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# A HARD RAIN

## Children's Shrapnel Collections in the Second World War

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### *Abstract*

Anti-aircraft shells exploding at high altitudes scattered shards of red-hot steel across the towns and cities of Britain during the Second World War. For many schoolchildren, collecting and trading this shrapnel became a popular social activity, often recalled today in oral history interviews. Drawing on testimonies collected as part of the *People's War* project, this article examines these curious and neglected processes of accumulation, exchange and disposal, looking at the aesthetic qualities that gave shrapnel fragments their value and attractiveness. In doing so, it attempts to locate children's shrapnel collections within their social worlds, as well as within broader discussions of material culture and modern conflict. It highlights the significant differences from other more typical forms of collecting, and some of the more subversive uses that children found for their shrapnel. The article also raises the possibility that collecting these violent objects may have been a way for children to cope with the upheaval and brutality of total war.

*Key Words* ◆ childhood ◆ collecting ◆ home front ◆ memory ◆ warfare

One of the defining characteristics of modern industrialized warfare or 'war of matériel' is the creation and transformation of material culture on a vast scale, including the devastation of landscapes and cityscapes, the mass production of armaments and the violent disfigurement of the human body (Saunders, 2004; Schofield et al., 2002). In these 'total wars', in which civilian populations are targeted by bombers and rockets, it is inevitable that children will encounter the material culture of warfare; some will be killed or injured by it.

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The ways in which children encounter, interact with and integrate this material into their social and conceptual worlds is a topic of great contemporary importance in our understanding of violence and childhood trauma (Werner, 2000). It is remarkable that in the era of the child soldier, in which tens of millions of children have been killed or injured in conflicts, the association of children with the material culture of warfare and violence still has the power to shock and surprise:

Connections which we hold with concepts of 'child' (innocent, passive, protected, happy and young) and 'weapon' (worldly, aggressive, violent, suffering and adult) are mutually exclusive oppositions. The juxtaposition of a child with a lethal weapon creates incongruity. (Sofaer Derevenski, 2000: 3)

In this article I consider one particular encounter of this kind: the practice amongst British children during the Second World War of collecting and exchanging fragments of anti-aircraft shell shrapnel. I examine the patterns of gathering, possessing and trading shrapnel, its aesthetics and its dangers. Through these analyses I have tried to understand the collecting of artefacts of war within the social lives of children in conflict.

## BACKGROUND

In the course of broader research into the archaeology and memory of the Second World War, I have conducted a series of oral history interviews examining the relationship between individual memories and the material remains of conflict (Moshenska, 2006, 2007). More than 90 per cent of my interviewees had been school-age children at the start of the Second World War in 1939, so my questions focused on their memories of life on the home front including rationing, evacuation, war work and experiences of bombing. In discussions of socializing, play and everyday life in wartime a large number of the interviewees talked about collecting shrapnel from the streets after air-raids and trading the pieces for other fragments or for other toys or collectables:

When the sirens used to go we went into the shelters, and when it was all clear we used to come out looking for shrapnel come down in the streets still hot. You picked it up in your hands and it was still hot, where it was come from the guns . . . you used to have the ack-ack guns driving round in the streets . . . they couldn't do much, I suppose it was more for morale. You see they were shooting at the planes, and when those shells explode the shrapnel's got to come down hasn't it . . . take it home, swap it around with the kids, 'give you my bit you give me that bit' . . . I wish I'd kept it, all the stuff, but you don't, do you? (Interview with HA)

When the ack-ack . . . where they were trying to shoot the bombers down, and the shells would explode, high up and shatter into smithereens, and that was called shrapnel, because it was all weird and wonderful shapes, and you

could hear it come down on the roof, and you would hear a sort of tinkling sound in the evening when you were listening to the radio . . . the next morning you go out in the garden, search for shrapnel, put it in a shoebox, and bring your best pieces to school and compare, yes it was like jewellery, you'd all be comparing your shrapnel. (Interview with TS)

These narratives correspond to fictional depictions of children in wartime, for example in Robert Westall's *The Machine Gunners* (1977), as well as previously published oral histories of the Blitz: 'As kids, we tried to find shrapnel. We'd find nose cones from shells and take them into school next morning like they were prizes. Even the teachers got excited – "where did you find that?" It was an adventure' (Levine, 2006: 409).

My interest in the subject of shrapnel collecting emerged from a number of factors in these interviews: the roughly even numbers of men and women who remembered collecting shrapnel, the apparent near-universality of the practice, and the vividness with which interviewees could remember individual items in their collections. Shrapnel collecting was evidently an important part of a wartime childhood, and a form of interaction with the material culture of warfare that appeared to have been driven entirely by the children themselves. This preliminary work indicated that shrapnel collecting was qualitatively different from other forms of collecting that children of this period routinely engaged in, and that shrapnel collecting might have been above all a coping mechanism, a means for children to control or domesticate the material culture of violence by integrating it into their social practices and thereby negating its violent and alien qualities. It could also be argued that collecting shrapnel was a way for children to feel involved and actively in the world at war on a par with the adults around them.

To examine these ideas I have used a far larger dataset than my own: the collection of Second World War testimonies collected by the BBC in its *People's War* project from 2003 to 2006, archived online at [www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/) (BBC, 2003–6). My analysis of this dataset focuses on a number of different areas including the values of different pieces and types of shrapnel, the dangers associated with collecting it, gender patterns in shrapnel collection, and the retention and disposal of collections. First it is necessary to examine both the historical origins and nature of these lumps of hot steel falling from the sky, and to consider some of the models of childhood collecting in the research literature.

## PRODUCING AND CONSUMING SHRAPNEL

The vast majority of the shrapnel that fell on British towns during the Second World War came not from bombs or damaged aircraft, but from the anti-aircraft (AA) shells that were fired at the over-flying bombers. A typical gun such as the British 3.7 inch could fire its 28-pound shells to

36,000 feet at a rate of 20 a minute (Routledge, 1994: 87). Exploding at a predetermined height or flight-time these high-explosive shells were transformed into clouds of shrapnel; hundreds of steel shards effective at a radius of about 20 metres (Wells, 1995: 43). These razor-sharp red-hot chunks of metal were capable of ripping through the fragile aluminium skins of aircraft into engines, cables, pipes, fuel tanks and crew members to destroy, damage or disable the aircraft.

British AA Command was mobilized in the run-up to war, and emergency production of AA artillery began. However, by June 1940 the total of 1204 heavy guns and 581 light guns for the whole country was pitiful, and fell far short of the planned 2232 and 1860 respectively (Overy, 2000: 46). During the Battle of Britain, AA command estimated a hit-rate of one aircraft destroyed for every 2444 shells fired; this was later revised to one in 1798, a slight improvement (Harrisson, 1988: 100). The vast majority of shell fragments that missed their targets fell to earth, landing on roofs, gardens and streets. On the unfortunate occasions that shells failed to explode at altitude, they were as deadly on their return as a falling bomb, or as problematic as any unexploded ordnance in an urban area. Bombing maps of the period show the frequency of these occurrences: along with the 1493 bombs that fell on the borough of West Ham in London during the Second World War, some 201 AA shells landed, with more than half of them exploding on impact (Demarne, 1980: 52–3).

In comparison to other mass-produced commodities, the life of a shrapnel fragment followed an unusual trajectory. The high explosive shell is more usually associated with the First World War, in which hundreds of millions were fired on all sides. Saunders' study of the cultural biographies of these artillery shells explores the relationships between people, the things they make and use, and the worlds they create:

Rich in symbolism and irony, shells were the mediators between men and women, soldiers and civilians, individuals and industrialised society, the nations which fought the war, and, perhaps most of all, between the living and the dead. (Saunders, 2002: 22)

AA shells in the Second World War were considerably less iconic, except perhaps to those who remembered the First: shrapnel falling nightly from the sky may have had an adverse impact on the mental health of shell-shocked Great War veterans.

In the manner of their use, their general ineffectuality and their physical remnants, the cultural lives of AA shells mirrored those of the shells of 1914–18. First World War shells transformed industry and the social status of women in their production, and shattered landscapes and men's bodies in their use; their fragmented steel remains mingled with the churned mud of the battlefield (Saunders, 2002: 53–5). In contrast,

AA shells were produced on a relatively modest scale, as armament production focused on aircraft manufacture, and in their intended use caused few casualties. Only in their shattered, spent form did they achieve social significance, mediating in the relationships of children to adults, to their peers, and to the world around them.

As a commodity, shrapnel is also unique in its explosive means of production and distribution, being created very suddenly at high temperatures and altitudes and spreading itself across wide areas in an admirably democratic way. As a tradable man-made commodity it was remarkable in being free, abundant, endlessly diverse and continually in production: in the world of collecting these are characteristics more usually associated with natural history specimens such as seashells.

### CHILDREN, COLLECTING AND CONTROLLING

The practice of collecting, the nature of collections and the character of collectors have been extensively studied by anthropologists and sociologists, and more recently as an aspect of museum studies (e.g. Baudrillard, 2005; Belk, 1995, 2006; Martin, 1999; Pearce, 1994, 1995). Collections have been interpreted in relation to consumption, display and the creation of identities as well as a range of psychological models; one of the values of this research lies in the fact that it offers a clearly identifiable starting-point for studying how human beings interact with material culture (Belk, 2006). However, considering the rich and complex culture of the playground, along with the ever-increasing importance of children as consumers in society, there is surprisingly little contemporary research focused specifically on children as collectors (but see Baker and Gentry, 1996; Cook, 2001).

A recent study of collectors that included both adults and children in its survey noted the paucity of research on child collectors after a brief boom in the 1920s and 1930s (Danet and Katriel, 1994a: 221). This earlier work, based on surveys carried out in the USA, is a valuable resource in the present context particularly as it is relatively close in date to the Second World War (e.g. Whitley, 1929; Witty and Lehman, 1931). These studies examined patterns including the peak ages for collecting, gender variations in types and numbers of collections, different forms of acquisition and stated reasons for collecting (Whitley, 1929: 260). Whitley's study includes 'pieces of metal' as a category of collection, and shows this to be an overwhelmingly male interest (1929: 256), while Witty and Lehman's survey shows interest in 'objects associated with war' to be a popular and almost completely male phenomenon (1930: 224). Both of these categories are to some extent useful analogues for shrapnel collecting. Belk contrasts early 20th-century children's collections with the results of more recent studies to highlight a move away from found

objects such as seashells, buttons and stamps, popular in the 1920s and 1930s, towards manufactured collections such as dolls, stickers and trading cards (1995: 54).

Children tend to take a more hands-on approach to their collections than adults; carrying them around, handling them and allowing others to sort through them as a form of display (Gabriel, 1974: 264–5). This introduces an inevitable element of entropy as cards become dog-eared, trinkets get scratched and worn out and light-fingered acquaintances make off with prized items. The most important corollary of this is that, for children, collections are overwhelmingly social things – a means of communicating and interacting with others in their social spheres. Walter Benjamin recognized that children's collecting habits are subtly different with a tendency to touch, name and modify the objects in their collections more readily than adults (Benjamin, 1999: 63). As Classen observed, the once common practice of touching and handling museum collections has virtually died out: 'the one kind of museum that consistently caters to the sense of touch in modernity is the children's museum' (Classen, 2005: 284).

The theory that collecting can be a coping mechanism for children in traumatic environments is based on an understanding of collecting both as a social practice and as a process of ordering and controlling chaotic material culture. Baudrillard states that 'For children, collecting is a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating' (2005: 93). Belk agrees that 'By providing physical control of the objects in a collection, the "illusion of control" . . . of broader physical domains, people, and knowledge may occur' (1995: 70). In more general terms, Danet and Katriel argue that

Collecting is imbued with the theme of control, articulated both as striving towards controlling and as the fear of being controlled. A collector gains control over the objects that comprise his or her collection through the power of ownership, which is actualized in the right to handle, rearrange, and even sell items in the collection. (1994b: 32)

Pearce has suggested that collecting can help people get through difficult processes of transition: she highlights the prevalence of children's collecting and trading during adolescence and in the recovery from bereavement or illness, as well as its role in creating social frameworks (1995: 237). This is to some extent a development of Winnicott's theory of the transitional object in the cognitive development of very young children, as well as the common childhood practice of assigning power and significance to objects whose presence has a positive effect on the owner's emotional state (Muensterberger, 1994: 9; Winnicott, 1953). Muensterberger argued that collections are often substitutes for people: distant or absent parents, or general loneliness; a view echoed by Pearce,

who also recognizes the active role of the collection and the objects that constitute it in accumulating experiences and memories, and in negotiating the collector's encounters with the world around them (Muensterberger, 1994: 25; Pearce, 1995: 237).

Exposure to warfare has a traumatizing effect on children, varying in severity according to a number of factors including age, gender, and family and social support. Exposure to bombing has been shown to be particularly traumatic, exacerbated by expressions of fear by parents and other adults (Freud and Burlingham, 1943).

Five years after the end of World War II, some 1200 British school children who had been exposed to air raids were examined. Some 18 per cent still showed disturbances caused or aggravated by the war experiences. They had war-related fears and nightmares, sleep disturbances, and exaggerated psychophysiological reactivity to sirens, loud noises, and explosions. That percentage is similar to the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosed in combat veterans of World War II and the Vietnam War. (Werner, 2000: 212–13)

For children, war is often experienced in terms of a heightened sense of powerlessness and, perversely, a degree of freedom, amidst the chaos and change in their social and material worlds. In this context, 'the calming effects of the collection have to do with control: one retreats from a situation in which one has lost control to one in which the collector dominates – if possible, totally' (Danet and Katriel, 1994b: 41). In interviews and studies of collectors, both adults and children, many have traced the origin of their collection and their drive to collect back to traumatic events in their childhood including bereavement, loss and war (Muensterberger, 1994: 10).

## NARRATIVES OF SHRAPNEL COLLECTING

The fear and upheaval of a wartime childhood emerges most clearly in diaries and oral testimonies including the Mass Observation Archive (Harrison, 1988) and more recently the *People's War* project which collected over 47,000 narratives of individuals' wartime experiences (BBC, 2003–6). From this extraordinary online archive resource I have selected a sample of stories that discuss shrapnel. This involved a series of key word searches, discarding stories relating to artillery shrapnel in combat, or to HMS Shrapnel, a Southampton hotel requisitioned by the Navy for the duration of the war. Analysis of the resulting sample has identified a number of key themes discussed later, which examine the properties of shrapnel, the processes of trade and exchange and patterns of disposal.



## WHAT WAS SHRAPNEL?

In the morning of course we would go round picking up the shrapnel and they were quite treasures: I don't really know what I thought they were, I just knew it was shrapnel. (A4111363)<sup>1</sup>

Shrapnel is quite clearly defined in the jargon of ordnance and gunnery: a shrapnel shell is a hollow shell filled with metal shrapnel balls, designed to explode in flight spraying pieces of shot across a wide area. It was principally an anti-personnel weapon, developed in the 19th century by the British Army. However, during the First World War trench warfare rendered shrapnel shells obsolete and production shifted to high-explosive shells; gradually the word 'shrapnel' came to be used to describe shell fragments (Blakely, 1952).

It came mostly not from bombs dropped on us by the Nazis during the Blitz, but from the exploded anti-aircraft shells that our boys were sending up to greet them. (A1144964)

Picking up shrapnel (bits of bomb casing), and bullet and shell cases on the way to school after the air raids was fun, many cannon shell cases were polished up and used as brass ornaments on the fireplace. (A2216963)

This display of children's souvenirs of the Second World War would have echoed, perhaps consciously, their adult relatives' souvenirs of the First. It could be argued that this juxtaposition was an attempt by the children to equate their experiences of aerial bombardment with the narratives of adult warfare that they would have been most familiar with.

Amongst the children of the Blitz there is some disagreement about what constituted shrapnel. For most it was specifically the fragments of exploded anti-aircraft shells, while for others it was a broader category incorporating bomb fragments, pieces of crashed aircraft or V1 flying bombs, bullets and even complete incendiary bombs. While all of these objects formed parts of many children's collections, shrapnel from AA shells would have been the most common finds, and perhaps this became a simplifying general term.

## THE COLLECTING PROCESS

Every morning, after a night of bombs and explosions, we would emerge blinking from our underground shelter in the garden to search for bits of shrapnel. (A2029024)

Several of the narratives of shrapnel collecting mention getting up early in the morning, either for school or a paper round, or specifically to gather shrapnel before friends and neighbours awoke and nabbed the best pieces. The competitiveness of this accumulation becomes clear in

these stories, which include hair-raising descriptions of watching from the shelter entrance to see where shrapnel landed, by the sparks it gave off as it hit the ground at great speed (A4196469; A7570460). Some children went to extraordinary lengths to expand their collections:

One day we found Jackie Cockerill riding his small tricycle about with a large magnet tied on a string behind, vainly hoping thus to collect any shrapnel which might escape his observation. (A4532627)

Early-morning shrapnel gathering was not without its risks: the shrapnel was often still too hot to handle, and if taken into school there was a risk of confiscation for the 'war effort', discussed later. Some children developed strategies to overcome these setbacks:

Walking home from school was always exciting because it was then that I would collect the bits of shrapnel that I had found in the street on the way to school that morning and which I had hidden in the front garden hedges of certain houses en-route. I never used the gardens of elderly gardeners as they would be sure to find my treasures as they clipped their privets. (A5811761)

As discussed earlier, the collections of bullets, other souvenirs of war and scraps of metal in 1930s America was an overwhelmingly male activity. It is interesting to note the contrast with shrapnel collecting and some of the contradictions in the evidence. Some of the narratives describe shrapnel collections as specifically male: 'All small boys had shrapnel collections . . .' (A2055881), reinforced by an account from a woman who agreed that 'obviously the boys were more for doing that than we girls. Obviously if we did find a bit then the boys would try to nab it off us . . . you know . . . it was their trophies, not ours' (A4507346). Despite this, women make up a sizable proportion of my sample of interviews; approximately 35 per cent of the accounts of personal collections in which the gender of the interviewee can be discerned. In several of these women's narratives the practice of shrapnel collecting is clearly non-gender specific: 'us kids would go around collecting shrapnel' (A4455885); 'It was something that all the children in my area did' (A5885832).

The dangers of shrapnel collecting were considerable. Several stories mention being burnt or cut by the freshly minted fragments, red-hot from the explosion and torn into ragged shapes (A7639761; A5472100). Children were warned in school about the dangers of handling mysterious objects such as butterfly bombs, the first ever cluster bomb, and other forms of unexploded ordnance:

We were all told never to pick up anything - shrapnel is extremely sharp, some strange objects could be 'live'. A policeman stands in front of the infant's class and holds up a brightly coloured small bomb which looked like a light bulb at the end of a stick topped with folding arms and he demonstrates

how it unfolds and spins. He instructs us if we see one on the street, 'never ever to touch it, just run quickly and tell the first adult you see'. (A2286867)

Saunders highlights similar warnings given to children living near First World War battlefields in the inter-war period for whom collecting scrap metal from munitions was more of an economic activity than a form of play, but one that led to a number of fatalities (2003: 147). In parts of the world affected by landmines and other potentially lethal forms of ordnance there is an ongoing need to educate young people about these risks. In wartime Britain these warnings generally went unheeded as children sought to add ever more impressive items to their collections:

My friends and I would go round the streets looking for shrapnel and shell nose caps but alas like the old saying 'curiosity killed the cat' became true to life when my friend Graham picked up a fire bomb and was badly injured including losing a hand. (A2119475)

Tales of injuries and near misses from falling shrapnel are remarkably common in the sample, including head wounds where shrapnel hit or pierced steel helmets (A2216963; A4040164). In Britain during the First World War the number of deaths caused by falling AA shrapnel almost equalled those caused by German bombing (Haldane, 1938: 17). With friends, neighbours, parents and teachers being killed and injured by falling shrapnel there is no doubt that many children were well aware of its very real dangers. The fact that they carried on feverishly collecting suggests that the obvious dangers may have made both the shrapnel and the collecting process a more thrilling, subversive activity.

While bombing destroyed houses and infrastructure, shrapnel may have seemed a much more individual threat. The 9-inch long, pointed fragment that punctured a door and landed in a baby's pram, the heavy nose-cone that landed with a flash and narrowly missed another boy's mother, or the rain of hot shrapnel that fell suddenly around a woman walking home one evening must have seemed like thunderbolts from the sky, aimed at these people personally (A6179628; A4136663; A4389861).

## AESTHETICS AND VALUE

From the narratives of collecting and trading there emerges a system of valuing different types of shrapnel based on a number of qualities. The two most important properties that emerge in the interviews are the rarity of different types of shrapnel fragment, and the aesthetics of individual pieces. The latter is of particular interest, as it offers insights into some of the original reasons for collecting. The rarity of shrapnel types is more closely related to the form of the AA shell itself:

My prize exhibit was a nose cone with three fuse band rings still attached. Yes, that's right, THREE! There were a few about in the various collections

with two, but THREE! I had it because it came down in our back garden, narrowly missing my father, and I was the envy of many of my friends. (A1144964)

While the body of the shell was low-quality steel the nose-cone containing the fuse was brass, which did not corrode as quickly: 'a brass fragment was a special treasure' (A4532627). The nose-cone was also the most recognizable fragment of the exploded shell; to the inexperienced eye most shrapnel looks like any other scrap-iron. 'I spotted a piece of shrapnel which turned out to be the nose cap of the shell. This I have kept ever since, highly polished, and have recently put it on a hardwood plinth' (A1138862). This type of curation, mounting and display is more commonly associated with First World War 'found objects' and trench-art (Saunders, 2003: 49–50). Interestingly many of these Great War souvenirs, which may have inspired some of the children of the Blitz in their shrapnel hunts, have their origins in a not dissimilar activity: an early account of artillery shell shrapnel collecting in the First World War compared the large numbers of soldiers digging in no-mans-land for the nose cones of shells to children building sandcastles on a beach (Saunders, 2003: 131). Like nose cones, fragments marked with letters or numbers were of considerably higher value, due principally to their rarity:

In our street, one brass piece could be swapped for four or five silver bits. If there were markings of any kind on your shrapnel, you could have your own auction to secure the best price in other pieces to add to your collection. (A2029024)

Inevitably, larger pieces were worth more than smaller ones: 'It was very prestigious to have the biggest and best bits of shrapnel and bomb' (A4260179); some gangs would decamp to the corner shop and weigh their collections of fragments to see which was biggest: a large piece could be traded for two or more smaller ones (A3939681; A2021059). One man recalls: 'I found a piece about 18 inches long and everyone in school was jealous' (A4374344).

'My brothers used to go out hunting the streets for shrapnel which was still warm. I remember I used to ask them for it and the feeling of warmth from it in my hand' (A2796870). A remarkable aspect of collecting that emerges in a large proportion of these narratives is the heightened value of shrapnel that was still hot from the explosion: 'it was best and most valuable if the shrapnel was hot' (A2238167). The fleeting nature of this property is notable, as it cannot have been a factor in the protracted exchange processes that several of the interviews refer to. This aspect of value transcends the generally tactile nature of children's collections noted by Benjamin, moving towards a more embodied approach to objects that corresponds with Howes' idea of 'skin knowledge . . . the knowledge of the world one acquires through one's skin'

(Howes, 2005: 27). Howes observed that in the modern western city children have considerably more physical contact with their environment than adults do (Howes, 2005: 29). In this context the sensorial approach to shrapnel takes on greater significance as a distinctly childish way of knowing the world.

This sensoriality in children's encounters with shrapnel emerges repeatedly as a powerful factor in these stories; it could be argued that the clear and detailed memories associated with shrapnel are connected to this aesthetic bombardment. The sound, smell, temperature and colour of shrapnel are described in some detail, as well as its tactile qualities. The tinkling sound on the roof as well as the crashing of shrapnel falling around someone caught in the open are mentioned a number of times, as is the whistling noise it made as it fell (A6179628). The description of shrapnel still smelling of cordite (A2021059) is questionable, as cordite would have been the propellant rather than the explosive within the shell, but whatever the smell it was powerful enough to evoke memories decades later. The lustrous appearance of the fresh fragments was also an important factor: 'The high temperatures experienced during the explosions sometimes produced beautiful rainbow colours on the metal, contrasting with the horrible twisted shapes and the evil intent of the munitions' (A2055881).

## TRADE AND EXCHANGE

I remember there was a rumour that shrapnel collectors like me were being arrested. It turned out that it was actually just someone trying to scare off the competition so they could have all the best shrapnel for themselves! (A5472100)

As we have seen, several of the interviews refer to trading fragments of shrapnel amongst friends; small pieces for larger ones, brass pieces for steel ones. Some of the descriptions suggest that these exchanges were an opportunity to flaunt the sizable fragments or large quantity of shrapnel accumulated around one's home that day: 'we would swap pieces and admire each others' collections' (A1144964; A4374344).

The other items that could be traded give a more rounded view of the value of shrapnel in children's economic spheres. These included other material remains of the war: 'This [shrapnel] could always be traded at school for cordite, old incendiary bombs or anything else that the Home Guard might have left lying around after their exercises' (A3889236). This corresponds to some of the more hair-raising accounts collected by Westall (1985) of children in wartime stealing grenades, guns and mortar shells for their own private war-games, amateur pyrotechnics and general amusement. Alongside the world of matériel were numerous precious commodities including rationed sweets and the wondrous world of American popular culture that gradually arrived from 1942 onwards:

The rest of the boys of my age who were in the same class as me who had not been evacuated were full of war souvenirs such as pieces of shrapnel and badges from soldier's uniforms where they could get them. Billeted next door to us were two soldiers, one a Scottish chap called Jock, who was in the commandos and the other was an American who used to give us American comics which were like gold dust. If you had an American comic to swap you could get the largest piece of shrapnel going. (A4086047)

An interesting trend in these narratives is the common comparison of shrapnel collecting with other types of collecting, as elderly 'Children of the Blitz' try to contextualize their childhood activities in more familiar terms: 'We used to collect shrapnel and there was a whole trading network going on, a bit like trading cards today' (A5472100). Others compared shrapnel collecting and the practice of 'swaps' with stamp collecting (A2216963) or conker collecting (A7570460): the latter in particular resonates with the concept of shrapnel as a seemingly natural phenomenon, falling from the sky and quickly losing its original lustre.

## DISPOSING OF SHRAPNEL COLLECTIONS

In my initial interviews not one of my informants had kept their shrapnel collection; many could not remember what happened to them and several recalled throwing away the increasingly rusty lumps of metal in the years after the war. However, in the *People's War* sample a number of different possibilities emerge. Most interestingly it appears that shrapnel was actively sought out by the authorities for recycling, and children were encouraged to donate their collections. In some cases this operated through the school, either collected by the teachers or placed in a special box by the school gates (A2754984). Others recall that shrapnel 'was handed in to the A.R.P. warden and it was put back to help the war effort' (A4126691). Elsewhere the police station was a collection point: 'The nose cone of a bomb was secured to the wall there. We were told that the shrapnel was sent to Woolwich Arsenal to make new shells' (A2680986). Only one woman remembers getting anything in return for her precious collection: 'Mother gave us a special bag to collect it in and we'd take it to the town hall. We'd get stars depending on how much we'd taken in' (A4455885). Like many wartime collection drives it is questionable how much use this material really was: the aim may have been to raise morale and a sense of participation, an important consideration in these initiatives (Calder, 1992). However, one account suggests that in some places, in this case a playing field, the removal of shrapnel may have been an important health and safety concern:

To find this shrapnel, we would line up across the playing field on our hands and knees and proceed along the field picking it up for subsequent removal and re-use in the war effort. If you missed any, your knees would be cut to ribbons - I still have the scars to prove it, even after all these years! (A2721458)

In some cases shrapnel collections or particular pieces seem to have been retained for a long time after the war (A2019070). The baby whose pram was hit by shrapnel recalled that 'it made a good door-stop for a while – and a topic of conversation!' (A4136663). Several accounts of shrapnel that was retained discuss polishing and/or mounting the fragments, or turning them into trinkets of various kinds (A4131028; A3267263).

Two stories stand out for their sheer cunning and nastiness, as well as giving an interesting and unusual glimpse into children's understanding and exploitation of the destruction wrought by war.

The thing to do was collect it after an air raid, then if your street had what today would be called a miserable old git the sort that wouldn't give you your ball back, then when the next air raid was on and you knew he would be in his shelter you would lob a piece of shrapnel through his window, the next day it was all around the shops how old so-and-so was nearly killed by a piece of shrapnel, not very nice but boys will be boys. (A1950347)

The second is described more subtly:

As children we collected pieces of shrapnel and one lady was excitedly showing her neighbours a piece of shrapnel that had broken her window. She was a terrible misery to all us children, she was always harassing us! When someone pointed out that the shrapnel was a bit rusty she immediately blamed my mate Sid and I but luckily I was in bed sick. (A3421469)

Following this, one wonders what to make of the numerous accounts by those whose windows were broken by shrapnel – was this really the effect of shellfire or the instrumentalization of shrapnel in settling childish scores?

## MODELS OF SHRAPNEL COLLECTING

The overwhelming impression gained from these many varied narratives of wartime childhoods and shrapnel collecting is of children confidently integrating this violent material culture into their dynamic social worlds of trade, status, mischief and play. Shrapnel took its place alongside marbles, comics and trading cards in the cut-throat economy of the playground with remarkable speed and spontaneity. The apparent universality of this practice across the country is notable; there are also indications that German children at the time collected shrapnel with the same alacrity:

Young and old lived in two worlds at the same time, in the bunker and in the everyday. Gerd and his friends played in the craters after the bombing raids and collected bomb fragments, sorted them based on how unusually mis-shapen they were, and swapped them like marbles. (Lorenz, 2005: 118; trans R. Salkie)

What makes shrapnel collecting different? One of the most significant properties of shrapnel was that it cost nothing: any child could accumulate a collection through a little hard work and canny trading, and children in poorer areas near factories or docks were likely to have a slight advantage due to the increased AA protection in these strategic areas. With airborne radar in its infancy AA guns were the only effective weapon to strike back against the German night-bombers of 1940. The hard pieces of steel twisted, broken, discoloured and still hot from their high-altitude detonation reified this defiant energy and enabled one to possess it, like a coin flattened by a train.

This possible association of shrapnel with power and resilience might explain another of its unusual properties: the speed with which it diminished in value from the fresher, hotter piece to the older rustier ones only good for breaking windows. The rate at which pieces lost their lustre would have been a factor in exchange and accumulation: shrapnel was in one sense a perishable commodity in the same way a new car rapidly diminishes in value. It seems that collectors valued shrapnel by its size, weight, freshness, rarity, colour and smell. As this compares most closely with activities like flower pressing or conker collecting it appears that shrapnel was indeed quite unlike most other collectable man-made commodities where the patina of use or age often adds commercial and cultural value.

Might shrapnel collecting have had a mnemonic function as well as a social one? According to Stewart,

While the point of the souvenir may be remembering, or at least the invention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting . . . This difference in purpose is the reason why the scrapbook and the memory quilt must properly be seen as souvenirs rather than as collections. (Stewart, 1993: 152)

While the fluid processes of accumulating, trading and disposing of shrapnel point towards Stewart's 'infinite reverie' of forgetting (1993: 152), the rapt attention given to individual objects, including detailed accounts of their provenance, hints at a memory function, undermining Stewart's somewhat simplistic dichotomy.

From the evidence presented it is difficult to argue definitively that shrapnel collecting was, as I have suggested, a mechanism that children found for engaging with or participating in the war as sub-adults, and for coping with the terrors of bombing and the hot, sharp steel rain it brought with it. However, the clear associations of collecting with controlling and ordering, the 'profane to sacred' transformation highlighted by Belk et al. (1988), suggest that these practices had something to do with gaining power over the material culture that was killing and injuring so many people. This need for control went beyond shrapnel: 'We took to collecting . . . anything!' (A2029024). The inherent ability of



children to adapt and cope in traumatic situations is remarkable, and it is important not to underestimate the element of straightforward fun in the shrapnel business: 'we all had such a good time swapping and trading and collecting those simple little pieces of metal' (A5472100).

## CONCLUSION

Studies in the material culture of modern conflict are growing in number, range and sophistication, highlighting the impact of warfare on individuals and societies, landscapes, art, architecture, the media, technology, the body, and the relationships between these disparate processes (Saunders, 2004; Schofield, 2004, 2005; Schofield et al., 2002). As these studies show, virtually no aspect of society is untouched by war, and yet so far there has been very little consideration of the ways in which children have encountered and interacted with the material culture of modern conflicts. As this study has shown, examining the things that children collect and curate can reveal unexpected details of their sensory perceptions of the world around them, their experiences and memories embodied in and represented by objects.

The scope for such work and its importance is enormous: in the last century the proportion of non-combatant deaths in war has grown from a tiny minority to an overwhelming majority. Children are often the first victims of wars and conflicts, either directly through violence or indirectly through displacement, starvation and other privations. Narratives of children collecting shrapnel and other munitions, often at great risk to themselves, range in date from the First and Second World Wars to 1980s Lebanon and contemporary Israel (McGirk, 2006; Sarrafian Ward, 2003; Saunders, 2003). As long as children around the world are confronted daily with the horrors of modern warfare then their encounters with its material culture will be of considerably more than academic interest.

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## Note

1. Full details of the stories cited from the WW2 People's War archive website can be obtained by entering the codes given in the text into the site at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/> (accessed November 2007).

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