A night of bombing

On page 4, George talks about the Blitz hut. Re-read his account and try to place yourself in the scene. (The Blitz hut is also described on page 29.)

Now read the following eyewitness accounts of the Blitz:

Ernie Pyle 1940, war correspondent

It was a night when London was ringed and stabbed with fire.

You could hear the boom, crump, crump, crump, of heavy bombs at their work of tearing buildings apart. They were not too far away.

About every two minutes a new wave of planes would be over. The motors seemed to grind rather than roar, and to have an angry pulsation, like a bee buzzing in blind fury.

Later on I borrowed a tin hat and went out among the fires. That was exciting too...

From Ernie Pyle in England by Ernie Pyle (1941)

William Sansom, auxiliary firefighter

We were worn down and shivering. There was black water puddling the alleys and our hands and faces were as black as the water. Suddenly we were sharply interrupted by an unusual sound; a long rattling crack of bursting bricks and mortar perforated the moment. I was thinking of nothing at all and then I was thinking of everything in the world.

From The Blitz: Westminster at war by William Sansom (1947)

George Wheeler, wartime firefighter, then 18

You'll see buildings not affected by the fire originally all of a sudden burst into flames. The heat is so great that any woodwork would suddenly ignite and up it goes. Then you realise: ‘Any moment, this is going to jump and St Paul’s is going to catch fire.’

Quoted on http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/a-b/blitz02.html

William Lindsay White, war correspondent

It was like a Christmas card picture of a church at night, a black silhouette with light streaming from its windows. From within the church came a noise deeper than a roar. The smell of this fire was now all around us. Marguerite remarked how curious it was, not at all unpleasant but almost like incense or some very sophisticated perfume. It was the spiced odour of oak beams put in after the first great fire of London. It was the scent of the city of London burning.

Quoted on http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/a-b/blitz02.html

Pick out and highlight your favourite phrase or sentence from the above accounts. Why do you like it? What is it about the writing that makes it so good?
A night of bombing

In small groups, look at the picture bank of blitz photographs and paintings. Discuss these with one another... what can you see in the pictures? Are there any that you find particularly shocking / interesting / surprising?

You are going to write your own eyewitness account of the Blitz. Like George, you will spend a night in an air-raid shelter of some kind. When morning comes, you will venture out into the still burning city.

First, you will need to write some notes to help you plan your writing. You might like to think about the following things:

Where are you? During the Blitz, civilians sheltered in a range of different places. Some hid in specially adapted shelters in their gardens, others used basement of old buildings or crypts of churches. Many Londoners used the London underground system for shelter.

What can you hear, both inside and outside? During an air raid, people gathered together and conditions were often very cramped. Outside, great sections of cities were demolished by wave after wave of bombing. How close do the bombs sound? What other noises can you hear? What do they sound like as they land and explode?

What can you smell? Swindells writes of the unwashed bodies. There will be other smells too and not just those associated with people. Think about what these might be.

What can you see? It might be very dark inside the shelter, but people might have candles or blackout lanterns. Some might be trying to sleep, others might be playing cards or reading.

When you step outside after the bombing, you will be surrounded by shocking, even traumatic sights.

The people around you. Are they friendly and welcoming, calm, or worried, hysterical even? You may well overhear snippets of conversation - mothers might be worrying about their evacuated children and whether their houses have survived this wave of bombing. On the other hand, people might be trying to keep the conversation lighthearted and their minds occupied with other things.

Outside. Try to imagine the aftermath of the bombing. Look again at the photographs to help you. Is the scene deserted and eerily still or is it frantically busy with firefighters, air wardens and rescue crews rushing about? Try to include some very small, precise details as this will make your writing feel realistic.