

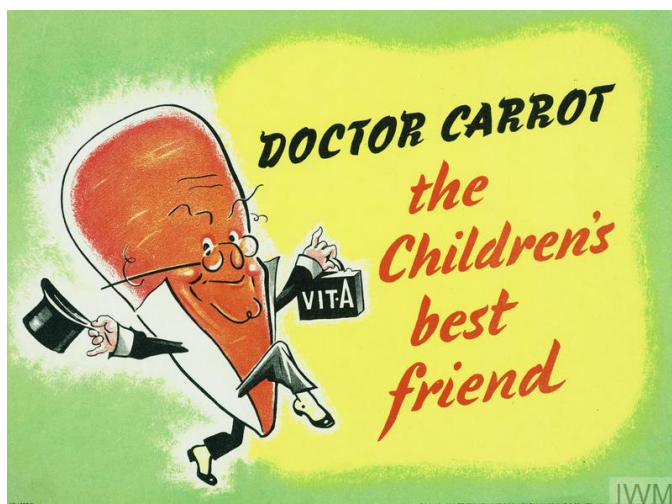
## The Vegetable that Won the War – Simon Wilson

“Les carottes sont cuites, je répète, les carottes sont cuites.”

For those of you who still remember a bit of the French you learned at school, yes, I have just informed you that the carrots are cooked. It comes from an old French saying based on cookery. In a stew, the carrots are the last vegetable to cook, once that is done the stew is ready. In French this has developed into an expression meaning that something is completed and nothing can undo it. If you were in the French Resistance and had heard that message on the BBC on June 5 1944, you would have known that the invasion was coming next day.

I was actually looking for information on frozen carrots when I found that snippet about D-Day. The hot weather, and thoughts of healthy eating, brought tales of wartime ice cream substitutes to mind. For a moment, I thought of making some authentic WW2 frozen carrots and eating them as a healthy alternative to ice cream. It wasn't one of those lasting thoughts.

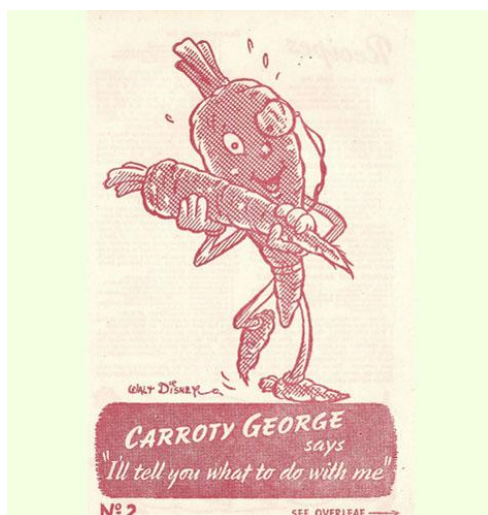
In 1914 we were caught out, as we imported 66% of our food from abroad. In April 1917, despite the limited capabilities of Great War U-Boats, we were reduced to six week's supply of wheat, We weren't any better in 1939, with 70% of our food coming from abroad. It's 38% these days, in case you were wondering. We were, however, more experienced in the ways of rationing, shortages and blockades, and were much better placed to cope with wartime constraints. By the end of the war people were actually healthier on average than they had been at the beginning.



A number of old-fashioned vegetables made a comeback, such as Good King Henry, also known as Poor Man's Asparagus or Lincolnshire Spinach. It can be eaten as young stalks or as mature leaves and its pollen has been found in Neolithic, Bronze Age and Roman sites. It comes from the same family as Fat Hen (now considered a weed), spinach and (more fashionably) quinoa. It is shade tolerant, could be grown almost anywhere, is self-seeding and can be grown as a cut and come again crop – all

useful qualities when you are struggling for productive space. As a general rule, though I have eaten Good King Henry and Fat Hen, there is a reason they were replaced by spinach – the leaves are small so you need to pick a lot, and they are high in oxalic acid, which can be a problem. Having said that, it is packed with iron, which was seen as a good thing during the war as it prevented anaemia in female factory workers.

Other vegetables assumed a more important role in the garden. Kale, currently experiencing a revival in fashion has always been grown in the north, where it stands up to the weather better than cabbage. It is a tough plant, has a long growing season, is resistant to pests and contains more calcium than milk, so was particularly good for young children. It is also one of the few brassicas that pigeons won't eat. Other vegetables like swedes, once seen as animal food, became more widely



eaten, being able to grow in poor conditions (including bomb sites) and containing more vitamin C than oranges. Parsnips were also seen as important - storing well in the ground, providing sweetness and being a high energy food, with more calories per pound than potatoes.

But out of all the vegetables, the carrot stands out. Potatoes had Potato Pete, and carrots had Doctor Carrot, but only carrots had cartoon characters drawn by Disney – Carroty George, Clara and Pop Carrot. They were also the only vegetable that helped shoot down German bombers in the Blitz, by enabling our airmen to see better in the dark.

Well, that was certainly what my mother told me when she was making me eat them as a small child. It isn't really true though, carrots can help with night adaption, but only in people suffering from Vitamin A deficiency. To me “Cat's Eyes” Cunningham was every bit as important as Douglas Bader and Biggles in my mental list of aviation heroes. Cunningham, it is said, was less than delighted with the publicity and the nickname.



‘Cats Eyes’ Cunningham

This was not the first time my parents lied to me about nutrition. My hair, for instance, never did curl, despite my consumption of large amounts of burnt toast. It was just a propaganda story to confuse the Germans about the increasing losses to their night bombers. It might even have worked, but as the Germans already had airborne radar by 1941 they probably had a good idea of what was happening. It was also put forward as a cure for “Blackout Blindness”. This was just another of those wartime myths – “Blackout Blindness” wasn't actually a medical condition, it's just a tendency to walk into things when there are no street lights. However, lots of people were being killed and injured in the dark and any hope of relief was good for morale.

In December 1940 the Ministry of Agriculture sent out a press release. “If we included a sufficient quantity of carrots in our diet, we should overcome the fairly prevalent malady of blackout blindness.”

The truth was that carrots were in plentiful supply and the Government needed to encourage people to eat them. By 1942 the Dig for Victory campaign plus increased farm production gave us a surplus of 100,000 tons of carrots, and the race was on to find a way to use them. carrots. One BBC employee wrote that they could always tell when carrots were available in quantity, because there would be a press release from Dr Carrot - anything that increased the consumption of carrots was welcome to Government departments.



In January 1942 they suspended the restrictions of the *Home Grown Carrots (1941 Crop) (Control) Order* and allowed growers to wholesale their produce free from restriction. Before this, carrot growers with more than an acre of carrots had only been allowed to sell to the National Vegetable marketing Co Ltd. Despite this relaxation, carrot growing as a farmer with over an acre of carrots was quite a complex business with different rules applied if selling them for animal feed, and depending on the time of sowing. It must have been easy to get the details wrong, In September 1941 the Ministry of Food brought 2,501 prosecutions for breach of food control orders, 2,280 were successful.

The market reports for Northern Ireland in 1942 indicate that, despite the surpluses, home grown carrots were insufficient to satisfy the market and English carrots had to be imported to fill the need, highlighting what a complex business feeding a nation can be.

Apart from being an ice cream substitute and a vegetable, a propaganda tool and a cartoon character, carrots could be used as a jam ingredient. Carrot jam had been appearing in cook books for over six hundred years by the time war broke out. There were many recipes for it in Victorian cookery books. However, most of the recipes called for the juice and zest of oranges and lemons. Even one of the official wartime recipes uses them. In wartime Britain oranges were in short supply (and reserved for children), and lemons were virtually non-existent. I assume that it's possible to make carrot jam without them, but I also assume it is not as pleasant to eat as the modern recipe suggestions on wartime food websites.



The same is true for carrot cake. The 1940s version is a small cake, and uses a few spoonfuls of grated carrot to add sweetness in place of sugar. It is not at all like the monster modern carrot cake. I just selected a modern recipe at random – the cake takes 390g (nearly 14 ounces) of sugar and four eggs. The average ration allowance per person was 8 oz of sugar and one egg a week. Frosting for the modern cake takes another 140g (5 oz) of sugar, though it was illegal, after August 1940, to put sugar on the

outside of any “cake, biscuit, bun, pastry, scone, bread, roll or similar article, after baking.” For the duration of the war, ornate icing on cakes was replaced by a cardboard box placed over a plain cake.

However, a piece of dry cake could always be helped down by a swig of Carrolade, a drink made by grating equal amounts of carrot and swede and pressing the juice. Even thinking of it frightens me. The wartime kitchen was no place for the faint-hearted.



And when all other things have been tried, how about using a carrot to engineer the downfall of the Führer? The plan, hatched by the OSS (later to become the CIA) was to bribe a member of staff to inject Hitler's carrots with oestrogen. This, they thought, would make him grow man boobs and lose his moustache – forfeiting the respect of the German people, or, alternatively, become a gentler person, with less interest in war. There are various theories why it didn't work, including a double-cross by one of the

German agents. Or, like subsequent CIA plots to kill Castro or make his beard fall out, maybe it was just a really bad idea.