Conflicts of a Lifetime

On 2 June 1913, George Dawson was born. Two days later, a young woman called Emily Davison was standing among thousands of spectators watching the racehorses in the Derby. Suddenly she leapt out, flinging herself under the hooves of the king's horse. Emily died. Her death was her protest against the politicians who refused to let women vote in general elections.

Young George was born into a troubled country. Suffragettes were demanding the vote. Ireland was on the brink of civil war. Striking workers demanded fair wages and better working conditions. Poverty and ill-health were rife. Over 100 in every 1000 babies died before their first birthday, and the average life expectancy was only a little over fifty years.

Worse was to come: in August 1914 World War I began. George's father joined the army and scarcely saw his son again until George was past his fifth birthday. His father was lucky, however, surviving the horrors of trench warfare to return home. In 1918 politicians promised the returning soldiers `Homes fit for Heroes', and promised women the vote. At least the women got what they were promised.

During the 1920s and 1930s, George's father struggled to find a regular job. Unemployment was common. George was clever. He won a scholarship to the Liverpool Institute, but there was no money to go to university. When he left school he worked as a clerk, but spent more time thinking about cricket and football.

Even a sports-mad young man, however, could not help noticing that another war was looming closer.

Adolf Hitler had seized power in Germany in 1933 and was rebuilding the German army. One by one, the countries bordering Germany were taken over. In September 1939 Hitler's troops invaded Poland. Britain and France declared war on Germany.

George joined the army immediately. He spent the early war years in Britain, like everyone else, waiting for the expected German invasion. It

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never came but in 1941, Japan joined the war. George found himself in India and then in Burma. During the years after the war he scarcely told his family anything about that time, of sweating through jungles and swamps, rifle and bayonet at the ready, not knowing where the enemy was, or when it would attack.

George's war ended in 1945, when the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet, as millions like George settled into peacetime, the USA and the USSR were growing ever more hostile. As their fear of each other grew, each built up an arsenal of nuclear weapons. In 1962 it seemed that world War III was imminent.

President Kennedy of the USA demanded that the USSR remove its missiles from the island of Cuba, off the American coast. Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, refused. Anxious families all over the world listened to news bulletins, fearing that their children would not live to be adults. Even children, who were supposed to know nothing about politics, felt the tension. Then Khrushchev backed down, and the missiles were taken away. The world breathed again.

That was not the end of the Cold War, however: the USSR and the USA took sides in many small conflicts, and raced each other to build bigger bombs, and to reach the moon. While conflict simmered, George's family lived more and more comfortably. George bought luxuries that his parents could not have afforded, even if they had been invented: a fridge, washing machine and television in the 1950s, a car in the 1960s. His family took holidays in faraway places — like Devon. The National Health Service gave people free medicine and treatment. By the 1980s, fewer than 20 babies in every 1000 died before the age of one. Life expectancy increased to over seventy years.

The conflicts that had loomed over George's life seemed to have ended in 1989. President Gorbachev of the USSR wanted peace. The Berlin Wall was torn down. Fear of war ebbed away but did not disappear completely, however. A host of smaller conflicts broke out, ensuring there was no peaceful ending to the conflicts of a lifetime.

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