

The Blackout Ripper



While often depicted as a pre-eminent example of stoic endurance, Britain's home front had a dark side. The war presented opportunities for thieves and plunderers and provided cover for murder. **Penny Legg** investigates one of Britain's most prolific spree killers, the Blackout Ripper.

The wartime blackout was intended to minimise outdoor light at night to hinder the navigation of enemy aircraft, but it was also a heaven-sent opportunity for those whose misdeeds were best undertaken in the dark. Thus, shadowy street corners and sombre alleyways offered cover for prostitution, burglary and murder. Between 1939 and 1945, reported crimes went up by 57% and occurrences of murder rose by 22% between 1941 and 1945. In short, the impenetrable blackness that descended on Britain at the start of the war meant the mad and the bad were emboldened to commit crime, secure in the knowledge it was much more difficult for their misdeeds to be noticed until too late.

Over time, there have been several serial murderers nicknamed 'the Ripper'. Victorian Jack, of course, was never caught. His spree stopped abruptly after he killed five known victims in London. In recent times, Peter Sutcliffe, the so-called Yorkshire Ripper, was finally snared after killing 13 women and attempting to kill seven more in a five-year period from 1975 to 1980. In the 1940s, there was another Ripper on the loose, a monster named Gordon Frederick Cummins, who exploited the blackout for his own bloody ends. Mercifully, his reign was shorter than his murderous namesakes.

Cummins was described by journalists as "rather a slight man, of soldierly build, fresh complexion and with dark hair swept back from his forehead." He was born in York on February 9, 1914, the son of John and Amelia Cummins. He joined the RAF in 1935 as a Flight Rigger and the following year married his wife, Marjorie, the secretary to a theatre producer. ▶

LEFT: COMPOSITE IMAGE SHOWING SPREE KILLER GORDON CUMMINS AND ONE OF HIS VICTIMS, EVELYN OATLEY. (SCENES OF MURDER THEN AND NOW)

By all accounts, theirs seemed a happy marriage. Cummins did nothing to come to police attention and all was well.

Intoxicating Effect

At the outbreak of war, Cummins was sent to 600 Squadron and stationed at Helensburgh, Dunbartonshire. Having left Marjorie behind in Barnes, Richmond – at a flat she shared with her sister – he became a pub regular and very popular with the ladies, who were attracted to his refined manner of speech and seemingly endless wads of cash. In his book *Dark City*, Simon Read mentions the ‘intoxicating effect’ he had on women. In April 1941, he was posted to Colerne, Wiltshire, where he took to calling himself ‘The Honourable Gordon Cummins’ – this was not a title he was entitled to and, for this reason, his RAF colleagues nicknamed him ‘The Count’.

At this time, he also began visiting a brothel in Bath, despite it being out of bounds to RAF personnel. It was while he was in Colerne that a woman was attacked in Ford, a neighbouring area. She managed to fight off her airman attacker, who tried to strangle her and rip off her clothing, but she was not able to give a description of him to the police. Soon after, two more women were attacked, this time in Bath. Again, neither woman could offer a description, other than that the attacker was an airman.

Having retrained in light of the RAF’s wartime need for pilots, Cummins was posted to the Air Crew Receiving Centre in Regent’s Park, London, soon after he passed his pilot’s test. He arrived there on February 2, 1942, and spent the night with a girl he had picked up in Oxford Circus. It was the calm before the storm, as he was about to go on a killing spree that would shock the nation, and which the Head of Scotland Yard’s Fingerprint Division, Chief Superintendent Frederick Cherrill, called an “orgy of murder”.

On February 9, 1942, the body of Hornchurch chemists’ shop manager Evelyn Hamilton was found in an air raid shelter in Montague Place, Marylebone, by electrician Harold Batchelor, who was on his way to work at eight o’clock in the morning. Originally from Newcastle

upon Tyne, Hamilton had celebrated her 41st birthday the day before. She had arrived in London late in the evening on February 8 on her way to a new life and was last seen when taxi driver Abraham Ash dropped her at a hostel in Gloucester Place.

Patrolling War Reserve Constable Arthur Williams had checked the air raid shelter and found nothing untoward at 11.20pm on that dark, moonless night. In fact, Williams did not notice anything happening at the shelter, even though he passed it several times.

Bernard Spilsbury, the celebrated Home Office pathologist who years before had identified Dr Crippen as his wife’s murderer, performed the post-mortem examination, discovering that Evelyn had been manually strangled by a left-handed killer. Later, on investigation, it was found she had booked into a boarding house at 76 Gloucester Place, a short distance from where she was found, and gone out into the inky blackness to the local Lyons Corner House for a late meal. She had not returned.

A Gruesome Sight

Police also noted that Hamilton had been robbed of the £80 (£3,780 today or roughly 10-20% of the value of the average house at the time) in her purse. It was assumed that these were her life savings, which she had been planning to use to establish herself in a new town. A man’s linen handkerchief, embroidered with the numbers ‘4’ and ‘29’ in red cotton, one on top of the other, was a clue to the murderer and, by March 5, newspapers were appealing for information.



MAIN: PUBLIC AIR RAID SHELTERS BEING ERRECTED IN THE STREET IN 1939. (COURTESY OF SABRESTORM PUBLISHING)

RIGHT: CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT FREDERICK CHERRILL, THE FOREMOST FINGERPRINT EXPERT OF THE DAY, EXAMINING PRINTS AT THE CRIMINAL RECORD OFFICE. (MARY EVANS)

OPPOSITE: EVELYN HAMILTON. (TOPFOTO)



“Again, neither woman could offer a description, other than that the attacker was an airman.”

Before then, there were more victims. On February 10, the naked body of Evelyn Oatley was found. Thirty-five-year-old Oatley, also known as Leta Ward, was a budding actress married to a poultry farmer. She had left home for the bright lights of the London stage only to find those lights dimmed by the war.

Out of financial necessity she had turned to prostitution and brought a stream of men to her one-roomed flat in Wardour Street. The flat was partitioned from her neighbour, Ivy Poole, by two folding doors. Ivy had wondered at the sudden loudness of the music playing in Oatley’s room on

the night she was murdered, but she did not like to make a fuss or disturb Evelyn and her client, so did not knock. A gruesome sight awaited Ivy when she did tap at Oakley’s door the next morning, as she accompanied the men to empty the gas meter in the room. Evelyn’s throat had been cut with a razor blade, she had been strangled and, later, her body had been mutilated with a can opener and sexually violated.

Spilsbury performed the autopsy and again noted that the killer was left-handed. Frederick Cherrill, the expert in fingerprint technology, found fingerprints on the can opener which confirmed this view. With two killings to solve, Chief Inspector Edward (Ted) Greeno, from the colloquially named ‘Murder Squad’ at Scotland Yard, was called in. ▶





Marylebone. Spilsbury was once again called in and recognised the same handiwork to the first two murders and subsequently in the fourth, that of Doris Jouannet, the 32-year-old wife of a 70-year-old hotelier, who was also known as Doris Robson. She had been mutilated with a razorblade.

The police understood they had a serial killer on the streets and were by now calling the murderer the Blackout Ripper. Greeno realised the murders had been committed on consecutive days, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. Why, he wondered, was there a gap on Wednesday? He ramped

up the police presence in the square mile in which the killer seemed to be operating. Three of the women were prostitutes, albeit, Jouannet was a part-timer, and so it was to the working girls on the street that Greeno first made enquiries. Greeno and Spilsbury had reached Jouannet while she was still warm, which meant the murderer had not been far ahead of them. They soon found that while they were with her body, another girl, the respectable but gullible Mary Heyward, was being attacked. She was in the West End, by the Captain's Cabin public house, near the Trocadero in Piccadilly.

This time, the girl survived the kiss that masked the tightening of the hand around her throat. She was able to scream and there was a witness nearby, John Shine, who came to the rescue. The victim was able to tell police that her attacker had wide-set green eyes, was an airman of about 5ft 7in in height and that she recognised his forage cap as being one for an officer cadet. In his haste to leave, the attacker dropped his gas mask. It had a service number stamped

"The trick was to find the pieces, the hidden clues, that built up a picture of the crime and who had perpetrated it"

A highly respected police officer who was to receive 86 commissioners' commendations over his long career, Greeno had joined the police force in 1921 at the age of 20. In 1923, he became Detective Greeno when he joined the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). He worked his way up through the ranks by way of the racecourses, where he waged war on those he called 'pests', the pickpockets and gang members infesting the meetings at the time. Later, he took on forgers, burglars, swindlers and fraudsters – but never murderers. In October 1940, he was promoted to Detective Chief Inspector and began to investigate homicides. Greeno, described as "a Master Detective" by Dick Kirby in his book *The Guv'nors*, believed solving a murder was akin to completing a jigsaw puzzle. One merely had to connect all the pieces. The trick was to find the pieces, the hidden clues, that built up a picture of the crime and who had perpetrated it. The Ripper case gave him plenty of pieces to collect.

Surviving The Kiss

The next bodies were found in quick succession. Margaret Florence Lowe, also known as Pearl Lowe, died screaming, strangled with a silk stocking by a left-handed murderer and then mutilated. Her body was viscerally ripped open and violated. She was found, stiff and with back arched, in her flat in Gosfield Street, off Tottenham Court Road in



inside it, 525987, which was later identified as belonging to Gordon Cummins.

Cummins was arrested on February 16 and charged with assault to commit grievous bodily harm. Greeno, though, was suspicious and decided to look more closely at Cummins.

Money Trail

In the meantime, enquiries amongst the street girls led to news of another Thursday night attack, timed between the murder of Jouannet and the attack on Heyward in the West End. Phyllis O'Dwyer had told her friends about a mad punter, a pilot cadet from the RAF, who tried to strangle her with her own necklace. In her desperation to get away, she lashed out with her feet, clad in her only clothing, boots. They were to save her life as she knocked her attacker off the bed. She later reported that his wide-set green eyes had been blazing but he quietened down and said he was sorry. He had paid O'Dwyer £5 for her time



and presented her with another £5 to apologise.

It was two of the £1 notes he gave her that gifted Greeno another piece in the Blackout Ripper jigsaw. He was able to trace them because they were in sequence. Proving he was indeed a determined detective, Greeno was able to pin-point the exact spot in the RAF pay parade that the notes were given out and so established they had been given to Cummins.

Greeno spoke to Cummins in Brixton jail. During the interview, Cummins explained away the gas mask by saying he had been in the West End that night, but his gas mask had got mixed up with that of another serviceman, so it must have been he who was the girl's attacker. He signed a statement to that effect, with his left hand.

Cummins' gas mask case had grit in it that could have come from the air raid shelter where Evelyn Hamilton, the first victim, had been killed on the Sunday evening. Cummins also ▶

OPPOSITE TOP: GORDON FREDERICK CUMMINGS, THE BLACKOUT RIPPER. (SCENES OF MURDER: THEN AND NOW)

FAR LEFT: CHIEF INSPECTOR 'TED' GREENO (RIGHT) WITH DETECTIVE SUPERINTENDENT BERT SPARKS. (SCENES OF MURDER: THEN AND NOW)

ABOVE: PIONEERING BRITISH PATHOLOGIST, BERNARD SPILSBURY. (TOP PHOTO)

LEFT: POLICE OFFICERS STAND IN THE ENTRANCE TO THE AIR RAID SHELTER WHERE EVELYN HAMILTON WAS MURDERED AND HER MONEY STOLEN. (SCENES OF MURDER: THEN AND NOW)

RIGHT: THE FINGERPRINT OBTAINED FROM MARGARET LOWE'S CANDLESTICK COMPARED WITH AN IMPRESSION OF CUMMINS RIGHT RING FINGERPRINT. (SCENES OF MURDER: THEN AND NOW)

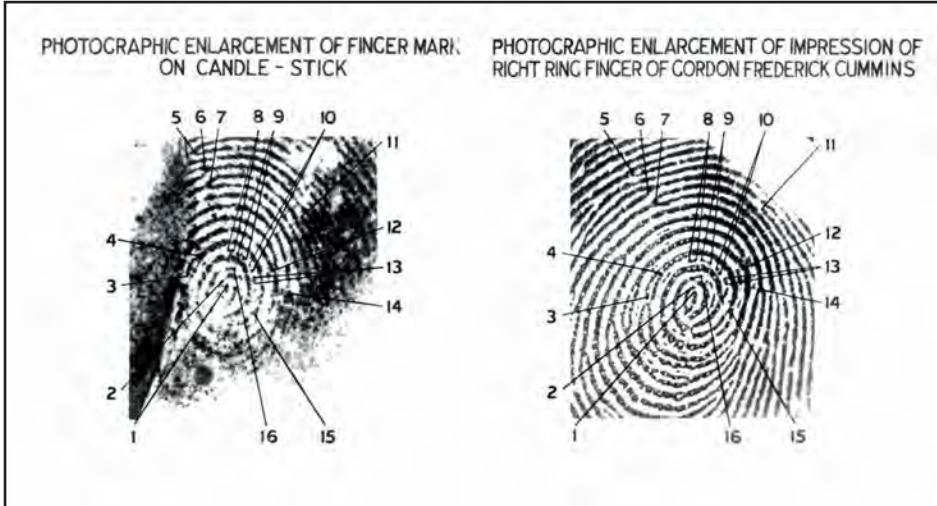
BELOW: GORDON CUMMINS IN HIS RAF CAP (TOPFOTO)

OPPOSITE TOP: EVELYN OATLEY, ALSO KNOWN AS LETA WARD, WAS SINGLED OUT FOR THE MOST GRUESOME TREATMENT. (TOPFOTO)

OPPOSITE BELOW: LONDON'S WEST END IN BLACKOUT. THE ENFORCED DARKNESS PROVIDED MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAWBREAKING AND DELINQUENCY. (ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS/MARY EVANS)

had a wristwatch similar to one owned by Doris Jouannet, and it was padded at the back with Elastoplast. The strip fitted exactly to a gap in the roll found in Jouannet's home. He was also in possession of a comb that corresponded to the dust pattern outline in Jouannet's flat, while in his uniform pocket a fountainpen was found that matched another dust space on the dead woman's mantelpiece. Her husband later positively identified all the items as belonging to his wife.

A search of Cummins' billet then produced a green propelling pencil borrowed by Hamilton from a friend and a pair of rubber soles, which Cummins



“How could Cummins be the murderer if so many witnesses said he was at his barracks at the time of the offences?”

had removed from his boots because he thought that their distinctive treads would be traced back to him. It had been snowing on the night of the first murder.

The Evidence Mounts

It seemed that Greeno had his man. However, Cummins had a solid alibi for each night, in the form of the passbook at his billet which clearly indicated he was there during the time of each attack. His roommates also swore they saw him go to bed and get up again the following morning. How could Cummins be the murderer if so many witnesses said he was at his barracks at the time of the offences?

Once again, the tenacious Greeno was suspicious and decided to investigate the alibis more closely. He soon found that the passbook had been fabricated, with friends covering for absences by signing Cummins in when he was not actually on the premises. Another friend admitted he had accompanied Cummins on a nocturnal trip after lights out, having gone to bed first to allay suspicion. The pair had then tiptoed down the fire escape. Cummins' alibi was shot to pieces.



i Further Reading

TNA HO 144/21659: *Criminal Cases: Cummins, Gordon Frederic*, The National Archives

Read, Simon, *Dark City: Murder, Vice and Mayhem in Wartime London* (The History Press, 2010)

Kirby, Dick, *The Guv'nors: Ten of Scotland Yard's Greatest Detectives* (Wharncliffe Books, 2010)



Greeno then found another girl picked up by Cummins that Thursday night. She had been saved by her pimp, hiding behind a blanket screening the bed from the rest of the room. Cummins had spotted his watching eyes as he undressed and left in a hurry. The man had undoubtedly saved the girl's life by being present.

Cummins had a large quantity of cash on him, which he had splashed liberally during the week, after claiming hardship the last time he saw his wife on February 8, borrowing a pound from her. But Evelyn Hamilton was carrying £80 when she was killed, and this was never recovered. He had shown Mary Heyward £30 in a wad in a

bid to entice her to look kindly on him and had bank-rolled fellow pilot cadets while out drinking. The circumstantial evidence against Cummins began to stack up. Greeno found that on Wednesday February 12, the one night when there was not a murder, Cummins had been on duty and unable to leave camp. To add to this, the fingerprints found on the can opener used in the mutilation of Evelyn Oatley were proved to belong to Cummins.

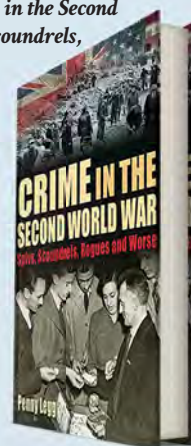
Gordon Frederick Cummins was charged with four counts of murder and two counts of attempted murder, he pleaded not guilty to each charge. He was tried for the murder of Evelyn Oatley at the Old Bailey. The trial judge was Mister Justice Asquith (Cyril Asquith, Baron Asquith of Bishopstone). Mr G B McClure prosecuted the case and Cummins was defended by Mr J Flowers. On April 28, 1942, after a one-day trial, the jury took just 35 minutes to find Cummins guilty of murder. He was executed at Wandsworth Prison on June 25 by Albert Pierrepoint, the executioner who was later to hang, amongst many others, John Haigh, the Acid Bath Murderer and Reginald Christie, the strangler at 10 Rillington Place (both men beginning their string of murders during the war). Cummins was 28 years of age. Police later suspected Cummins of two further killings committed in October 1941.

Montague Lacey, a staff reporter for the *Daily Express*, described Cummins as having

Spivs, Scoundels, Rogues and Worse

Adapted from *Crime in the Second World War: Spivs, Scoundrels, Rogues and Worse*

by Penny Legg and published by Sabrestorm Publishing. Several photographs used in this feature have been reproduced from *Scenes of Murder: Then and Now* with the kind permission of the publisher, After the Battle.



a "three-way mind". His report on the culmination of the trial, published the following day, states that Cummins had three different personalities. The first was as a respected member of the RAF, whose commanding officer described him as a "very intellectual type of airman". The second was as a vain young man who his friends nicknamed 'The Count' because of his affected speech, false claims to nobility and boasts of conquests with the opposite sex. The third was the cold-blooded and prolific killer, whose reign of terror was thankfully cut short by a determined detective. ●

