Children's ID Tags Brought The War Effort Home

I WAS JUST a month away from my sixth birthday when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

I remember it vividly. My mother caught part of a radio broadcast describing the bombing and went immediately to phone my grandparents, who lived behind us, to see if they had heard the complete newscast.

They hadn't, so another call was placed, then another, until the details were known.

Four days later, Hitler declared war on the U.S., and our lives in Rutherford, New Jersey changed for several years to come.

We lived not far from New York City and the Atlantic coast. Fear of attack by air or sea mounted, and defense measures were promptly put into effect. Air-raid drills became more common.

In March 1942, a note was sent home from school announcing procedures for air-raid drills during school hours. First, each child was to be issued a pair of metal identification tags, each almost the size of a silver dollar, to be worn at all times. The number on my tags was 2337.

The first tag hung around our necks on a long ribbon. The second tag hung from the first on a shorter ribbon.

The tags were similar to ID tags worn by soldiers. The shorter tag was to be removed if a child were killed in an attack. The other would remain with the child.

Fortunately, there was never an attack, although reports of German submarines off the New Jersey coast cropped up from time to time.

A school friend said her sister was called to her teacher's desk to describe any moles or scars on her body, which also could be used to identify her in the event of an attack.

If an air raid occurred while we were at school, we were hustled off to the basement of our building, where we sat on mats on the floor until the all-clear siren sounded.

I think we were to remain silent during the drill, but I didn't recall that it was all that quiet.

Occasionally, during a drill, we were taken outside the building and placed into geographic groups—those living north, east, south and west of the school. Then we lined up in columns of two, and teachers would lead us up and down sidewalks in our small school district.

When we recognized our streets, we were to drop out of line and go at once down the block to our homes. I dropped out of line one or two streets too soon on the first of our sojourns. Discovering I was lost, I broke into tears as the rest of the students and teachers continued on their way.

Luck was with me, however. A kind neighbor recognized me and led a tearful 2337 home.