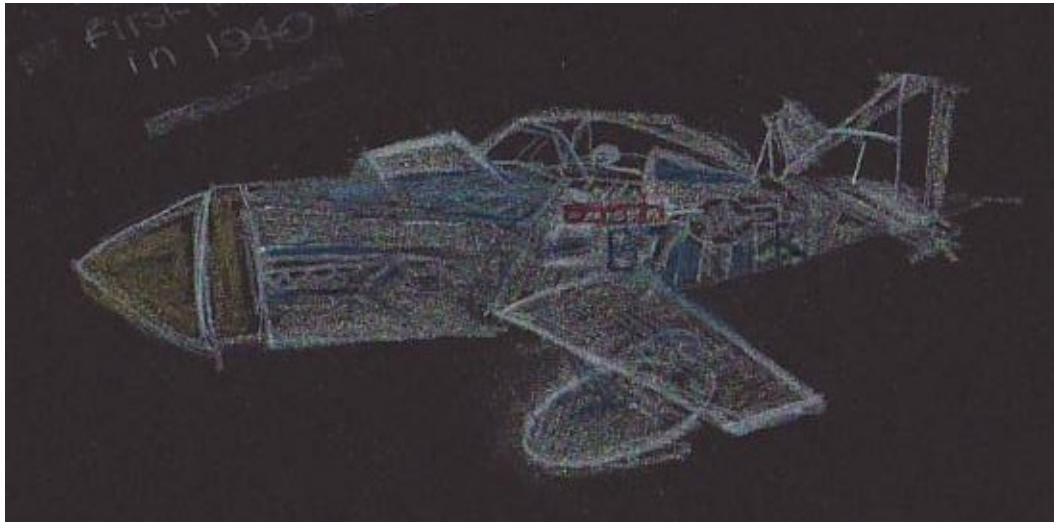


Figure 6: Spitfire by Jake

‘tipping’ the doodlebug. The pilot would ease the wingtip of his aircraft close, to almost touch the stubby wing of the doodlebug. His slipstream would be enough to turn sharply the wing of the doodlebug thus destabilizing the bomb’s automatic gyroscopic control, forcing it to turn wildly and plummet safely in open countryside far from its densely populated target.

### **A False Sense of Security**

Just when British defences were able to shoot down half the doodlebugs that were launched, and thought that they were at last getting to grips with this deadly V-1 menace, the V-2, a rocket-shaped bomb, the first long range ballistic missile, entered the war.

Unlike Luftwaffe bomber aircraft and doodlebugs, V-2s could not be intercepted by Spitfires, or the newly installed radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns situated around the south

coast of England. The V-2 was a rocket missile. It flew in a vast parabola, rising fifty miles into the air before its engine cut out, and then hurtled down to hit its target vertically at an unheard of three times the speed of sound. The unfortunate people who were the target heard nothing, saw nothing.

Those nearby, not directly affected by the blast, would hear a thunderous explosion followed for a few seconds by what sounded like rolls of thunder quickly ebbing away. And just when they thought it was over, an increasing whistling sound would arrive rising to full pitch a whole fifteen seconds after the impact, as the sound shadow of the rocket arrived. They would brace themselves for another rocket strike — a dread-filled fifteen seconds to suffer. But this time followed by an eerie drawn-out silence.

The V-2 travelled so fast, three times the speed of sound, that it was virtually silent, and unstoppable once in the air.

## **The Shrug**

Uncle Jim was a whiz with the scientific facts and seemed to know just about all the answers. But when I asked him "What do you do about the V-2s?" he shrugged his shoulders in defeat. I was shocked and frightened at the same time. How could he *not* know the answer? How could *he* not *know*?

## **Auntie Mary's War**

"How high does a doodlebug fly, Auntie Mary?"

"Ask your Uncle Jim."



Figure 7: A V-2 rocket missile

Unperturbed, Auntie Mary reaches for the curtains. Unlike Uncle Jim, she needs no prompting. She pulls the curtains across her kitchen window — just dark enough to remind us of the blackout during the blitz. She plays on our experience of bomb-sites and our knowledge of Uncle Jim’s facts about the ‘little blitz’, with the V-1 and later the V-2 rockets. She weaves expertly the tapestry of her history, her-story, threadbare of facts, but rich in deep emotional colours.

And so we are primed for Mary to take us back to the

‘little blitz’. To a time of fear. Stress. And strain, month after month after month.

## **The Run for the Air Raid Shelters**

She begins,

“The air raid sirens would sound at any time, day or night.” She gives a chilling imitation of the air raid siren winding up. ‘Suspiciously like the wail of the banshee, which she uses to good effect in her stories of Ireland.’ My observation helps me to insulate myself against the encircling warzone that Auntie Mary is creating.

“Everybody in the house would rush down the stairs. Your mum would be carrying the two of you,” pointing to Jean and Mary, “and you David would be coming close behind, as fast as your little legs would carry you.”

She laughs quietly to herself at the image.

But now the story grips me. It takes me back into my earliest memory. Running down our stairs in the dark to get to Mrs Stevens’ basement, holding on tightly to the wooden bannisters to prevent myself from falling. My mother ahead, carrying my twin baby sisters of a few months, calling to me to catch hold of her skirt as we dash into the garden or out into the street.

Into the air raid shelters we scurry, usually behind Mrs Stevens and her daughter, Pat, who hurries with a rolling gait caused by a hip dislocated from birth — the atmosphere more of excitement than panic; more of a nuisance than a life or death struggle to survive. Not so Auntie Mary’s

stories, they are scary. Scary.

## **The Wait**

A faint flicker of flame picks out her face in her favourite seat by the kitchen fire as Auntie Mary continues, her voice dropping to a whisper,

"We would all huddle together in the air raid shelter, sitting on old mattresses or cushions on a cold, dusty concrete floor. The blackout was in force at night time so that enemy aircraft would not be attracted by the lights to city areas. With no lights at all, the inside of the shelters were pitch black. You couldn't see your hand in front of your nose!" Auntie Mary waves her hand slowly in front of her nose and makes out she is desperately trying to see it.

"There we sat, holding hands, our eyes getting used to the gloom, listening out for the sound of the bombers or the dreaded winding drone of a doodlebug."

She cups her hand to her ear, and tilts her head in an effort to hear. We children sit on the floor holding hands tightly for comfort. She lets the silence run. We all strain to hear, too, the hint of a drone of the devilish doodlebug.

"What is that?" she whispers at any slight noise from outside the room, and,

"Is that it?" One or two children almost involuntarily answer, "No!!"

"Sssshhh!!" Auntie Mary cautions, her eyes circling wildly, looking scared, planting the idea in our heads that a stray doodlebug approaching may be able to home in on the sounds of all but the quietest children.

Perhaps it is the invitation to be on the lookout, or the “Sssshh!!”, or Auntie Mary’s exaggerated and dramatic silent-film miming, but now an almost tangible click of entry follows, and we are well and truly locked into the drama of the ‘little blitz’. With the tense hush among us, the kitchen has become the war-time air raid shelter. At every noise of a car outside, we look at her anxiously to see if it is the tell-tale drone of the dreaded doodlebug.

She checks, pursing her lips as she considers each interruption carefully, then shakes her head slowly, letting us know that the latest false alarm will not prevent her from continuing to listen intently — to save our lives. Peter the cat miaows, and we all jump out of our skins. Auntie Mary smiles at the cat’s interruption, but says nothing.

### **One on the Way**

Just as we are starting to feel confident that the bombs are not coming our way, or that the siren has been a false alarm — the danger has passed and we are safe — a low guttural whirring sound disturbs the tense hush in the room. The drone, coming through Auntie Mary’s closed lips, increases bit by bit, gaining intensity. A doodlebug must be approaching!

From Uncle Jim’s description, we all know that if we are lucky, and the sound of the doodlebug comes directly overhead or passes us before its engine cuts out, its momentum will carry it on away from us as it turns into a silent dive towards its doomed target.

Auntie Mary’s eyes are closed now, her eyelids flicker-

ing as if she is in a trance. Her body is swaying from side to side, circling to the tempo of the cyclic droning. Auntie Mary's hand, thumb and little finger angled as the wings of the doodlebug, is slowly rising towards us. It is close! Too close! The winding drone grows louder and louder. It has nearly reached over us. The engine cuts out. It is impossible to tell whether it has passed or not.



Figure 8: Doodlebug in freefall, World War Two

We strain worried eyes to Auntie Mary to save us. Auntie Mary thrusts her fingers in her ears and hunches her shoulders and starts to count. And so do we. We wait together in awful suspense for the inevitable explosion.

## **Countdown**

We count down the slow heartbeat seconds with Auntie Mary 15,14,13,12,11,10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1 . . .

An eternity, glancing anxiously and furtively at each other and Auntie Mary. An age, and then she takes her fingers from her ears and looks up, smiling. It has missed us. We are so relieved. Auntie Mary, her story over, gets up from her chair,

"But", she pauses and we freeze, "there may be a V-2 coming."

Auntie Mary stands quietly, a warning look on her face. Some of us put our fingers to our ears again,

"There's no point in blocking your ears? You can wait for the V-2 for ever. But when it comes you won't hear a thing — unless it misses you." she nods in her emphatic Irish way, laughing mischievously, but silently. Silently.