



## MUSTN'T GRUMBLE

January 2, 2011

After reading constant bad news and watching dreadful terrorism scenes, I thought London would be quite a different place. I looked to see hate-filled Muslim placards on the street and purple-haired, pierced teens “shagging” in parks but saw none of it.

Instead I saw a London at Christmas 2010 still proud and strong. A city a little shabby but none-the-less well-kept...like the home of a family member out of work unable to afford redecorating, but clean and neat and filled with loving care. The Brits were friendly and engaging and considering the high price of every single thing plus the coming of a backbreaking 20% VAT tax, positively cheerful. “Mustn’t grumble” was the phrase that seemed to epitomize them this Christmas, rooted deeply in the arduous days of the London Blitz. “Mustn’t grumble” had been the theme as they interrupted daily tasks and headed for bomb shelters, smelling the stinking sulfur of falling bombs, breathing the stale air of those dark, life-saving tombs...emerging to find more of their city in rubble...friends dead...but life going on. “Mustn’t grumble.”

Some have called it the British “stiff upper lip.” Whatever you call it, it is something to be admired and something we Americans could learn from. We can’t go one hour without our favorite coffee...soft drink...or bottled water of choice. Nor can we bear variations of temperature without much complaint. We are the spoiled, rich cousins. No wonder they sometimes resent us.

My father was an Army Engineer stationed in London during World War II. He had few positive things to say about the “limeys.” There was a snobbery he couldn’t abide that forever closed him off from appreciating anything from the Mother Country. And it was our mother country. I looked up our unusual family name in the Imperial War Museum and found at least two people who had died by that name in WWII.

I experienced that snobbery myself when traveling from Berlin, Germany, to Frankfurt. At that time the foreboding wall still surrounded the city and Berlin was isolated in East Germany near the Russian Border. If you were an American living in Berlin, you could leave the city by two routes only. One was west by car. You were not to stop under any circumstances and given two hours to complete the journey. If you didn’t make West Germany in precisely the appointed time, the American military would come looking. The other route was that of the British duty train that had carried troops during WWII and consisted of compartments with bunk beds. The compartments were narrow with no room to sit or stand. You entered the room and got into your bed and that was it. The train traveled all night slowly, arriving in Frankfurt in the early morning hours and departing again in the evening for the all night journey back to Berlin.

My friend and I shared a compartment with two British WRAC’s (female soldiers) who refused to look at or speak to us or engage in conversation in any way during the twelve hours we shared that small space. That was my first experience with the British.

But having endured and come to love the grumpy Germans, I learned to love the ways of the British as well. Contrarily...with the advent of the “cowboy” George Bush, I was repeatedly told how much the Brits had grown to disdain Americans.

Maybe it was the season, but from the first cabby we met to the last, we were met with wonderful exchanges. I think of the woman from Scotland Yard who randomly sat down with us at a

restaurant....shopping bag in hand.... laughing and commiserating about British “coppers” unable to carry guns. I think of “John,” our guide on the “Jack the Ripper” Tour ....delightful and funny as he delivered dreadful details with Christmas cheer; Our young waitress, half Slovenian and half Egyptian but fully Londoner eager to fix the best chocolate sundae possible; the women standing in the long queue for the loo at Queen’s Theatre, sharing quips with me about having only two stalls for all of us. “Mustn’t grumble.”

After five hours at the Imperial War Museum we were reminded of what they endured during two world wars; 60,000 civilians killed in the second world war; thousands separated from their children for as long as four years to keep them away from the bombing; severe rationing; learning how to mend and reuse everything. And in spite of it all, the women still maintained a selfless encouragement to their husbands and sons to fight for their country.

During another three hours at the Churchill War Room we reviewed and remembered the grit and inspiration of that last Great War, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, whose motto “Never Give Up!” and whose faith in the British people was unwavering. We experienced a quickening of our own spirits even 50 years hence.

I’m no longer as gloomy about Britain as I was. I see that spirit still. It isn’t a scientific survey, but I think the resolve of the old empire...the good part of it is still there. Don’t write off the British. They are ever our best allies and from them we can ever learn. Especially as we move into difficult economic times with an uncertain future. Let us remember the indomitable endurance of our cousins from that cold, foggy island. Ever resolved...ever cheerful...with a strong dose of “mustn’t grumble!”