

The Home Front

Alan J. Summers

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In *The Home Front*, Alan J. Summers offers a revealing glimpse of civilian life in 1940s wartime England. Set in a small seaside town in Essex, a county northeast of London, Summers' story, which draws on "anecdotes and reminiscences of the people who were there," examines the contributions made by those at home while their loved ones served in World War II.

When the tale begins, during the summer of 1940, the Battle of Britain is well underway. Summers' main character, Mark, an RAF Spitfire pilot who has been severely burned in an air skirmish, faces an extended recovery period. The young lieutenant moves in with his uncle in the village of Lavering, which is near the hospital that provides his burn treatments. Now a "hairless, multi-coloured monster" who can "just about dress himself" and is "in pain all the time and short fused," Mark intends to flee the area, but his uncle and the villagers have other plans for him. As he recuperates, Mark sees how the townspeople have mobilized to help in the war effort, despite the toll the war has taken on them, and he soon becomes engaged in the local initiatives.

Summers' characters represent many of Britain's historic civil defense organizations. Among the Lavering population are Sea Scouts, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and Brownies. Old-age pensioners and retired military personnel volunteer as members of the Home Guard, and others serve in the Air Raid Patrol and the Observer Corps. The true solidarity of volunteers on England's home front has been well documented, both during and since the war, so when Summers' injured war hero tells a group of Boy Scouts that, "We all have a contribution to make and the work you do here ... adds to our nation's war effort," his words reflect an entire empire's notion of community spirit.

It is difficult to determine whether the efforts and activities of the local citizens are realistic. Duties including "coastwatching" and "firewatching" often fell to older Boy Scouts, for instance, but Summers has Cubs and Brownies, presumably children under the age of ten, manning watch towers, working on a bucket brigade, and throwing water onto a roof fire while hanging from a rope.

With a few questionable exceptions like the ones noted above, *The Home Front* offers a generally accurate and detailed look at England's local defense operations during the war, from rationing and the housing and education of evacuee children to falling planes and surfacing Italian submarines. Summers notes that his information about wartime life comes from many sources, and he combines them all into an enjoyable, elucidating work of fiction.

The Home Front's secondary story lines add a bit of romance and intrigue to the book, and, while some of the side stories stretch credibility too far, they do keep the plot moving. Unfortunately, Summers adds an epilogue that spoils the book's conclusion. In it, he jumps ahead a few years and predicts an ominous future for the main characters, which might best be left to a sequel.

CHERYL M. HIBBARD (September 14, 2012)

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