

DOMAINE MARTELLUS

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Forward to the death

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1. A - Version

P. ~~BB~~ →

trooper ship and being escorted through the Straits of Gibraltar by smaller craft which we could see all round us from the decks, we would land so to speak in America?

Not that the Fifth Army was really American. It was just what we called it, no doubt because its commander Mark Clark was American. Officially it was the Allied Fifth Army, meaning that its troops came from all over the world.

I had a long dreamily restful chat with one of the naval officers. He was from New England and it was a new sort of conversation for me. My speech seemed to rush forwards and up and down compared with his. Space and great distances had given him, little older than my own twenty years, a calm mind.

The hush of that landing craft, its smooth, non-committal handling of a huge clement foreign Basin, drew us to those strangely silent Salerno sands, much as if the hush of the boat had chosen to come ashore.

We jumped down into the shallow wash, were required to make no splashing noises as we waded to shore in the deepening twilight of a hot autumn day. We were cheerful enough. We felt under observation but I put that aside as an absurdity. The trees

higher up, even the fig trees, cast quickly deepening shadows and if we turned and looked back at the sea we could comfort our eyes on the destroyers and landing craft at anchor, carefully watching over us. Yet the hush did perplex us.

We reached those beaches, in war dialect, on D+8, that is to say on the 16th of September 1943, namely eight days after the landing. I had the first pip on my shoulder as a second lieutenant and would be twenty-one on the 20th of this month. And I had a photo of my girlfriend in my upper left pocket.

We reinforcements (told to keep our voices down) went to our various assembly points. The captain who welcomed me—with a nod as if we already knew each other—was modest and pleasant. Then the moment we had shaken hands he turned away as if to say we don't need polite exchanges here.

The gunners were grimy, I noticed. I thought, All this hush business is part of a military exercise. After all, we were allowed to walk around, so clearly we weren't cheek by jowl with the enemy (that dread word). But it seemed odd to conduct exercises in a theatre of war. Of course the army was capable of anything, its motto being, If the men get

bored organise a manoeuvre. And in any case, this enemy, the Germans, would soon be out of Italy. We all ^{knew} that. We'd decided it in our stifling bivouacs in the Algerian desert close to Philippeville. What use was Italy to Hitler now—a narrow peninsula too cramped for fighting, with hundreds of miles of coast for allied invasion?

But this was where we were wrong. Italy is mostly a very close terrain—sudden hills and miniature chasms and rivers galore—providing a surprise every fifty yards. You only had to turn a corner and you were observed. It was a terrain easy to defend and the very devil to attack. If Hitler wanted to lay waste our armies at little expense to himself, this was his chance.

On the other hand he needed all the armies he could lay his hands on to fight the Russians in the east and the coming Normandy invasion by the allies in the west. Also Mussolini's regime in Italy had just collapsed, which meant that the Germans here risked facing a hostile population. Hitler might think twice about engaging his men on three fronts.

These small sensible and mostly mistaken arguments crowded into my mind to explain the hush that lay over Salerno.

I saw corpses in the distance. They were close to the last wash of the waves. Exactly as they had fallen. They were ours. I told myself that out of the thousands of men that had disembarked on D-day these dead, safely distant from us, were the unlucky exception.

As darkness gathered I walked up the sloping beach to where the trees began. I could see a large group of men standing together apparently silent. I was curious. As I came nearer I noticed that a Brigadier was at their centre, addressing them. He was talking in a low voice. I could see the red tabs on his shoulders. I thought it remarkable that a brigadier should be addressing Other Ranks man to man. That was a lieutenant's or a captain's job, a major's at most. At this point I became convinced that this was a training camp well enough behind the lines to allow for manoeuvres.

The Brigadier was saying in his careful murmur, almost a whisper (we had to gather closer to hear him) Jerry's just at the back here, on the other side

of the road (a lane between trees ran a few feet behind him). He said, You're going to stop him crossing this road and whatever happens, chaps, you're not going to move, understood? Whatever happens you don't move. You stay where you are. There were nods in the deep dusk.

I felt my girlfriend's photo in my left pocket, over the heart. She was Viennese, the daughter of a woman who had led a communist revolution in eastern Europe and been released from prison by it. I remembered her mother's soft patient voice. She had steel-grey eyes but her softness overrode their steely single-mindedness. She said fascism was the last bastion of capitalism, and this war would destroy them both.

I already had a nervous habit of feeling the photo as if to assure myself that my past had really happened. I remembered the joy we two had had—the endless laughter. It was a thing war couldn't eclipse. But it was already eclipsed. We had said good bye, a final and sealing one, on a railway station. She said something incomprehensible to me--- 'Being calm isn't everything'. And now I needed this photo to be a lucky talisman for me. I didn't care

about the self-deception. And I might soon feel grateful for that calm I was supposed to have.

I felt bolshie all of a sudden, in the lonely manner of the reinforcement who has not yet joined his crowd. I asked myself what am I doing in a war anyway? I hadn't wanted it. All we ever knew about it was that it was suddenly on. We just found ourselves in it. A bolt from the blue. Not a by your leave or explanation. It didn't sound right even when it was announced. Chamberlain's voice wobbled on the radio as if even he was puzzled.

I remembered the recruiting interview I'd had in a little Oxford room. The man opposite me was disarmingly differential. Would I fight in this war?

And I realised before I spoke that I really didn't know, I hadn't made my mind up. So when I said Yes I was surprised at myself---as if it wasn't my own decision.

The moment I said it I was asking myself an impotent Why? And the answer came swiftly, unambiguously: I'm going into this war because of the Nazi concentration camps, because---as a Gentile--- I'm horrified to see the Jewish civilization in Europe about to be extinguished. It was this one

thing that made the war different from all the others. And I think that was in everyone else's mind too---that this war unlike all the others had a justification.

What we didn't see was that in fact the Jewish civilization in Europe had already been sacrificed. The declaration of war simply trapped the Jews inside Hitler's regime, and all over Europe, for six long years.

I strolled back to my area where the fruit trees were, the last of the day's bright sky lighting my way. I began looking for somewhere to put my sleeping bag for the night. I chose a soft leafy place right under a plump fig tree, overlooking the fact that, this far south, figs ripen early and fall from the branches with a plop.

But when, breaking from the sky like a monstrous hot breath, there came the sound of rushing like an engineless plane crashing to earth, followed at once by a thunderous metallic crash near by, I thought perhaps this isn't a training camp after all, we weren't far behind the forward lines after all.

As yet I couldn't tell the difference between the monster 88mm. shell, which tore a crater in the

ground like a bomb from the air, and the small high-trajectory mortar-bomb that burst very few seconds after it was launched at close range (for instance, from the other side of that lane).

Another heavy one came over and another. And had I been seasoned I might have thought that these were the opening sallies of an enemy attack. But even now I kept telling myself that of course some shells were to be expected in a back area.

The small mortar bombs were preceded by a loud thump when expelled from the cannon, followed almost at once by the quick confined crash of their landing. Thus they gave you no warning. You jumped into a ditch or threw yourself flat for the loud high breathless shriek of a coming shell but the mortar's high trajectory meant, despite its low speed of emission from the spout, that the little bomb came down with one quick whack, so throwing yourself down was already too late. And now they began arriving in quick succession, bringing changes in the air from warm to momentarily stifling.

Then darkness became complete in the Italian manner---swiftly, a depth of darkness we had never known in our over-populated islands. There was a lull

in the firing. At last we could hear the silence that rightfully belonged to this beach and the olive and fig trees, an exchange of whispers, it seemed.

It was my first experience of Italy, a land at that time still pristine, hardly touched since medieval times, her slopes and copses and streams in secret close liaison with the sky, a liaison we were to live with for two years.

I felt drowsy. I slipped down inside my sleeping bag, that little womb I was to carry unwashed to the top of Italy and beyond. Night came and I blinked in the dark.

By now even I knew that this was no rest area. Oddly, it was the silence that convinced me, brought the truth. And as I dozed a certain nervousness gathered in me, a foreboding that made feathers inside, though I still clung drowsily to the thought that this war was an exercise, if a dangerous one.

The possibility of being trodden on by Germans in the night didn't even occur to me (it was in almost every other mind on that beach). Figs were what gave me trouble. They plopped down on me. In full autumn maturity, they made a thick little purple pool, one of them on my brow. As for my new sleeping

bag the stains would remain its whole lifetime. I picked myself up and stumbled with my kit to another fig tree and there I fell asleep, as if moving had done the trick. Even the feathers in my belly went and my slumber was an expanse of stillness of the kind you wake from suddenly but fresh.

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At first light my division also woke up, especially to the existence of us reinforcements. We were conducted by runners to our various command posts. These were still close to the sea, in earshot of its leisured wash, but on higher ground. A major told us in clipped tired tones that we could easily, at any time, be pushed back into that wash. We were hanging on by a tight strip of land, he said. 'It was all that was left to us.

So it was true. This was war. The enemy was breathing and watchfully close. My realisation was—and I cannot explain why—a great turning point in my life.

I was allocated to a troop—four guns under the command of Captain H., a Yorkshireman of thirty or more who walked with his feet splayed out and his head forward as if greatly excited to be going

anywhere, even the latrine. He was beginning to bald and I still see today his slightly buck teeth as he laughs. He already had a family, so was very grown-up for the rest of us.

Our command post, set behind four twenty-five-pounder guns, quickly became a little home, our warm useless political discussions its heart. We quickly discovered how devoted we had each been to the Struggle against Fascism, the vast left-wing movement of the Thirties that stretched right across Europe.

I told him how in 1940 my girlfriend K. and I had marched up Whitehall in a huge crowd yelling Down With Chamberlain and Chamberlain Must Go. Yes, it was we of the Struggle who had put Churchill there. He was hoisted up on our sole shoulders. So this was very much 'our' war. Why was I carping about being in it then?

'Twenty-five pounder' means a gun that sat between wheels with a long barrel like any other long-distance gun but it was, by comparison, light—it could be hitched to an armoured carrier quickly, whisked away from a threatened site with little ado. Its shell made a shallow crater and only if you took its forward blast at close quarters were

you dead. The true deadliness of the twenty-five-pounder lay in the fact that its shells could be fired in great numbers and simultaneously, across a wide front, creating not only dead but great panic among the living. Yet it was highly mobile too. Its breech could be loaded very quickly and thus send shells into the air in quick succession.

These murderous weapons operated in groups of four, which were in the hands of a 'troop'. Each troop had its separate command, with two or three officers. There were two troops to a battery, and two batteries in a regiment, so that as a regimental unit you were worth sixteen guns, which was formidable when you consider that there were two regiments in a division, making 32 guns. Yet it was the division, more than the regiment, that was the family you belonged to. We moved forward as a division and held the line as a division. While too big a family to warm the cockles of the heart it moved into attack as one unit, its parts coordinated space-wise and synchronised time-wise, so that it could make a large hole in the enemy line.

Not that we ever saw our divisional commander. He was too busy with the intricate business of

supplying daily food, ammunition, clothing and mail to the battle area from the rear 'B' Echelons. This became especially hazardous when you had to reach forward lines that themselves were on the move, and you could only move in darkness.

So we thought of ourselves as the 46th division, the sister of 56th division, which was the source of the liveliest hatred in our battle lives. On the two or so occasions when, in order to relieve the other in the line, we passed each other in single file on the relief road, we felt a contempt that we never for a moment felt for the enemy.

Our two divisions made the Tenth Corps. This Corps could thus call up the fire of over sixty guns spread across quite a wide front, and was capable of much disruption (to put the screaming and the death mildly).

But it did not achieve a destruction comparable to that inflicted by bombers in the air or by the enemy's 88mm. artillery shell. So you might say that its bark was worse than its bite, except that it bit often and deep. And the sight and sound of its impact had a madness to it which so to speak perfectly reflected the madness capable of producing it. But

the explosive and the human have been for centuries in too close a brotherhood for the insanity to be felt any longer.

But in the forward lines insanity shows itself at once with marvellous candour in the form of hallucinatory states and tremors of presentiment, in a haunting unreality that is the most real thing you will ever have known, such that far from appearing in any way insane it finds easy residence in you, locks arms with you in the sense that you know it already, in a very deep place.

But on that beach I had utterly no presentiment of this experience about to unfold. How could I if it had never been described?

Still sleepy, I wandered away from our command post up the hill to where Texan infantrymen huddled in their hastily dug slit trenches. I stood talking to them, looking down at their heads level with my boots. It didn't occur to me that I made a perfect target but it did to the Texans. They seemed surprised by my presence, watching me from below, as who wouldn't to witness a youth strolling about the forward lines with all six feet of him exposed. They told me, You British guys must have war in your

blood, look at you, it's like you're on holiday. Charitably, they didn't tell me I was a bloody fool. They knew I was a new boy. Yet I had already, quite unawares, learned something. The evening before, I had seen men throw themselves to the ground when an 88mm. came over. So now, when one fell pretty close, I did the same, though it was still a kind of drill for me, with a touch of tomfoolery. Then I stood up again and the Texans went on gazing at me affably. I was glad to be thought a pre-packaged soldier and I listened to their soft, low, strangely consoling Southern voices. I think probably none of them survived. I was to meet them again just before that last unthinkable hell of theirs.

This hell was bound to happen in such a close terrain. A sudden enemy machine-gun emplacement can spring up at your elbow, you find yourself exposed to a lone man whom you can't see but who can call up lethal fire on you. So cut across by rivers and terraces and mountains and lesser hills and hillocks is the Italian terrain below Bologna that the defenders can call all the shots, especially if you never trouble (because you have enough resources to

destroy all the earth, and seem hell bent on doing it) to think up the right strategy.

That was why these Texan youths stared up at me now---as a part of the madness they would never fathom, and which would later consume them utterly.. Of course they thought me ancestrally guided---I seemed to have been here before. They saw that I threw myself down for the close ones and just ducked my head for swishes that denoted a safe trajectory. So wasn't it true what they said about me---that I had war in my blood? They ought to have seen me a few weeks later frantically scratching the earth with my fingernails to make an instant man-size cave for myself under such a rain of metal that only a miracle could have intervened to save us. Which it must have done.

From Captain H. I at last got a serious strategic picture of what was happening. Our division was in charge of Salerno the town, while the enemy was still in control of several roads leading down to the coast, i.e. to us. If they managed to storm one of these roads in strength we would be pushed into the sea after being cut off from both Salerno the town and the rest of our division, just as the Texans

on our flank would be cut off from the rest of theirs. In that case we would all be without supplies of either ammunition or food (in that order of importance).

Had I been experienced I would have grasped this easily the moment I first waded onto that beach—you simply don't have twenty-five-pounder guns sitting among forward infantry unless you are in helter-skelter retreat or, as in our case, caught in a wedge. Shell-firing guns are never in the forward lines, that is nose to nose with the enemy. When they are in the forward lines it is almost the end. Such guns must be well behind the lines. If I'd had just the slightest experience I would have seen that we were a hopeless case. A glance at those guns sitting there with nothing but the sea to retreat to, this over eight days after the first landing, would have told me all.

Salerno was in any case ill-chosen as a landing place. You could see why on the map. A big force could be throttled just by the terrain, its exits squeezed with ease. Our army commander, Mark Clark, wanted to pull out, as he later---because of the high casualty rate---wanted to pull out of the whole

Italian campaign. Yet he proved to be the chief instrument of the vast toll of dead and wounded and shocked in that campaign.

The Germans held the dice all the way up the Italian peninsula. At this moment the 16th Panzer Grenadier division was directly facing us, its job being to stop us thrusting towards the road to Rome. The German commander-in-chief of Italian operations, Field Marshal Kesselring, had already rushed three of his divisions to our area, Hitler having told him on August 22 (a fortnight before the Salerno landing) to treat Salerno as 'the centre of gravity' for the whole of the Italian campaign.

Nothing could have been cleverer. Hitler felt he should perhaps (and it was still, for him, perhaps) make full strategic use of a terrain that could be defended economically but attacked only at great cost.

He must have noticed, for instance, that in the Salerno operation our two divisions, plus the 7th Armoured division and an armoured brigade, were up against at most four German battalions. And he rightly concluded that he could perhaps prolong this typical situation all the way up Italy.

After all, every metre of this terrain, offering as it did lethal observation potential for the enemy, required on our side keen eyes, nimble feet and much savvy. And that had to be exercised at the lowest levels of command. It meant our forward lines could rarely be straight ones. A push in one place, if unaccompanied by a push of the same depth on at least one flank, would get you into a wedge like the one at Salerno, if not surrounded.

We were aware of none of this. As for Captain H. and I, the bright buttons of the Struggle against Fascism, we didn't even cotton on to it by slow degree, later. From our point of view we were just trying to advance up a very narrow peninsula and it depended solely on the quality of our fighting and our good luck whether we did it fast or slow. Therein lay the principal self-disabling delusion of the entire polyglot army that Churchill had urged to join in with us---New Zealanders, Indians, Moroccans, Australians, Canadians, Poles and Frenchmen and Americans and Russians (yes, even Russians kept a presence in Italy). The result was an unthinkably high casualty rate.

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The fact was that one man planned our every move and he wasn't on our side. Even at this moment the wily Kesselring was ordering his army to make a teasingly slow 'disengagement' (as he himself called it) from the Salerno area to the difficult river Volturno, north of Naples, where the first big casualty-toll was designed to take place. And Hitler was paying attention to his every move, and the more we entangled ourselves in Kesselring's traps the more he was impressed by Kesselring as the right man to run a long and bitter Italian campaign. Only this persuaded him to stay in Italy at all---namely our stupendous blindness to what was going on.

That was why nothing disturbed us reinforcements as we waded onto this beach. And why the mortar-bombs and shells that came over were not followed up with an attack. For that reason alone I hadn't woken up under the heel of a German boot.

Kesselring had a much better trap waiting for us on the river Volturno. But our version of events was that our naval gunfire and nearly two thousand air sorties had kept the Germans off. Not that this information came from higher up. It was simply how we chose to think. We believed we were pushing Jerry

remorselessly towards the gates of Rome, and whenever he fell back it was because we pushed him. All the way up Italy we lulled ourselves with this daydream.

Strategy is another name for pre-empting the enemy intention but we failed to adapt our modes of attack to Hitler's sole intention of creating a death-trap for us.

All of a sudden, a week after we landed, there was no further risk of our being pushed back into the sea. Our forward lines moved north of Salerno, leaving us gunners behind with our guns, that is some kilometres in the rear, where guns belong.

Our forward lines 'broke through' to the road to Naples on September 26th, three days after the Germans simply vanished from their positions in the course of a night, leaving mined bridges behind them. It was all of sudden peaceful on our beach. Our battle cruisers looked like pleasure boats in the calm waters.

We felt happily forgotten. The days, like the Mediterranean, were balmy and sweet. We heard little but the faraway boom of other guns than ours. The fleet made a peaceful sight in the bay, the air so heavy with the special haunting hot scent of wild

thyme that I began to think that this peninsula war might have begun to peter out already, just as, back in Phillippeville, we had generously promised each other it would.

We heard birds (always silenced by battle). At night leaves stirred in the breeze from the sea. In a characteristic Italian rhythm, the colder sea air of nightfall is drawn to the still warm mountains inland, just as at dawn the chill mountain air rushed to the sunlit and already warm sea. And this silent and unobserved exchange repeated itself each day like one long breath, an inhale at nightfall and an exhale at dawn.

A bombardier rushed into our command post and shouted, Bring your mugs, anything you can lay your hands on. An infantryman had found a huge vat of red wine and bored a hole in it. We drank and lazed drunkenly and talked by the light of our oil lamps, we wrote letters and I secretly touched my no-longer-girlfriend's photo. I even showed it to Captain H., hoping that he saw her as my future wife, which might magically, in the rosy haze of wine, banish the utter impossibility of that.

We moved our guns north, troop by troop, each convoy leaving separately. A certain care had to be exercised in this operation because no one could say for certain if the enemy hadn't left pockets of resistance behind, as they had left mined bridges.

The Salerno beach when we looked back at it had a drowsily alluring, never-to-be-seen-again peace. We went high into the hills and found ourselves in a meadow high above the sea, cupped round with trees, hushed in its own scented air. Through the trees we could watch the tiny white-frothed waves far below. They made a twinkling silver ripple in the vast blue of the harbour, a blue I had never seen before, just as I had never breathed an air haunted with pine and elm and beech, with the sky yet another blue, so deep and domed and infinite, so close, so unassumingly true that I had to believe it false. I turned to a peasant not much older than I and asked him with dumb signs and grunts, Do you always have it like this? And he nodded in that agreeable Italian manner denoting utter bafflement.

Up here, in their own silence, there were pebbly streams, virgin cool in the shade, winding through young woods. I bathed in one, stood naked in the

middle. The water twisted and bubbled and chuckled round the stones. I came to the conclusion that after all war was an easy matter. I had seen photos of sturdy brown-faced soldiers in North Africa from the days of the El Alamein battles and deduced from them a safe war in which machines did the work.

I strolled through the woods, read a book from my little library, joked with the bombardiers, chewed grass outside the command post, which was in a barn. I watched the pigeons on the roof and the cows waiting by the entrance to be milked and the peasant's family coming and going. There was slush at the entrance and hot close wet-hay smells inside and the occasional decisive stamp of a cow, shifting her great flanks, and it was all a good-luck sign for me.

Of course such quiet (lacking as it does even desultory intermittent shelling) betokens imminent attack. The big pervasive silence is easily recognised by those whose ears are attuned. I'd got wind of a coming barrage---from our side---but not how big it was going to be. I wasn't even clear about what the word 'barrage' involved. And much less was I aware that the size of a barrage is commensurate with that of the battle timed to follow it. All I knew was

that we were on Stand By, and so was the rest of the division's artillery.

When dusk came, as I was wandering past the barn entrance, Captain H. called to me sharply to stand by for any emergency. I nodded, my hands in my pockets. Shells and cartridge cases lay in tall piles behind each of our four guns and the first shift of men was standing to.

It was almost dark when he gave the order Take Post through the Tannoy loudspeaker system. The troopers ran out to the guns. This was five minutes before the barrage was due. I was a little bored, expecting nothing. A runner came to the command post with a message to say that the infantry were on their start line (those two words were later enough to make me shiver with foreboding, and they still do, somewhat).

Captain H. looked at me from inside the command post—Stand next to the guns, he told me, be ready to relay my orders if the Tannoy breaks down. I took a megaphone with me and it seemed to amuse the gunners (etiquette said that one only used the voice).

I heard a faint order Fire! from a field to our flank, then it was taken up again and again until it

came from the loudspeakers behind me and the dark starlit night moved and a swollen booming and crashing chasm took the place of the sky, surging far ahead and spreading in a wide fathomless sustained deafening roar along the whole front and I started awake at last, mouth open, stunned at the endless blue and yellow flashes across the spaces with the earth rocking and leaping and rumbling from the gun's detonations and the night itself shaking. I stood in this illuminated arc that surely was the world gone mad in a last thunder of the universe and I began to feel an exultation I had never known before, I let myself go in this last hour of the universe such that God must take notice, yes, there must even at this eleventh hour be God to take notice.

The men were pushing the shells home with their ramrods, tight-closing the steel doors of the breech, standing back for the mighty spout to recoil and give forth its demon flying death while the meadow all round was lit by simultaneous flashes (taking kindly to the light as meadows do). I was no longer a spectator, I itched to be at one of the guns pulling the hot lever with my lanyard after the sergeant's order Fire!

But the silence afterwards, the way the leaves and trickling of water returned to themselves and the acrid cordite smell gave way to the hot scent of wild thyme, and the way the trees stood placid and still again, was a disappointment to me. What had it all amounted to if everything became as it had been before, with the silence, into which all sounds die, victorious? if nothing remains recorded?

I was yet to learn that to be at the receiving end of a barrage like this one excludes exultation, changing tears of joy to tears of sorrow. This sudden silence was only for us. Not yet had I cringed from their horrifying precipitate swoop to earth and heard the screams, the ones of the living and the ones of the dying.

Here, miles behind the forward line, we were in little danger of retaliation. If it happened at all it came after perhaps a day's delay, during which the enemy would have calculated our map reference---with a large margin of error.

Also those shells of ours were aimed at the enemy's forward positions, which responded not to us distant guns but to those directly facing them in the form mortars and hand grenades and Sten guns.

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Figs

We were dropped off at the Salerno beaches south of Naples by an American landing craft in the late afternoon, as close to dusk as possible and in a calm sea silence and a soft still warmth.

These beaches had been invaded by the American Fifth Army some days before, on September 8 1943. And I was to join my division here, a British division in the American Fifth Army. It was an unexplained surprise to be in an American army but we accepted our new identity as a promise of adventure.

We sampled their food on the two-day journey that brought us from the virgin white and yellow sands of the Algerian coast. The trip was smooth and unerring and we gasped at the turkey and jam they scandalously deposited side by side on our trays, without our ritual greens and gravy. This boat was clearly another world, a quieter one than ours (as belonging to great spaces perhaps). Who could have dreamed that, leaving a Scottish port in a crammed

But killing somebody is remote from a soldier's mind. He simply defends himself. Faced by a strong enemy you quickly learn that the killing is reciprocal and the death in an enemy's last gaze is your death too. Not a stunning truth—but one that makes a soldier and is his real baptism of fire.

The forward lines thus induce mercy. It is rear troops whose thoughts may dwell on revenge, atrocity.

I knew I wouldn't be with the guns much longer, that my real job was in the forward lines. I knew my song would change. Very shortly my role would be to guide these very shells to their destination. I would be at the spearhead of attacks. I would find myself in places where my own fire had fallen perhaps only moments ago. And from this new position of death and ruin I would direct further fire.

I would be in the forward lines but sometimes (this I did not yet know, since it was never spoken of) I must be prepared to find myself beyond those lines, in enemy ones.

In a word I was to be a Forward Observation Officer or F.O.O., as we called him. Or, in the words of the army textbook, *The Eyes of the Army*.

And then these guns of mine and my command post would become, being well behind the lines, a rest and refuge for me. Their daily detonations—the shell slipped so easily into the breech, the hot lever pulled to make the gun leap forward and try to fly beyond the blocks that braked its wheels—would be no more to me than fireworks on Guy Fawkes night.

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We were ordered to move the guns forward to a town ten kilometres up from Salerno called Cava de' Tirreni. The move was to be made in separate columns so as to create surprise. This was precisely what it didn't do. Light as their shells were, our guns still made a hell of a racket getting hitched up and set down again. The Germans had just vacated Cava dei Tirreni and it was obvious (though not for us) that they had quickly taken up positions with a perfect view of the valley in which our guns were to be put down---within spitting distance of us, as it turned out.

Captain H., under cover of night, put our four guns down in a small valley flanked with steep vine terraces, a short walk from the town. We did the unhitching as quietly as possible. Then, after

putting out sentries, we walked stealthily back into Cava de' Tirreni. We had taken over a big house on the northern side. The idea in war is that you walk into any house of your choosing. Its owners or squatters make a quick bunk or retire to a deep cellar. There is no unfriendliness about it because civilians have little interest in being caught in crossfire. If you move in fast it means, for them, you will probably get out fast too.

This house had an atrium and a balcony looking down on it, and it was this balcony that drew us—really a large salon beneath yet another storey. Most of the men billeted themselves down here. I shared a tiny nursery room with another junior officer who had freckles and surprised eyes. We took it in turns to sleep in a child's cot, relieving each other every few hours for guard duty at the guns. Once I came in to wake him and as I was doing so I fell asleep slumped over him and we only woke up at dawn. We got some very sharp words from above but senior officers rarely came down on us hard, knowing as they did that there were many battles ahead that would do their own cowing.

To get to the guns one took a winding path that couldn't be observed. Cava de' Tirreni (meaning the quarry or mine of the Tyrrhenian seas, on Italy's western coast) was tiny then—no four-lane highway ran at its side, as now. Its humped houses appeared to be piled on each other and it smelled the same as all Italian war-time towns—sun-dried herbs and old walls and wood smoke and sewage and chicory.

The vine terraces where we put our guns had a greater beauty than they would in peace-time because, as I see only now, their silence was so war-deep, devoid of the domestic clatter of normal times. And of course this silence carried with it a foreboding which enhanced even further the beauty. There were mossy statues and young trees. There were also a fountain and green garden benches where the women who tended the vines used to sit. We started digging ourselves in during the night but by dawn, that first morning, we were only down a few inches. We camouflaged the guns as best we could

The moment the sun put its first blinding tip an inch above the horizon there was a swift hoarse breathing in the sky and mortar-bombs crashed among the leaves, their smoke rolling flatly away, hugging

the dew. Jerry must have been able to see the whites of our eyes. Most of his first ones dropped near the benches and statues. A splinter caught a young Italian woman. She screamed frantically. Somehow her screaming seemed to inspire the enemy and the bombs spread to the terraces where we were and we began scrambling up and down them, flung ourselves to the wet earth and as quickly jumped up again as the crashes came in clusters and the pungent smoke got into our lungs. One of the men shouted down at the woman Shut up! Shut up! in the illusion that she was attracting the fire. He threw himself down close to me and murmured, She's not hurt as bad as all that. But I think she was screaming at her first realisation that war killed and meant to do so.

I lost two men in that sacred green hollow. One was my own signaller, too badly hurt to scream. We got him into a hut and put him face down. He had two deep holes in his back, behind the lungs. One of the troopers asked him if he'd like a smoke and he managed to raise his head. The trooper put a cigarette between his lips and was about to light it when the man coughed blood into it so that it swelled up and fell with a plop to the cement floor. Then his

head fell forward. And things were suddenly quiet and he was dead. My face puckered up against crying in that first compassion, you are crying for all the future ones, whom you will not cry for, as well as for this friendly creature who spoke to you not a moment before so that you still hear him and see his particular way of smiling. He was a man I trusted and he was to accompany me on my F.O.O. missions, we had agreed about that. Just a glance and we seemed to understand each other. No need for orders—he was already there. This in your signaller is precious as gold.

A peasant woman in black stood by the hut door and moaned quietly to herself. The gunners trod about respectfully, thinking. We cursed Jerry who had done it because cussing gave us an outlet. The other wounded man got it in the arm but it was a bad one just the same and he was stretchered away to hospital, and I think died later.

In the manner of soldiers we griped and belly-ached. We asked how the hell could anybody have thought of putting twenty-five-pounder guns into a bloody soup-bowl like this, where we can't even fire the sodding things. To fire out of that hole you

would need a vertical trajectory, the shit would fall back on you. You have to be a madman to put artillery into the forward lines where Jerry can just look down on you etc. etc.

Afterwards there were boring hours. A death isn't forgotten. It becomes part of that strange assembly of dead men who have gone and live men who might any minute go.

We sat in the balcony area overlooking the atrium and I was asked to give a lecture. All because I let it drop that I had been on the set of a film called *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, which was shot at the Elstree studios. They wanted to know how a film was made. As all I remembered of that day was hanging about for just one scene—shot in a few inaudible moments—I had little to say. I would much rather have talked about the theatre, how my mother and father used to take me and my two brothers to the working men's clubs when we were tiny. You saw the top comedians in those clubs, on their way up. In my mother's arms I began to know about timing and pace and projection. But these troopers turned it down. They wanted the big screen, the passive sanitised dream.

I enjoyed strolling alone in Cava de' Tirreni's narrow lanes. One morning I looked up at a window and a man and woman were beckoning to me to come upstairs. In sign language they were telling me to push the downstairs door open and, stranger from another land as I was, walk up. I waved back and smiled and walked on because once up there, for all I knew, I might disappear, then who would look for me? I expect all the harmless couple wanted was to barter for cigarettes, bully beef, sugar. In exchange perhaps for eggs. Discreetly they might have suggested a girl. I hadn't yet learned that Italians were as straight as a die, even when crooked.

It was a restless period for us. I was impatient to get my first F.O.O. assignment over and done with. It would have been useful to get some gen (our word for information) about this. But none came. It hadn't figured in my training either. You could be trained for surprise but not for the surprises when they actually came.

I knew the bare logistics—you took three or
~) four men with you, including one or two signallers. Your radio equipment had to be with you at all times. This included batteries and, in very rare cases of

unusual proximity, a cable for direct wire contact with the rear. Mostly you would have no chance of recharging the batteries so while you needed to be in day and night contact with your command post back at the guns you had to be economical in radio use. Your firing orders had sometimes to go far beyond your own command post to engage the guns of a whole brigade or division, and the reply had to come back down that hierarchy, so you needed plenty of juice. It was after the word Ready had been passed to you from all the assembled waiting guns that your final order of Fire! went through and then, almost instantaneously, you heard the baleful whirring of the shells above your head.

The only thing you know as a novice F.O.O. is that you will have to observe the country carefully and consult your Intelligence map as you move across it. But that isn't much of a training. So your state of trepidation as your first F.O.O. assignment draws near, like mine now, derived from utter bafflement as to what to expect.

Obviously an F.O.O. must know something about the enemy that faces him. After all, he must develop so to speak an intimacy with him. He must know what

kind of fighters these particular enemy regiments are, and in what strength they are at the moment, whether they are the 15th or 26th or 29th Panzer Grenadiers or a Hermann Göring division or the 44th Austrian infantry (the most amiable of opponents).

Such a man can be a treasure for the infantry since he carries about with him an invisible armour shield in the form of quick and heavy support from the rear. So the tendency of infantry officers was therefore to treat him with awe if he was good and amiably disregard him if he wasn't.

Once in a new position the F.O.O. must help consolidate it with so-called SOS targets, which may involve a firing programme lasting the whole night. You communicate this programme, with its timetable and intervals by radio, to your command post, having already given your exact map reference in code.

There was one thing I looked forward to---being my own master. I would be trusted or spurned for my decisions alone. I even felt a need to witness war at its demented heart. And for this the role of F.O.O. seemed exactly placed.

Before you get your first assignment the eyes of senior officers are on you sizing you up. The respect

of your gunners (very few of whom saw the forward lines) is much enhanced if you go up, and it grows the more you go up. The unlucky ones among them are those who have to accompany you. But more unlucky is that handful of men who become your favourites, the kind of men who, try as they might, cannot help being reliable. Never was there a better argument for that devoutly observed military rule—never volunteer.

Likewise if the F.O.O. was good he was always in demand. If he wasn't he stayed with the guns.

The French long ago had a more precise word for the F.O.O. and that was *le sentinel perdu*. He is to all intents and purposes a lonely (and frequently lost) spy. Much of the Intelligence given to him about enemy dispositions is likely to be wrong though his life largely depends on it being right. But it is impossible to have good Intelligence about forward lines because they move so fast, especially in close terrains like those in Italy. So it is the F.O.O. who keeps the map up to the latest date. The danger for him is that being very mobile, with at most four men, he can easily get lost, and in enemy lines, which happened to me and mine more than once.

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We entered Naples on October 1 1943, namely three weeks after the Salerno landing. And these weeks cost us 12000 casualties, 5000 of them American, nearly 7000 British. And we were here solely because Kesselring's new defence line was now ready for us.

But at last we had an official 'fleshpot' where we could go for short leaves, even half a day. There were whores galore in Naples and the chance of a dance and Lilly Marlene being sung. The copper wire laid by Fifth Army engineers for new telephone systems at once disappeared. That hadn't happened under the Germans because their penalty for stealing copper wire had been death. There was a favourite apocryphal story that the kids of Naples, in this new lawless democracy, unscrewed the nuts and bolts of an allied ship until one night it sank elegantly out of sight.

I drove into Naples several times alone. I sat in a tiny restaurant tucked into a side street with the sun blazing through the entrance. I ordered chicken but was aware after a few bites that it was cat. Why did I order chicken after being told so often that it was always cat? The place became empty

and I started to talk to the proprietess in my poor army Italian which always got the accents hopelessly wrong—we called the Rapido river the Rapeedo whereas it is accented on the first syllable as in 'rapid'. We did the same with 'Taranto' and 'Brindisi', both of which carry their emphasis on the first syllable. And no doubt if we had ever wanted to talk about the Medici we would have made the same mistake (most Anglo-Saxons still do). But it was our rule and no Italian dared correct us.

The proprietess was a large young body with black curly hair and an easy sisterly manner. She asked me if I was lonely and I smiled, refusing this offer to bed down with her. I told myself that I didn't find her attractive but in fact I was afraid of a dose of clap. Also we were warned not to separate ourselves from our clothes, ever, not in Naples at this present half-starved time.

She and I sat with our elbows on the table gazing into the blinding light of the entrance and I found in myself a resolve that I would one day make this country my own (which I later did). I left her some cigarettes, which were considered gold.

A few days later I sat with five other officers in a barracks on the city's outskirts, the sea silver and flashing far below, the light failing.

The Battery commander said, We shall have to decide who is going up with this one. I held my breath, my heart beat faster, I gazed at the wall and held the leg of the table. The day had been one of those autumn days that lazily replay the earlier sweltering season and raise the Italian's voice and give him a special easy walk.

Not many days after that I sat once more in an officers' conference, this time in a room with a parquet floor and tall windows high above the deep still blue of Naples harbour, lightly ruffled with white-flecked waves, where our battle cruisers looked like clever intricate toys. The windows gave on to a balcony from which a grateful evening breeze wafted in, then spent itself until the next one, in an hallucinating rhythm I had never known a hint of in my former life.

No sounds came up to us, so removed were we from city and sea. The captain who had welcomed me at Salerno with a gruff but solicitous nod, Captain Maugham, said he thought I should go up in the next

show, being the freshest among us. The major smiled at me and said he agreed it was time to break me in.

I smiled too but I was mortally afraid. Yet excitement went with it, even increased it. I was to stand out, perform, perhaps earn better smiles—more earnest ones. It is wonderful what human association does for us, being able to render sane and even orderly what our trembling limbs know to be otherwise.

2

Crater

Most of the 13th day of October 1943 I leaned against a warm haystack facing south. There were flat fields all round and a breeze intermittent like a series of broken sighs that breathed a message to me I couldn't decipher—whether warning or solace. I was alone, reading a novel about a man of twenty-one (just right) who was deeply in love, and how his love, after a long time of anguish, was requited. And since it was thoughtfully written, taking me back to a style of speech I would never hear again (everything pre-war was now a remote never-never land), the words melted in nostalgically with the scented autumn day and the hush that the sound of bees and flies only made deeper.

The silence brought a fear that awakened suddenly and died again, as if these fields knew what lay ahead, this very night. It made me look up from

the pages and as quickly sent me back to them. It merged with the words I was reading—with the hero's horror that he might not be loved by the girl. And this in turn helped that southern hush to be valedictory.

Now and then and I gazed at Vesuvius in the far distance sending its straight white volcanic smoke unresisted into the blue. It curled very slightly at the top with such a leisurely and domestic air. Like any curling smoke you might see. There wasn't a gun to be heard, not in the remotest distance. Yes, when an attack has been prepared, and the enemy is waiting as you are waiting, with death in mind, all the trees and grasses join in.

We were to make a bridgehead over the river Volturno, a name which suggests currents that turn in on themselves—*volto* with its idea of turning round, *turno* that of returning. And it was the river Field Marshal Kesselring had chosen for us to break our heads on (his words). But wait---this river was also useful for him in so far as it gave him time to prepare an even stronger line further north. But wait again---this stronger line would give him time to prepare a truthfully impregnable line which whole

divisions, whole corps could decimate themselves to the point of self-disbandment (and did), thus breaking both head and heart.

Thankfully we knew nothing of this but even if we had we would have rejected it. As a soldier you have to believe that your enemy is confused and surprised by your every approach.

I was to assemble with my four men at infantry battalion headquarters in a pre-arranged area south of the river Volturno. I was to await dusk there and the time appointed for the opening barrage from our side. The moment this barrage ceased I was to go forward and make contact with our attacking infantry company at its start line.

Those were my orders and I didn't have the experience to see that they didn't make sense. Clearly my permission to move was too late, being the moment when the company assigned to me would be committed to battle. The order thus put me far behind the start line---into the tail, not the spearhead. Which meant that I would spend the crucial first stage searching for my infantry commander. Without him I had no job or place to go. Without me he had no retaliatory power against the flak.

Not only that but our army too was inexperienced. This was the first set-battle of the Italian campaign. The Salerno operation, having been a mostly defensive action (landing stores and equipment under fire), offered no lessons for what was coming up.

Jerry was in some strength now—three divisions faced us and were particularly lively on our sector because the main Naples-Rome highway passed just ahead.

I was there with my men at the appointed time. I remember young woodland---good cover. We stood together, my men and I, five of us, waiting in the dying light. The barrage from our guns started up to the second, a huge mounting thunder from behind us, followed at once by the screeching of shells arching overhead into enemy lines. The earth trembled because we weren't a great distance from the river and we fell into the usual pre-battle elated illusion that such a shattering orchestra must leave not a yard of enemy earth alive. The fact is that, especially in close terrain, the enemy pops out of his holes at the first lull and starts lobbing the stuff back. And that would be happening within moments.

It was ten o'clock and dark before my signallers and I got the order to move and we advanced in single file, keeping to one side of a broad crowded causeway between the trees. Then as soon as enemy shells began falling close we started running, trying to get to the ditches which we knew to be just short of the river. Stupidly I had eaten a late meal and started vomiting as I ran, turning my head to one side so that my tunic and map-case wouldn't get soiled. As we ran the enemy launched its fearsome Nebelwerfer or Organ Grinder mortar bombs right where we were so that hot breaths of suffocating cordite rushed into our faces. Clattering enemy machine-gun fire opened up from the river, presumably on our men trying to cross.

A mine-detector outfit went ahead of us as always, laying white tape down as a safe guide for us. Infantrymen were losing contact with each other, calling out to each other between the deafening bursts, afraid of losing touch. Everyone was dazed, some men were just wandering here and there, others were on the ground and calling for the stretchers or just screaming, sometimes a man would dash for the

ditch at the side of the causeway as if he had decided to do no more running.

Something was going very badly wrong. There were more men running towards us than there were with us, in fact growing masses of infantrymen all running in the wrong direction, away from the line. We were bumping into them and for the life of me I couldn't understand how men running away from the line could be obeying orders of any kind. They were calling out to us, You can't go up there! I dashed over to one of them and grabbed him by the arm—Where are you going? He shouted, You can't get through! Thinking I might have mistaken the route I shouted back, Where's the river then? and he said as he ran on, Back there, there's all hell up there, you can't get through!

Stretcher bearers were rushing past us—it seemed a whole army was on its way out of the line. My four men were waiting for my order and I shouted into the shattering noise Come on! and we started running forward again.

We were quickly in the thick of it. The Nebelwerfers were concentrated here. A Nebelwerfer puts six bombs at a time into the air and their trajectory makes a terrifying howling noise like a

vast barrel organ in the sky which turns into a dense hungry roar close to your ear as the bombs crash to earth from their almost vertical trajectory.

There was such a thick wall of detonation and tracer bullets and darkness and men bumping into each other that all you could do, once you were close to the river, was run from one deep 88mm. crater to the next until you found an empty place to throw yourself into, elbow to elbow as the screams of the wounded came over, that terrible Help! Help! Help!, that imploring scream to the enemy guns to Please, please stop! And then the shouts of the stretcher bearers, Give us a hand you blokes, for christsake help! but the only thing that happened in our brains was let it not be me, let it not be me, and when at last we managed to scramble down into a crowded crater and throw ourselves down I found myself scratching frantically with both hands into the freshly scorched soil, trying to make a hole for myself of all grotesque idiotic things but knowing how crazy it was didn't stop me doing it, I was clawing the hard black earth with nails all too frail and I knew I was doing it and how crazy it was but the hands kept doing it and I swear my men on either side of me were doing it

too, the very same silliness. I saw my actions so clearly, stood away from myself because these were my last moments on earth---that was how it was for me and every other man in that crater and the screeches of Wailing Winnie over our heads and that ghastly angry hot descent of the bombs shattered our last hopes and, as always for the soldier, made us doubt afterwards that we did get through and weren't in a new deadly life that contained a trick that made it seem life when it wasn't.

And simultaneously we were listening to the stretcher bearers and I was thinking urgently should I take my men and help with the stretchers but that would mean running back, wouldn't it, running away? And because these were our last moments on earth our thoughts were sharp and clear and intensely observant, I was aware of my men on both sides of me and how they were living these last moments too and they like me were silent and like me they had their eyes closed and I was sure they too were scratching crazily into the earth because you never do anything individual, not at the extremity of extremities.

How long we were in that crater, how and when we got out, even whether the mortar bombs and shells

were still falling when we jumped up and ran, even whether we ran, I cannot recall and never did recall, not even right after.

All I know of that night was being in the crater in our last moments and then, as in a dream that jumps whole hours in a flash, I am standing in the first dawn light at the river's edge, a few inches from a handsome German officer with thick black hair who is saying in English with easy confidence, In Rome for Christmas? You won't be there for months, if ever.

My Company commander was standing just to the left of me and all of us listened to the German diffidently, disappointed that our success in breaching the river should excite this clear-spoken well-meant smiling ridicule, and we believed him not because we were gullible but because in such extremities one knows the truth, and this was the truth. It was indeed many months of mostly useless costly struggle through mud and cold, in strategic positions that spelled disaster, before we reached Rome depleted and worn out.

Perhaps it is this preliminary dying that you go through in your last moments which turn out not to

have been your last---perhaps it is this that induces amnesia. Perhaps amnesia is a thankful device to expunge how you got out of that crater so that you may carry on this life not half-crazed or wandering in your mind for the rest of your days. And suddenly the German officer is there, a friend, talking without emphasis in this bountiful dawn silence, and his very voice is a balm.

A few feet before us was the swollen fast river, the opposite bank deserted except for four English soldiers lying side by side, faces down as if gazing into the earth, in perfect order and neatness, their tin hats undisturbed, their weapons under them, in an identical shared death. They must have jumped to the bank close together and in that jump gone down in one burst of machine-gun fire. For several days they stayed there, clean and obedient.

Apparently our division had been given not only the most intensely defended but the most exposed part of the river to tackle. On our left flank was our sister division, and on their left were the Americans, presumably the Texans we had known at Salerno. Our sister division, the 56th, hadn't got across.

I couldn't work out, in that dawn, why my Company commander was still on the southern shore when the opposite bank was already in our hands. I expected a bridgehead to be something you could see right away. But Bailey bridges have to be loaded and transported. Engineers to build them have to be available. And building a bridge in daylight, especially in the first vulnerable hours after a battle, would be suicide.

For the moment there was only the tired dawn silence that follows a rough night. Both sides are taking time off to lick wounds. A cup of char reassured us, the steam blew up into our faces with each breath.

We were lucky because the Nebelwerfer or Wailing Winnie, fearful though it sounded, was also inaccurate. Its bombs dispersed over a large area and they took more seconds to land than other mortar bombs. Their terrifying chorus in the sky was thus achieved at the expense of accuracy. Their aim was to create extreme panic. This they achieved in the case of an entire battalion of the US 34th division. They scattered and it was a whole day before they reassembled. No cowardice was involved. They just

thought it was something other than war and was coming out of the sky—the frightful Secret Weapon constantly promised by Hitler. By far the greater number of casualties in battle come from shock and are called non-battle casualties because wounds do not figure, so there was reasoning behind Wailing Winnie.

Of course mortar bombs that fall inaccurately still fall, and they fell among us, just short of the river. Machine-gun fire, not these bombs, was the nemesis of the men trying at that moment to cross the river.

We all believed, as men in the first world war did, that the shell that got you had your army number on it. The idea reassured and terrified in equal measure.

* * *

That bridgehead was at the cost of a thousand casualties in one night.

As for our sister division it was pinned down by shellfire. Its Ox and Bucks battalion disguised themselves as peasants but the moment they broke cover to approach the river they had 80 casualties in a few seconds. They tried to cross in boats but most

of these were at once destroyed, this time with 40 casualties.

Really the American Fifth army was in no position to cross that river. Its divisions only had boats enough for one battalion, namely two companies of about sixty men each. And that was hopelessly inadequate for a whole front.

I never learned how the men I saw running away from the line that night re-joined their units, or if they did. To my mind they were deserters and would have been rounded up as such. You just can't rejoin your unit a whole night late. There were no officers among them as far as I could see. Which made desertion even more likely.

In fact, though we didn't know it then, the Fifth army had a desertion problem. The 'Naples stroll', as it was called, started about this time—some Americans just walked out of the line and went to town. Mark Clark sensibly accommodated himself to this by organising rest areas close to the line, to which the tired and shocked could be sent. You could hardly throw men into prison for suffering the results of the pressure you were putting on them, such as tackling water without something to float on.

The British were less wise. We now know, as a result of the publication (in 1994) of the court-martial of that time, that 197 soldiers mutinied 'at Salerno'. 179 of these were put in prison for a year or so while the ringleaders were given five years. They mutinied because their officers had told them they were going from North Africa not to Salerno but Sicily, where there was no fighting. The men were already battle exhausted and considered this a calculated lie which exposed their officers as unfit to lead. I never heard of any mutinies on the Salerno beach. It would have been difficult to mutiny and get arrested within earshot of the Germans. So I am inclined to believe that those men I saw running in the wrong direction were those who were court-martialled.

The fact that we heard no more of those men meant nothing. No battle events were ever, in my memory, discussed afterwards. Also we were used to disappearances. Soldiers, in groups or singly, were posted off constantly. There was never a better application of the divide-and-rule axiom. Unwanted elements could be dissolved into thin air. And this, by the law of war, is how it has to be. The comfort

of being in an army is its delegation of moral choice to staff officers remote from scrutiny, which helps one sleep at night, it being the case that what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve after.

5

Prayer

We moved at last from our hill-top parlour, Sessa Aurunca. We said good bye to our hosts, trying to determine whether they were really in sorrow or deep gratitude at our going. There were tears from the young women and also from those matronly ones who had found a son or two, but gratitude could still be beneath the tears, even promoting them, especially as they were Italian tears.

The mountains were forgotten, presumably shrugged off by the high command. We mounted our vehicles and moved in slow convoy eastwards, for reasons we knew nothing of.

And, as always, Italy protruded with her message that life was stronger than war. No matter where we turned the Italian story was there. Her sky and soil seized on each other with unswerving hot certainty

and from a seed came, within hours it seemed, a sudden pugnacious bud and stem that bounded into life with a reckless festive clamour. A terrain that was surely our nightmare was our heaven.

Day and night we soldiers lived in the midst of that sky and soil, unknowingly open to its fevers and favours. And the Italian people seized on you too—without intent, unhurried, just like the sky and soil. This people of many mysteries seemed without the slightest knowledge of who they were, how they were composed, and of course this had to be so. Least of all did they know that the life they conveyed to us was life as it had always been intended to be. And just as their terrain was heaven and hell, so were they. They weren't a happy people, not at all, yet they demonstrated little else.

They were even sullen and bitter, yet these moods came to us from them as impersonally as weather, sometimes damp and drizzly, sometimes that hot open glory of sunlight that seemed made for them and, more strangely, by them. You could see how fascism had started among them. It was a revolt against their very passivity. That was why we called fascism 'reaction'. It was precisely that---against

the life that brought them hurts and bitter delusions they did nothing about because it was in their makeup to 'carry on', those bitter words used in Britain throughout the war. So the fascists assaulted the conventions, disrupted, beat people up, were rude where they formerly had been mild. In the words of a fascist I knew, people needed to be beaten not with sticks of wood but sticks of steel.

They were all experiencing the daily gnaw of hunger. Not that they starved. They all, town and village dwellers alike, had family connections in the farmlands. The labourers had a nimble resilience even in the forward lines, quickly tending maize, vines, the precious olive tree. They nipped out of the house in a lull and scraped and rustled where they couldn't be seen. They never forsook the land.

* * *

We moved eastwards and astonishingly we were set down at sweet Cassino's doorstep. Of all forbidden things we actually came within sight of her. Sprawling higgledy-piggledy down the southern slope her curling domestic smoke consoled and menaced us equally.

And the valley that lay before her---the lush green plain---with its little roads and a river that crossed it as straight as a dye, and its one tiny bridge, added something hypnotic to Cassino's wistful invitation to us to visit it, at the price of death.

And then, as if to give that invitation a certain compelling edge, there was the vast abbey that hung over and a little behind the town, yellow-white and placid in the southern sun, quite as if it wished to confirm military impregnability with blessing and prayer, its serene deeply silent stones being in homage, after all, to a saint.

The allure here grew tragically overpowering. For this abbey was the size of a sturdily built town, with cloisters and chapels and libraries and dormitories and halls. And though they were dedicated to a man who founded a highly reflective order of monks fourteen hundred years ago, they spoke only one thing to warriors and that was 'I am a military bastion'.

That abbey shimmered like a gentle tapestry, mellow and still, an adjunct of the sky, without substance, overseeing all below it as if older even than the earth, and truthfully those trees and

rivulets below gave the impression of having adopted the abbey as a long-awaited saviour.

And equally it was a perfect defence position---had always been, was intended to be from the moment Benedict set foot on the hill and saw that this was truly the Vatican's southern gate. And he emphasised this by destroying quite unnecessarily a temple to Apollo and respecting an ancient Roman tower, which showed a certain military predilection.

And now that abbey had become the benign and sweetly watchful protector of the valley before it. Or rather this was how you were likely to think if, say as an F.O.O., you were asked to observe it---and for several days, during the hours of daylight.

And that did indeed become my job. The Eyes of the Army had a peaceful role at last.

I was to do my observing from a ridge that faced it at a distance of a kilometre or two, not in order to register targets but to report any movements I might see in and around the abbey.

My ridge was lower than that on which the abbey sat but since it looked straight at the abbey's southern windows it gave the impression of equality.

And spread between the abbey and me was the tranquil green plain with its river, at present entirely in enemy hands, as was the forward slope of this ridge from which I was to do my observing.

We had moved our guns to behind this ridge, namely behind its southern slope, so that all I had to do to return to the guns was to clamber down a steep cliff covered with bushes and saplings thick and high enough to block our guns entirely. On the other three sides we were hidden by tall thick trees. Which alchemy thrust a wonderful inactivity on us. If spotted from the air we could go to cover easily. Never had we been so snug as in this green drawing-room with its captive sky. We slept long and deep. No longer did we addicts of the deafening dag haul our sleeping bags close to it. Its engines were muffled here, their sedative powers redundant. You were pulled deep into the silence the moment you shut your eyes. And as for the shell that had your number on it, what guns could reach you?

We felt an unusual benevolence amid all these dank leafy perfumes that smelled so far from the world outside. You stepped into this green haven suddenly: a road wide enough for our armoured

carriers and guns debouched without warning straight into its embrace—and ceased as a road the moment it arrived.

Just before dawn one day I was told to take a signaller with me and climb the ridge to an observation post that would reveal itself to me across a narrow clearing. I was to establish radio contact with my command post below, and this would be done by cable, not radio. It was my signaller's task to unroll the cable as we climbed.

I was to keep my eyes on the abbey and somewhat on the plain below me, and I was to report the slightest movement, and for that purpose I was provided with a huge pair of Rabbit's Ears, which were enormous binoculars of great penetration, taken from a German prisoner.

Our steep path straggled between thickets and saplings so that the moment we set foot on it we were hidden. I was to stay at my post in the hours of light and descend just before first dusk.

At the top we came to the flat shrubby clearing I had been told about. Walking straight ahead as we had been instructed to do we came, after a few yards, to the other, northern edge of the ridge, which had

an even steeper slope than the one we had just climbed. This too was thick in bush and sapling, such that you would detect any movement down there by the sound.

Taking care, crouching to hide ourselves, we found my little eerie scooped out of the thick bush between boulders in such a way that it provided a seat and room to stretch one's legs. It was hidden from all but the sky. So someone had sat there before.

And facing me was the abbey of St. Benedict as first built, in wondrous brown-golden state in this the first light of day.

I settled happily in. The weather was now dry and fairly warm. I turned the long-distance lenses on the abbey and set the focus and all at once a brilliantly clear picture of each window, stone buttress, disposed itself before my eyes.

Those stones were to change each hour to a new subtle tint, russet and rose in the first dawn, white and grandly still at noon. You could gaze at this frail tapestry for minutes on end and less and less give credence to its solidity. War with its great hush between battles restored St. Benedict's abbey to

its earlier centuries. In all its thrilling changes of light from mellow rose and damask and cherry-wood to tints of brown so rare that the façade became a veil held dangling in the sky, this abbey was a last point of sanity, an assurance that war may not forever be the shadow that follows us, each and every one of us.

But also, because this was war, the abbey windows had a way of staring down into the valley that could seem to frightened soldiers a bitter grey warning. Its very stillness might make some commanders dream of taking it out on the grounds that Jerry was inside, fully equipped. It only needed a few philistines among them to set a scare going, and they were available.

Intelligence said no such thing. Intercepted messages to the monastery, even personal ones to the abbot from Hitler, corroborated the evidence that the Germans considered Monte Cassino as they considered Rome, as an open city.

And we F.O.O.s were sent up to that eerie (so I believe now) in order to banish any idea of the Germans being inside, since both General Alexander

and General Mark Clark were firmly against violating such a clearly understood covenant.

The second morning I sent my signaller away. The silence was all the greater because the plain below never stirred from hour to hour.

I was wary of the slope immediately below me. From time to time I gave sober thought to how I might defend myself should I see those shrubs below move or hear branches crack. The only way was to make a bunk so I recced the path by which I had come and removed any sharp gravel that might make my exit noisy.

My task was a clearly stated one—direct from divisional headquarters: I must report all movements at the end of each day. My reports were, apart from one, 'No movement'.

That one movement was a hand-full of Germans in a motor-bike-and-sidecar. They suddenly appeared from the east and sped towards the river. They got out at its only bridge. I put my Donkey's Ears on them and watched them climb beneath the stone arches. They worked for ten or so minutes, clearly laying mines. Then they drove back to cover—to the east again.

I waited the rest of that day for the bridge to blow up but it didn't. In my report that evening I

gave its map reference for our mine detectors, convinced however that no army in its right mind would attack across that plain. I was wrong.

One afternoon at the warmest hour, when my cockpit in the sky was the choicest place to be, there was a rustle of steps behind me and I turned to see a young man in uniform, except that it wasn't a combatant one. We said hullo and at once liked each other. He was a journalist and armed with a notebook. Suddenly we were having a chat like the Kent cottage ones. As then, I made a cup of tea. We talked about books and, I think at one point, Mass Observation, for which I had worked just before getting my call-up papers.

He wanted to know what I'd been doing on That Terrible Hill. I told him a few things that happened and he made some notes and we parted saying how we must meet again, knowing there wasn't a chance in hell of that. A few weeks later I had a letter from my mother saying, What's all this you've been up to? There was a front-page story in the local paper about how her boy was a hero. I can't remember what the heroism was, or how my affable journalist had managed to extract one from what I told him but copy has to

be written—and there it was, apparently, under a photo of me. Horace Potter who lived next door to my parents called round. He had just seen it come off the press, he being a sub on the newspaper.

It would hardly bring solace to my parents' unsung nights in the shelter. And the triumphal style of war journalism is a pain in the arse anyway, not least for the journalist. So I closed the subject as quickly as possible in my subsequent letters. And then there was the fact that we were forbidden by the censorship rules to even mention battle in our letters.

No doubt my intelligence report corroborated previous ones from that same cockpit. The fact is you cannot stare at such a building for days on end without some tiny evidence of military occupation, if it exists. Soldiers inside such a building have a way of forgetting vague orders such as 'Never show yourself beyond such and such a point'. They get used to the silence all round them and it is here that an observer on a distant hill has his chance---unseen, unheard, he is at last discounted. This is when someone in the building shows himself, if only for the fraction of a second.

In that eerie I noticed in myself a desire to say more in my report than my military remit allowed me. I wished to persuade the higher command that the abbey was clearly not a defensive position. But my impressions counted for nothing. Also the absence of movement proved nothing either way. I realised that I knew in my heart that the abbey was doomed.

The danger was that some pressure to bomb might gain momentum, and reach even unto the thrones of the Shakespeare-quoting Roosevelt and Churchill.

6

Shudder

The new attack was to be yet another breakthrough (the very word denotes the tactics of rush and too much weight). And it would take off precisely from where my long-distance lenses had been focussed.

Apparently we were in a rush to get to Tome and the job had to be done right now. 'Rome by Christmas' had become an ideology for the highest echelons of command—every day that passed after Christmas Day was overladen with guilt at not being in Rome and of course this became a fresh nail in the coffin of military ingenuity.

We were now in mid-January 1944. Having secured a mere seventy-mile advance in over four months, to the tune of at least 10.000 battle casualties a month, not to mention the sick and shocked, it seemed

logical, in this mood of self-revenge, to try and repeat those figures.

Not only this but the hardest, most closely defended centre of the Gustav Line fortification, namely Cassino, was going to be, of all unilluminated strategies, our centre of attack.

This time our breakthrough would (ideologically speaking) make it possible for the US 2nd Corps, containing our Texan brothers, to cross the Rapido river. As its name suggests, this river was (especially in torrential rain) as fast as the devil, and in winter particularly treacherous. And the rains had started again. The cold was beginning to bite. Yes, this was January, not June.

Our job—that of 46th and 56th divisions—was to make a hole in the 14th Panzer Grenadier Corps that faced us.

So it was that we drove, tyres whirring and slipping in the mud, following white tapes in the dark, to positions as close to Cassino as commensurate with officially declared suicide.

In the dead of night we set down in what appeared to be a very crowded field. We were cheek by jowl with the Texans once more. There was no question

of slit trenches here. We moved into feverishly prepared dugouts of the world war one type. We could stand upright in these---with head room to spare. Mine was the size of a large room. We cut a hole in the top of a biscuit tin and then dug it into the mud wall as a grate for a fire. We twisted more biscuit tins into a chimney that fitted into it and would carry the smoke through the roof. How that roof was made I cannot recollect---perhaps planks but more likely corrugated iron since engineers must have been here before us. I only know we never had a drop of rain inside. We gathered masses of wood and I had that fire blazing white most of the day and night. The walls were soon dry. The puzzle---in view of the incessant shelling we were getting---was that we were allowed to let the chimneys smoke at all.

Every shell that came over made the earthen walls shudder. The lulls in the enemy firing were all the sweeter for being short. The air-burst shells were now so high in the sky (because of our ground-level position) that we rather enjoyed their deafening useless crack. But most of the stuff coming over was heavy 88mm.

We and the Texans renewed our acquaintance and exchanged bully beef for smooth Spam, Players for one of their almost identical Virginia brands. I noticed a certain difference in them. They had seen a lot and I think had begun to wonder what the hell they were doing so far from home. They looked wary now. You could say as an Englishman (admittedly one not quite right in the head) that you were fighting for England in these fields but as to how they were fighting for Texas in one doomed battle after another up a narrow peninsula in the Mediterranean Basin no one had so far given them a clue.

They gazed, they watched, they smoked, they nodded and said something from time to time but their pauses, like those between the shells, were unpredictable. Of course you could have told them that they were fighting for world power—which is what their nation got out of the war. But I don't think that would have been appreciated as an argument for their death. Those once soft-spoken creatures whom we had learned to love would have demurred, I think—preferred to be with their folks again and to let American markets achieve world power by their

natural expansion, not by means of this crazed blood ritual that had fallen in love with its own mistakes.

Our exchanges weren't good humoured as before. One of them seemed offended when I said something like, American spam has converted me to British bully beef. There was this edge to the nerves that afflicted us all---and in them perhaps was the shock of premonition.

Of course our guns were out of action in this vulnerable place, so the enemy could fire without fear of retaliation. But it was the certainty of their bombardments---which must come from a very accurate map reference of our position---that made us ask what we were doing so crowded together, one Corps mixed up with another. One thing we did feel certain about and that was our proximity to the front line. It even crossed our minds in giddy moments that we were actually in that line, though without means of assault or defence.

The only practical reason for being crowded up like this must be the coming attack, planned for about 20th January (this we knew about). But even so you never assembled troops this way, under the enemy's very noses.

Or the idea may have been that, crammed up against the front line, we—a mixed bag of infantry and gunners and perhaps some Engineers—were being held in reserve so as to be ready to pour into a hole made ready for us by that attack. But again, you simply didn't plan battles this way, your guns stayed where they should always be, well behind the committed lines. Even allowing for the freakishness of war, this situation surpassed all manner of guessing among senior as well as junior officers.

For one thing, the dug-outs were not of our own making. I have no recollection of my own men digging. So the Engineers must have been involved---and earthworks on such a scale are noisy and smoky and provoke local curiosity. The material had to be transported---roofs, tarpaulins, stanchions. Italian gossip travelled faster than fire. You didn't have to squeeze it out of anybody, it tumbled out of the mouth and into your ear and the job was done. Italians regularly passed with wonderful nonchalance from the enemy to us and back again. They skirted military positions along paths that meandered unseen and unsuspected in low hills and woodland. Produce

and family news travelled that way. It was better than spies.

Captain H. was nearby. I paid my visits to him at the double, no question here of dodging here and there to avoid the shell with your number on it. And these bombardments were so concentrated, and of such persistence, that we were constantly convinced that they were a softening-up barrage before an enemy attack. But no attacks came.

Captain H. and I found that our chats were short and sweet. I was anxious to get back to my snugery, he to stay in his. And we had little to say these days. 'Our' war against Hitler and nazism seemed to us to have disappeared.

As indeed it had. The astonishing thing to me now is that neither of us even knew about the Allied Conference that had removed 'our' war from the scene, namely the Casablanca Conference of January 1943, eight months before we set foot in Italy.

In that conference President Roosevelt had neatly wiped 'our' war out by abolishing Germany as a nation. Germans were now stripped of their rights as a people, if such a thing can be conceived. They were refused the right even to come to peace terms. They

were to 'unconditionally surrender'. No distinction was from now on to be made between nazis and anti-nazis or between the Jew or gentile. Being Germans all, they were an innately damned people, as they had been in the former genocide, world war one. This opened the door to any atrocity, as it was probably intended to. And indeed in the same conference the fire-bombing of the German cities was conceived, in order to 'break the morale' of the previously German people.

And here Captain H. and I were sitting in a field where men and materials were crazily massed together under bombardment, with no means of movement, as if even strategic meaning had departed from war.

In this kind of military position no records can be kept. War records cover supply lines and their arrival or not, and of course attacks. But the kind of limbo we were in excites no annals. Our song We're here because we're here because we're here said it best.

Meanwhile we were getting more and more reinforcements. A new second lieutenant joined my troop and we shared my dugout. It wasn't good that he

came straight into relentless shelling like this. It was too much of a blind fall. Even the boom of our own heavy artillery way back made him jump and then he would half-smile in frightened apology. One day a shell came within yards of the dugout and we threw ourselves down in a corner close to the fire and I found myself on top of him. He was trembling all over with an unusual violence—like that of a fever more than fright.

To have your nerves go at the start means you can't get your self-navigation in proper shape thereafter. We were very lucky that one time, favoured by the fact that the blast went forward of us. But he couldn't take account of degree and nuance. He had a pale soft skin, still a boy, and we used to sit and talk quietly in the lulls but I think he couldn't accommodate himself to the idea of people blowing each other up. I think it deeply contradicted the life he'd had before, perhaps a village life where everything was ordered and familiar. Even in the lulls he was on guard inside himself. In this state he was sent out on his first F.O.O. mission and was killed almost at once.

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There was suddenly a sense all round us of bustle and movement at short notice. We and the Texans were separated.

The attack started on the night of January 17th , three days earlier than planned. Our two divisions got across the Garigliano close to the Cassino defile. But Kesselring threw in his 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadier divisions and this was a poor omen for the risky Texan assault across the Rapido.

The rains and that river did for our Texan brothers. The river swelled up furiously. The two Texan regiments, already battle-exhausted, were lost almost in entirety. Their Bailey bridges were swept away behind them and they were left stranded in darkness on the northern bank without any avenue of escape and in mud and near freezing rain under shell-fire all night, exposed in a water-logged trap with neither supplies nor any chance to prepare defence positions, and the few that lived to see the morning must have been near demented.

Mark Clark was indicted in Texas after the war for this but it is difficult to indict commanders who know no other military doctrine than meeting strength with strength, head-on, especially if they can point

to this doctrine as having come from above. He was exonerated.

This Texan assault was rebuffed by only five German battalions from the 1st Parachute Regiment, crack fighting troops.

The real trouble that dogged Mark Clark was that he had no battle experience. It is said that General Eisenhower, chief of American operations in Europe, was furious at Clark for insisting on getting his army before he had done a proper stint of battle. But he gave Clark an army just the same—perhaps in consideration of the fact that he himself had no battle experience of any kind, even a view of it through binoculars.

7

Byzantium

We were pulled out of the line—as ‘broken reeds’. This was how Mark Clark put it. His use of such expressions caused resentment but he was telling the truth. It was decided that we needed not just a short leave in Rome or Naples, nor even just a long leave, but one far away from any theatre of war.

By marvellous degrees the air ceased to vibrate, boom and whistle with shells departing or arriving, until finally not so much as a distant bombing could be heard.

The further we drew away, in convoy down to Italy’s southern coast and then by ship, the more did life seem to have slipped back, by means of a naughty quirk of time, into peace, with all its comforts artfully provided.

Desires stirred that were thought lost, irretrievable. Having reached glittering Taranto—emphasis on the first syllable—at Italy's heel, having glimpsed the deep blue water we were to cross for an excitingly unknown destination which we knew to be Port Said, we began to realise that at the heart of every great war there is a tourist agency at work, an agency so punctilious, so exhaustive in its knowledge of schedules, that no lay tourist agency could possibly rival it.

Thomas Cook was out-cooked in every matter—accommodation (varied subtly according to the delicate shades of rank), food (no longer 'rations'), attentions of the most civil kind proffered by local populations, as well as entertainment both personal and public, all funded and provided so discreetly that putting your hand in your pocket was now a pleasure because needed so rarely, as for example (dare I draw the curtain aside?) in the case of whorehouses.

Suddenly, from having been the chosen targets of every sort of detonation we were the flattered and cosseted and above all unpaying guests of that very

army that had marched us into the shit and intended to march us back into it again.

We leaned over the side of our anchored troopship to look down on Port Said as small boats clustered below containing youths lithe from sea and sun holding up melons and trinkets, just as if we could access them. The vast port was brassy and dirty and its noises were those you wanted to hear. This was the 'middle' East, bustling with a poverty that looked like riches to us because the beggars were bullet and bomb free and all they wanted was cigarettes and baksheesh. And spring was coming and the warm damp harbour air, laden with spicy smells, was a silent reassurance that to be at ease in limb and heart was all right.

We clattered and bumped down the runway with our kit and marched to a train bound for Cairo that was unashamedly commodious with little mirrors and thick-pile plushy seats in each compartment, and when it set off it made the right clattering sound on the track in celebration of childish trips to the sea. When at last Cairo appeared in the distance I had one of those special déjà vue experiences that say 'You

were born here and are only returning' but you can't see how.

The city was a vast officers' mess set partly in gaudy palmy lofty rooms, as in Shepheard's Hotel, and palm-tree gardens with fountains and orderly mellow-yellow streets of houses with balconies, among which you would find your discreetly unadvertised hotel, room booked, service readily available, a foyer too tiny yet a source of everything you needed to know.

I sat in the huge Shepheard's lounge and found myself one of an astonishing democracy of officers of every rank with top brass walking by you and gazing about them indulgently. You were suddenly in a class, a class that had not long since ruled England and was now the effective proxy government of a bustling Coptic cum Muslim world whose king was at once in rebellion against and amenable to an arrangement which in peacetime he would have called oppressively colonial.

And indeed this city was suave and bustling in a last celebration of empire, and without the faintest fear of any competitive American ambitions in that direction. Americans in Cairo were strikingly, you

could say abundantly, absent—given the multitudes of them elsewhere.

Yet an American presence was suggested. It sat, a mellow easy authority, in the senior officers whose life was here and who said 'rarely' for 'really' and 'cawfee' for 'coffee' and made 'you' rhyme with 'er' or 'awe'. It was in their charmingly bland self-assurance, visible in their biologically relaxed gestures, their easy-going rigour of comportment which also included sternness. And it told you they ruled the world.

However, they didn't rule the world. They didn't even rule Britain. For a century and a half they had shared life with a strong middle class and a huge working one, neither of which had much time for this other top class, if only because it wasn't top any more.

Yet it was top. It declared itself, without fuss, to be top. Their fascinating grace of manner said they were top even while you didn't believe it. They carried in themselves the last English authority, and clearly it would not, together with other things English, survive the war.

So top did these English people feel ('English' because they never had Welsh or Irish or Scottish accents) that they seemed to have finished altogether with Britain. The faery islands, made faery by queen Elizabeth 1, who dreamed of a new spiritual empire that would take in all Europe, undivided by schism and sect, had become too small for them, more in spirit than anything else.

And that was why, in the last years of the nineteenth century, they had begun to look for American heiresses. There was an almost indecent rush to marry them.

And Winston Churchill, the beloved leader chosen by all of us on the Left, was the progeny of such a marriage! His was a great Whig family, and such families, acting in unison, had once been so powerful that they could remove and install even monarchs. They were not to be sniffed at even now, in the famous 'darkest hour'.

So here in Cairo, in this Last Byzantium, we the battle-soiled had a chance to stew in refined juices brewed by an aristocracy that could no longer bear the grim industrial smoke-hole that Britain had become (and which had given birth to us). And though

this Cairo was celebrating lost English authority she was also passing that authority down to those like myself whom they would call, embarrassed, the masses. And that authority was all the more convincing and generous because they didn't know their power had passed, much less that it would.

And the absence of Americans helped this beguiling fairy tale. And since you saw nothing in Cairo to contradict it, you enjoyed it, the city being both the last jewel in the imperial crown and a backwater splendid and loud with a pomp that must be costing a fearful amount of money—for a country that, far from being the world power it had been only yesterday, was frankly bankrupt.

Defiant, Shepheard's had an air of unassailable pomp and circumstance in which young shoulders with only a single pip on them rubbed shoulders that flashed red and were keeping the British empire safe, even though, of all the grim signs that the war had already made clear, the clearest was the future demise of that empire.

Yet these men had in large degree been running the war. It was they who had given us officer cadets our training. Their dulcet bland accents had

dominated our mock battles. They were our lecturers, our senior officers. It was they who were best at talking to the Americans (Chamberlain had even suggested an Atlantic Union before the war). And it was they who saw to every detail of our grand Byzantine tour, which went as smoothly as a show at the Palladium.

We went to the Pyramids and were served by tall Nubians at the King Minos hotel. We strolled the Cairo streets and took gharry rides. One morning I happened to be leaning over the balcony of my hotel room when I saw just below me, at the window of a house opposite, a girl with long hair, and she was smiling at me. I smiled back. We made an appointment in sign language. We were to meet below, in the vestibule of her apartment block, at four o'clock that afternoon.

When the time came we went straight upstairs to her apartment and I was introduced to her parents. We had a polite tea in the sitting room and then the girl and I went for a sedate walk. We chatted and we strolled. I now had one of those patrician fly-whisks with horse-hair at the end and this I whisked here and there. She was a plump young lady and the war

provided her with a feast of marital possibilities--- here was so ardent a believer in the Last Byzantines that almost anything British and commissioned would do for her. My balcony of course changed personnel every few days. And since she expected decorum to be strictly observed this was probably what she got from successive officers. From behind her shutters she could make her choice and hopefully one day she would clap her eyes on her rightful man. My hunch was that she would marry a local merchant.

I met an English nurse in Shepheard's. We shared a table in the drinks lounge. Nurses were the best people to know because they understood something of the forward lines. Our conversation was easy and agreeable and no doubt if I could hear it again it would strike me as very much English of a former time, implying a kind of frank reserve, strikingly calm, a particular natural alchemy you get wherever there is world power.

She took a photo of me in the Battery Gardens, a cigarette hanging from a corner of my mouth, the eyes narrowed against the smoke, a chic posture of the time. We went for our gharry rides and at night sat under hanging lights in the garden of the officers'

club. At the end of my stay we said good bye with one light kiss on the cheek and looked at each other with a certain regret. We might have fitted as lovers but it would have been lustre-less. Friendship would have been good. She glanced at me in a solicitous way, thinking of the lottery of death perhaps. I wondered afterwards if she and other nurses had been planted, asked to 'keep an eye' on the youngest officers. If so it was a good civilised idea.

If I look at that photo today, cracked and brutalised, I see that a certain change had taken place in me, one I was unaware of at the time because it was so deep. In it I am gazing straight into the nurse's eyes.

The way my cap is tilted and my dress uniform sits on me so comfortably (no formal Sam Browne belt) and that cigarette hangs so suavely in the corner of my mouth, making the eyelids close a little against the smoke in a gaze that is pleasantly, jokingly quizzing—I am gazing at the nurse whom I like so much, since she is taking that photo.

The cool placid Battery gardens in which we stand are civilisation itself and at last I am a fully paid-up member of its latest war against

itself. Yes, I've been absorbed by the war at last, made one of its own. My mad wedding is festive yet also bitter sweet, like the smell of apples and fermenting wine in the autumn months of Italy, that go together with falling leaves.

The photo speaks this so eloquently. My dress uniform is like my own specially tailored suit. Indeed it was specially tailored at Austin Reed's. I remember looking through the window at Regent's Street far below and recognising giddily, as the tailor pinned here and there, that I was saying good bye to myself. And now, it seemed, I had recovered myself. I fitted in. The Last Byzantium had worked its charms.

* * *

We went in convoy across the Sinai desert which stretched like an eternal garden before us, its wadis gleaming with stones shaped and polished with careful deliberation by the sky, a sky that gazed and knew. These dried-up rivers had become endless avenues where you felt God was born, this being your first acquaintance with a silence that spoke to you.

We slept under the trucks in the implacable hot noon air, and moved only at night. I remember a

wooden signpost in the middle of the desert marked simply 'To Baghdad', and how I stood gazing up at it. I resolved to go there one day and a few years after the war I did, to teach at its university.

Our convoy ended in Palestine, another jewel that required our military presence, this time to prevent trouble between Judah and Islam. We settled down in Tel Aviv, vacated no doubt by other troops hardly a day before. I recall sitting in a shaded cool apartment hotly furnished with carpets on the wall, the blinding sunlight squeezing through the shutters. My hostess is interesting and we are talking books, and some politics.

Jews said of Arabs and Arabs said of Jews, They are an ignoble people. The Jewish argument was that the Arabs had no modernity in them, and the Arab argument was that the Jews had. But it was a mild diffident thing, this rivalry, there wasn't yet the mutual demonisation of after years. At that time they lived side by side just as they did in Baghdad when I was later there; and just as they did in Spain before Ferdinand and Isabella banished them five hundred years ago, breaking up a three-part medieval discussion that might have led to a civilisation of

three religions that marvelled at and increased each other.

The next stop was Beirut where we found French restaurants too good for us to appreciate, and cafes where you could sit under the awning for hours with the cool wash of the sea close by. And here at last was a brothel For Officers Only (more by fact of possession than decree), furnished and presented with tact and taste where there were clever political discussions and laughter and the apportioning of sex to a time after, not before, the discussions and coffee and laughter, so that it drew its juices somewhat from those pleasures. We went there every day as one would to friends, and sat under the tranquil whirring fans with the coffee cups clinking and the girls rustling to and fro in a sea of giggles as Madame spoke politics to us in her measured French.

We returned to our tents and transport and this time we stopped at Damascus with its pearl-clear stream bubbling through the street, and we ate huge strawberries and cream. We officers were taken to a local air strip and one by one went up in an Auster, sitting in the second cockpit as the pilot did stunts

and invited us to take over the joy-stick and tip the wings. We swooped down over our own camps to within yards of the upturned bored faces. We dived endlessly and looped the loop and travelled upside down, hanging from the cockpit by straps. I remember seeing below a dark figure in a white loincloth behind a wooden plough drawn by a single ox in a brown field and feeling I would like to talk to him and what a pity this thing I was in travelled so fast and so far above. I took over the controls, that is the joystick, and when at the end of the flight, the pilot jumped down onto the tarmac he said with the winning warmth of those who find travelling half a mile or more above the earth without any sensation of speed thrilling, 'I could teach you to fly in a week'.

While in Syria we learned that our two divisions had been transferred to the British Eighth army, which meant dumping our earlier attitudes of contempt for the Eighth army and replacing them with a sense of bemused self-estrangement.

What we resented about the Eighth army was, apart from the obvious fact that it wasn't the Fifth, all the crap publicity that had accrued to it in the North African desert because of its commander General

Montgomery who wore coloured scarves and berets and seemed to us to blow his trumpet too much. Not that we knew a thing about him. Like all other army commanders he was entirely remote from his men. That must be so. There is no time for a commander to travel up and down his lines exhorting thousands of men through his Tannoy system, apart from the fact that soldiers hate to be sped into battle by rhetoric.

Also the proposed Western Front, which we knew Montgomery was due to lead, made us jealous. 'Our' (the Eighth army's) 7th Armoured division had already left us to prepare for it, just as the American Fifth army had lost its US 82nd Airborne division to the same cause.

Yes, Monty would soon be running Operation Overlord (notice the truculent big-scenario title), but this had its plus side because we in the Eighth army, once abandoned by him, would be able to jettison its irritating glamour.

For instance, while encamped near Damascus we got a directive from him which we thought typical of his cockiness, a directive insisting that we do gym every morning at 0700hrs. under officer supervision.

We, both officers and men, scoffed at it and did nothing. What we overlooked was that Montgomery had left Italy many weeks before and had nothing to do with it. But in military life that sort of thing doesn't signify. You go on blaming him just the same.

When I met Montgomery after the war I found him one of the least cocky people I ever clapped eyes on. He couldn't help speaking his mind—all the time. And this fact alone was enough to get him his cocky reputation, in high places and low. For instance, the first words he addressed to me were, Never trust a journalist. As our host at the table ran two hundred newspapers and one or two of his London editors were present it seemed quite appropriate for Montgomery to say what he thought. What would be the point of saying it if they weren't there?

Since army commanders were so remote from us, we made them up. The one and only time we saw top brass was when we assembled in an open Italian field one day under a splendid hot morning sun and a tiny plane flew out of the sky and landed a few hundred yards away, containing our very own king George VI.

He was whisked before us in a jeep, seated on a special little platform that had been made for him,

and when he jumped down the hand-full of waiting generals rushed forward to greet him. There was our divisional commander whom we knew vaguely as 'Ginger' even though he was Ginger's successor. And there was General McCreery, our Corps commander, perhaps the only commander in the Italian arena who knew what he was doing (he protected us against any of Clark's battle plans that seemed to expose us unduly), and he had several MCs from the first world war. And now he leapt round the royal jeep like a child dropped in fairyland, spellbound, while our divisional commander Ginger—or rather his successor—stood there stolidly showing everybody how deeply he was unimpressed by anybody but himself.

The king was dressed in summer khaki and shorts and his knees were very white. He carried a little cane. We sent up three cheers for him as he gazed about him. He talked with the generals for a time, looking very serious and to the point, and then he remounted, settling himself on the platform once more and placing a piece of beige cashmere over his knees against the sun with a fastidious little pat which put a special hush of fascination on us because it seemed to come from a deep deep past that we also

belonged to, he being the face and frame of our country and perhaps a reassurance, even a promise, that we still had one.

It was an intelligent idea for him to appear out of the blue, not take a parade or inspect us. Those who devised the visit knew well that he and he alone could make us feel we had someone watching out for us, quite separate from politics. His older brother Edward, whom a lot of us felt had been ousted from the throne in a rigged abdication because of his vast popularity, had been on a par for us with Gracie Fields who sang Down Our Allie and the American black singer Paul Robeson—they each and all rooted for the poor. Also this present King George and his queen stayed in London during the blitz and visited the bomb sites next morning, so they had become 'one of us'.

Sad that despite being our head of state he was excluded from the war conferences by our two republican allies. Not that we noticed it. The conferences came and went, like the leaders in them, and our kings and queens didn't, thank God. But it wasn't done for us to be overtly pro-royal. The matter had to do with feelings.

Most of us felt that the king belonged to us as we belonged to him in a not quite earthly connection too subtle for our times.

My no-longer-girlfriend's photo in my pocket was decidedly cracked and faded now, hardly more than millions of dots. Stare at these dots as I might they no longer captured her. I kept its tatters in my pocket just the same. She was surely many ardent copulations ahead of me and I realised she had become a reminder for me of what I could only see as images from a past that was unattainable because it had never happened.

8

Detonation

All the way across Mesopotamia and Palestine and the Lebanon we picked up news about Cassino.

We were hungry for any detail, not least because of an anxious suspicion that we might be called back there any minute. In fact battle news came to us faster and seemed better informed than it ever had on the battlefield.

At the back of my mind there was always the Benedictine abbey, a tapestry hung low in the sky, so impregnable and everlasting that it looked fragile.

It was chiefly, we heard, the commander of the New Zealand Corps, General Freyberg (described by his second-in-command as having neither brains nor imagination) who clamoured most for its bombing. Having won the VC in the 1914 war, as well as knowing Winston Churchill personally, he was a man to be

feared even by General Alexander (whom the second-in-command described as 'a flashy ignoramus'). For both Alexander and Clark the bombing they knew to be without rhyme or reason became a political necessity. They had to consider what would happen to their careers should Intelligence, by the remotest of chances, be wrong.

American bombers already had a bad name for inaccuracy after persistently attacking a small town in error for Cassino a month or two previously. Venafro was the town, and the headquarters of the American VI Corps was on its outskirts. There were fifty or so American casualties from the first bombings. And three months later, having been told to get their map-reading right, the pilots again missed Cassino and again bombed Venafro, this time so accurately that they caused the death of 96 of their own soldiers and 140 civilians, with hundreds of wounded. The place was reduced to rubble.

We on the ground never, as far as I know, requested air support, it being within our power as soldiers, even at as low a level of command as mine, to politely decline the offer should it come through when we were forming up for an attack.

I don't remember a single battle where air support was involved. Battles are too localised and mobile for any effective support, let alone from the air. Planes are here one instant and gone the next, and too far up for any but the most extended targets. Although I now read about twenty, fifty sorties having taken place at various stages of the Italian campaign I don't remember seeing or hearing a single one of them.

Fighter planes were a different kettle of fish. They kept German bombers off, which is why I don't remember a single one of them either.

* * *

In the bombing of Cassino and its abbey on February 15th 1944 many bombs went astray, some of them on Freyberg's own Indian Division. There were about twenty casualties from these strays, none of them fatal. General Mark Clark, seventeen miles away from Cassino at his trailer headquarters, had sixteen bombs planted in his front garden, so to speak.

A great cheering and gleeful throng of soldiers and nurses from behind the lines gathered to witness that bombing---apparently everyone knew exactly, to the second, when it was going to take place. The

fireworks display was not to be missed because, like all of our plans to punch yet another hole in the enemy line, it would beyond doubt open the road to Rome and finish off the Germans for good.

Whereas that bombing turned our subsequent strategy into a prolonged funereal calamity.

It was planned to synchronise with vital movements on the ground. The commander of the Indian Division (no less than the gentleman who more than anyone else had instigated the bombing) was to move into the rubble of the abbey the moment the last wave of bombers had passed. He was to receive notice of the first wave from air command, and order his men to the start line. But no such notice came. The first he knew of the bombing was when the bombs fell. He rushed out of his command post asking what the hell the noise was. As for his start line he was nowhere near it. And you cannot assemble battalions on their start line after the event.

In other words he knew less about the timing of the bombing than the watching bloodthirsty festive crowds.

As to his advance on the rubble of the abbey it was thus delayed a whole day, during which time the

German 1st Parachute Regiment moved comfortably into their new impregnable quarters. His subsequent attack on those quarters was seen off with ease.

That is the trouble with bombing missions---they raise an impressive hell in a second and problems for years. This is why the foot soldier is rarely heartened by raids from the air. They are over-destructive. They bomb the house you want to move into, destroy the roads your supplies must come up on. And they may rob you of a vital source of succour and information---civilian friendship.

The front-line soldier is only 1 in 7 of an army. The rest of that army is there to sustain, supply and if necessary hospitalise him. Yet in strategies that include bombing, and even in many that do not, that soldier is the last person to be considered. He cannot take part in your bomber pilot's drama in the air, as the bomber pilot cannot take part in the drama of a speck on the ground.

Only monks were in the abbey when it was blown to pieces—and apparently two children who couldn't be evacuated because raising them a few inches made them scream with agony and no sedation was available (they were both dying, a boy and a girl).

The stricken abbey was now an unbeatable place for both observation and defence, a marriage which is deadly indeed for the attacker. Our friends who rained terror from the skies had provided the enemy with a positive bee-hive of impregnable bunkers---as well as the moral right to occupy those still consecrated fragments.

Naturally all this news sounded to our ears like home sweet home. But there was more deadly stuff to come. In order to exact revenge on the crassness of the Cassino bombing it was now decided in a kind of hara-kiri mood to altogether smash the town of Cassino, and thus turn not simply the summit of that hill but every inch of its southern slope into a buzzing fortress.

On March 15th 1944 a huge allied bombardment took place—1400 bombs from the air (1000 tons-worth) and 190.000 shells from the artillery. And the idea behind it was the same as that behind all previous bombardments and assaults, namely 'to dislodge the enemy in and around Cassino'. It provided them, on the contrary, with a lodging more secure than any before.

Just three German battalions crawled out of their holes again and poured down lethal fire on the poor devils (New Zealanders this time) trying to cross the Rapido (yet again?) after their first Bailey bridges and even the replacement ones were destroyed, such that on March 20th General Alexander, suddenly appalled by the casualty rate, decided to give the New Zealanders just a day and a half to regain their positions or withdraw.

And indeed they withdrew, on March 23rd, but so badly mauled that the New Zealand Corps could not be said to exist any more. It was formally disbanded and its remnants distributed to other units.

We thought, well, this must certainly be the end of frontal attacks against a proven unbeatable line but no. In the prevailing aberrant logic of the Italian campaign the punishment meted out by such a small German force had to be requited a third time by incurring even more casualties on our own side.

It was now the turn of the valiant Polish Corps (the presence today of the Polish cemetery just north of Cassino is living testimony). But valour was impotent to turn a thrice-doomed strategy.

That attack happened on May 11th. The Eighth army to the right flank were going to put in a simultaneous drive towards the Anzio bridgehead in order to relieve that beleaguered landing. The British 13th Corps were going to advance on Sant' Angelo in Theodice, close to the road to Rome and the Liri defile.

Again there was a massive artillery bombardment, though, as if in blushful contrition, the bombing from the air was now concentrated (naturally to no avail whatever, destroying only roads and ditches) on the German supply lines. Having not realised their objectives in the earlier bombings, it was simple logic to attack other targets as if they had.

Those attacking Poles could be seen from just about every house, now turned to rubble, in Cassino. So you could neither get through the town nor take it from a flank.

So at last Cassino was left to the Germans. It became a town of ghostly patrols by night—these would brush each other in ruined kitchens and corridors and shoot point blank. And the German defenders, compared with the sum total of the forces thrown against them a tiny band of men, remained.

And, just think, it suddenly occurred to the top command to allow the French commander General Juin to do what he (and we) had always said was the only ppractical one.

Without fuss or fury he followed the plan he had tried unsuccessfully---in that jeep---to bend Mark Clark's ear with seven months of blood sacrifice ago.

Having quickly got his Free French Corps across the mountains Juin sent his Goums, fleet of foot in mountains as no one else, on a separate curving action towards the Liri defile that contained the road to Rome. This silent and unsupported action barred the Germans from their only avenue of escape.

But, by one of war's terrible ironies, that Goum action opened the defile containing the road to Rome to guess whom? No less than General Mark Clark who, instead of sticking to the strategy he had been ordered to follow, slipped off the road and into Rome as its American Liberator.

General Alexander (once described as a 'fifth wheel') complained bitterly upwards about this unmilitary conduct but no reprimand, least of all a court indictment, came forth, it being a rule of this

particular war that if by pulling a fast one you made headlines no one would complain.

What actually happened was far worse than a mere unmilitary change of direction. The moment the Goums opened the way to Rome for him Clark urged his own General Truscott, commander of the Anzio operation and perhaps his best general, to break out of his bridgehead eastwards and cut off the Germans in and north of Cassino. Truscott did this swiftly. In fact he cut off a great part of the German army. But just as he was about to do his mopping up operation an order came down from Clark that he should pull out at once and turn his nose to Rome. Truscott refused to believe it. He checked with army HQ at once. But there was no one of authority to speak to. Clark had gone on his liberation quest. So withdraw Truscott had to, leaving thousands of Germans to fight another day---against us who were on our way.

* * *

We disembarked at Taranto, clattering down the gangway fitter and brighter and more boisterous than when we had clattered up it.

And we even got more leave, this time in Rome, now that by courtesy of our former commander it was

ready to receive us. I stayed at the Hotel Inghilterra. The hall porter looked after our sexual as well as tourist needs without complacency or connivance or implied disdain, his born Roman tact turning it into a simple market operation, with the name of the lady, the address and the price set out clearly on a piece of paper (not that anything is this simple for a Roman—he set the price down with a special dark contempt known only to his city).

From the Piazza di Spagna I took a rocking, sliding, forward-falling ride in one of the city's tiny canvas-topped cabs in which a handful of people stood crammed body to body clinging to an unsteady steel frame. It was an ideal personal introduction medium. Should a woman press harder than each collective free fall justified it was a come-on sign. The pope forlornly appealed to the women of Rome to behave with more discretion, meaning that they shouldn't perhaps open their legs at the drop of a hat. But how did he know what they were privately doing? To judge by their behaviour in fully-dressed encounters you could think it was going to end that way but it didn't necessarily or even mostly. What the pope was unable to add, because it might have

seemed an indiscretion, was that the women of Rome were virtually starving and had to feed their menfolk and children somehow.

Well, at the end of this little cab journey in search of what I understood would be many hours of mutual languorous self-indulgence, I found two ladies in an eighteenth-century setting. They greeted me at the door of a large apartment with tall windows and parquet floors, both looking not only like school teachers but spinsters. They smiled and invited me in for some ersatz coffee. We sat chatting and the hours passed and any thought of the mingling of seed, let alone hours of it, was no more in the air than were smells of roasting meat. They were thin, they were anxious. I paid them what I had been told to pay, we shook hands with great friendliness after such a nice long talk, and I once again did the free-fall journey. And I thanked the hall porter—and this time his Roman thoughts were wrong.

Somewhere north of Rome, well east, high in the hills where thick snow and ice were in the air, we settled in a townlet that treated us not as guests but sons and brothers. We had never eaten so well in all our lives. Where the food came from, it being an

amalgam of our rations and local cellar stores, I was never told and never enquired about.

One of my gunners who had a cheerful placid face unmarked by F.O.O. duties told me that a local couple had adopted him. He was in their house for all meals. They doted on him because they had no children, he said. He was the son they had always dreamed about. And then one day he asked me a question—The man can't have children and they've begged me to give his wife a child and what should I do? The woman had quietly opened the door of their bedroom and shown him the double bed, and on the wall at its head was a *madonnina* with a candle flame before her, such as you saw in every such bedroom, and at every wayside.

I said, Give them their child. And as far as I know (he never spoke of it again) this is what he did.

And all this took place in two weeks.

No one could say we weren't ripe for more war. The fitness we exuded cried out to be used. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, we were told to move. We stealthily dressed and when we were kitted up to go, with the engines revving outside, I tapped on my host's door, behind which no fewer than four slept in

the one bed. They blinked at me with bewilderment, thinking it was an alarm. I said good bye with a smile and all they did was blink at me more from within their deep Italian dreams, and next morning I swear none of them remembered my little visit.

The familiar feathers in the belly returned quite as if war had a direct line to the nervous system.

The press rooms, those chief engines of war, were meanwhile being festive about the 'liberation' of Rome. In a ghoulish gloating language of pure illusion they described how the Fifth army was 'racing' and even 'storming' up Italy in pursuit of an enemy that was 'fleeing' for dear life under the 'pounding' of an 'air blitz'---a retreat so swift that 'our boys' couldn't keep up with them, though the said boys were of course 'at grips' with them, 'clashing' with them and 'smashing through' or else 'locked' with them in fight.

Of all languages this is one which can never capture battle in its truth, and of course it isn't meant to. The function of press rooms in war is to conceal, camouflage and corrupt the truth when it threatens the reader's determination to go on with

that war. They must keep the story of the war rolling. Without it no war can run its course.

Press rooms thought and wrote in exactly the same manner as we did. Their language was grandiose in a manner that fitted war-dementia perfectly. So we needed it. We needed to see ourselves as 'getting to grips with' and 'clashing with' the enemy. That language made us feel momentarily, if pathetically, exalted. In its necessarily shallow light we saw ourselves as 'running the show', deciding on whether to rush the enemy with tanks or machine gunfire or bombs from the air. The giddy funfair that newspapers turned the war into suited us. Above all, the very ignorance that underlay newspaper reports was ours too. We really did think that at this moment, with Rome taken, Jerry was fleeing for all his worth, and that we were chasing him for all ours.

In fact we sleepwalkers now had the Trasimene Line before us, and the Arno Line beyond that, then the Gothic Line and lastly the river Po. These were the traps Field Marshal Kesselring was now preparing (in a mood, surely, of ruse and party game).

He was a singularly fortunate general. He could devise his strategy fully confident that Hitler was

behind him---a luxury no commander on our side could expect. Divide Hitler into three allies each of whom had different designs and Germany would have capsized by 1942.

Stories about how our motley assembly of 'allies' argued and bickered about almost everything trickled down to us on a regular basis. But what did we expect? As between a Britain about to lose its world status, a communist power bent on getting world status and an America impatient to write off the European war zone and move on to its real area of interest in the Far East, where was there room for the single command on which battle, however extended, depends?

As for me, I found myself full of zest for what was to come. I was no longer the one-pip officer who had led a ½-mile-long convoy into a cul de sac. An irksome memory, that—the unhitching of the guns and their laborious reversal, curses all the way down the column such that though I usually drove up and down said column on my motor-bike I now found myself with plenty of paper work to do at the column's head, now the tail.

We travelled north of Rome, skirting the Trasimene lake as Hannibal did nearly two and a half thousand years before. And we set down our guns for another wait, which allowed the feathers to settle into the belly. They became, as before, a constant, even in sleep, which was one of fear's mercies, that there was a way to live with it.

But in the meantime, while we waited, I had a secret debt to settle, in Cassino. I didn't know what it was, only that I must pay that town a visit.

9

Hush

I stood in the great hush. The sound of my Jeep engine died as if it had been sucked into the dead earth. Not a living creature was here, not a bird or footstep. The hill which had contained the town was covered with quick-lime to hide the stench of the dead and it lay like a white shroud fallen on the slope and full of soft mounds. At the top where the abbey had stood was a formidable glowering mass of jagged sullen stone which gave no messages except I am dead.

The moment battles end the Field Hygiene unit (part of the Medical Corps) moves in to count and remove for burial the dead, military and civilian. The Field Hygiene people who moved into Cassino, accustomed though they were to the sight of the fallen, stood in shock and bafflement at what they saw before them.

The road to Rome went silently north into its valley. I heard a slight grating sound and an old lady in black, head covered, came pushing a wheelbarrow along a sad ruined road at the lower eastern point of this hill of debris and dust.

She came within yards of me, looking to neither left nor right, her gaze bitter and mute and closed, her lips pursed in a deeply pallid face. She stared at the rubble before her, looking for whatever she could rescue. Standing at her side, just lately from Beirut, I must have looked an unworthily agile member of that monstrous assembly that was able to bomb monks and monasteries and lay entirely waste a slumbering town that wasn't even on its rightful target programme.

And try as I might to solicit a glance or a smile from her she remained set on her quest for crushed mementoes of her home. I wanted to say something about how senseless war was but I was in uniform, namely war itself. Yet I didn't really understand her bitterness. With the forbidding insensitivity of youth, on which wars wisely depend, I expected her to mourn this vast white shroud together with me, to look up from the death of her

town to interest herself in my youthful khaki-clothed aspiration that all this should come to an end soon.

Worse, I couldn't genuinely perceive what had happened to her. I accepted that all this was dead without knowing what exactly that meant—what the death was that I was always trying to escape, the death that the other second lieutenant, the shuddering one I had thrown myself into a corner of a dugout with, hadn't escaped.

It wasn't that I didn't know what she had lost, all her family perhaps, certainly the home that had been hers since birth, just that I thought it a bagatelle and she knew this.

I was dizzy, standing there, with the dizziness of my own incomprehension. It was as if I had entered this great concourse of the dead and yet remained lively and loquacious in its midst. I felt numbed and the numbness was in every bone and I couldn't return to an earlier time when this numbness was absent because I couldn't remember it, especially that laughing boy our almost daily self-taunting chant was about.

No wonder I had drawn a line under my past, written *finis* under it, before leaving London. I knew

exactly what I was doing then, wouldn't you say? If I was now pondering suicide—an active vigorous and spectacular suicide—wasn't that just one more logical step?

The Italian light brings the most forlorn of scenes to life but it could do nothing for Cassino. The sky, usually so close, so part of everything you did, laid heavy mourning hands on this hill, deepening the silence of the numberless dead under their quick-lime winding sheet.

I didn't yet know that I had come to terrible decisions. Least of all that my thought of graduating as a soldier had only one meaning.

Only slowly did I come to know that I had resolved to die in the campaign that awaited us.

And I would make a mark, I would go out with glory. I didn't know what the glory was to be. But one thing was clear—that my present fitness and stamina were at the service of trying to die.

It would have to be done quickly—I knew we were about to enter the last stage of the Italian operations—I needed to seize my chance and I knew this chance would come, I knew life would fit in with

my resolve because that resolve was so deep and sure and unhesitating.

There was a book much in vogue during the second world war called The Last Enemy. It was by a fighter pilot whose name was Richard Hillary and the Last Enemy was death. It had fascinated us all, back during the Battle of Britain (as the Beaverbrook press christened it) when our fighters were our only defence against a vastly superior nazi bomber force.

All through his book Richard Hillary seemed resolved to fight that last enemy, knowing that this last fight was a first embrace. And he did go down.

I wished to say to myself that, having been enrolled in the brotherhood of killers, I would now do the rightful thing by joining the other brotherhood of the killed, and thus truthfully I would write my own finis on all things visionary and good, in bitter gratitude for my former life that had brought me, as its apex and reward, to this shroud on a hillside whose dead I had managed not to join.

This time I would be mindful of what I did in battle, not in the sense of surviving though. I would be mindful the other way, without attention to the safety of my skin. After all, if there was such a

thing as saving your skin there had to be the reverse.

And there was another reason for suicide. When so much flak has been thrown about, when you have heard that whizzing hot fragment with its little shriek a sufficient number of times you naturally get a sense of yourself as a special and even cherished target. And in the dearth of other attentions this becomes strangely like a tribute.

And your sole worth, as a target for the enemy, must needs impel you, out of defiance, in the end, to offer your breast at last.

* * *

We moved tremulously into the line. All its fateful signs and sounds returned to us fondly and it was like falling into a dream where we shook and stared and recognised and were impotent to leave.

The Italian spring had begun to work its haunting brazen magic. We were some miles from a castle high on a steep hill called Monte Poggiolo (we took names not from the map but the local people). It was our ultimate target.

This action took me into enemy lines for the first time. There are two ways you can find yourself

in enemy lines. You either come on them by mistake, that is you lose yourself, or they suddenly come on you, you look round the new terrain and nothing of it is yours any more and you don't know how it happened.

After some rather sleepless nights full of stop-go moves and no settling down I arrived with my men at the appointed place, a country mansion in the flat of a great valley which stretched before us for at least a mile, rising to steep woodland on all its three sides.

This place was Battalion headquarters. The C.O. told me he was sending a platoon to a smaller house we could see on our right flank. He said I had better go with the platoon because that way I would be more forward, it would give me a better command of the valley, especially the hill that rose before us, at the valley's end.

I moved with my men and the infantry platoon into the second house and there was a lot of excitement in the air. We were expecting to attack. We could see yet one more house on the slope facing us, among trees, a new house, small and neat. And it seemed likely that we would be ordered to attack this. We always assumed that a house that could look

straight across at us was enemy-held. Whether this platoon I was with would attack alone, with no artillery back-up, or be the spearhead of something bigger I didn't yet know.

I climbed to the hay loft for a more secluded look. My signaller below plugged an earphone extension into the radio and brought it up to me so that I could talk to my command post at the gun end.

I was in restless mood, pacing about. I spoke into the mike and pinpointed the map reference of the house ahead. I wished to put a few shells on it to evoke a response in the case of its being occupied. I gave my order: Target...Fire by order...One round gunfire.

I waited for that to be repeated back, then there was a longer wait for the word Ready, which signified that the guns had been loaded.

I said Fire! and almost at once there was a whirring in the air above that grew to a shrill whistle and the first shell landed short of the house, briefly obscuring it in smoke.

When all four shells had landed short I added one hundred yards and once more ordered fire. This time I got a hit on the left side of the roof. I

ordered a final four rounds which fell to one side of the house, close to the walls. Smoke and debris settled down in a stately, almost loving way among the trees.

I sat in the hay loft in a methodical frame of mind quite different from the alarm and anger of my earlier days. I went downstairs, returned to my perch, aching to get a move on, to hell with this waiting and watching game. I wasn't kept waiting long. The Battalion commander at the mansion behind us sent me a runner to say that I must take a section of infantry, seven or eight men, to the very house I had just shelled. I would be the officer in charge.

I called my Battery commander by radio (he had the final responsibility here) and he assured me that the house I was going to occupy was safe, therefore my well-armed infantry escort was just a safeguard. I must go in daylight, he said, 'soonest'. Once in the house, he said, stay put.

So, kitted up and ready, we started off across the valley. With my signallers we were eleven men in all. We didn't take much trouble concealing ourselves. I trusted the Intelligence I'd just received. The men followed me in single file, pale,

their eyes intent on the ground. I told them what I knew and in answer they spoke my thoughts—why, if the top of this valley was unoccupied, was I being sent up like a recce patrol, that is in strength?

Once we were close to the house we concealed ourselves behind trees. I saw a movement at the windows which I thought was careless enough to be a civilian's, so I walked forward and pushed the door open. My Battery commander was right. Standing there looking at me in alarm were five Italians.

The tidy dining room where they stood was identical to that of every Italian home—a sideboard, a big central table under a pile cloth and a narrow kitchen visible through a doorway. There were three women and two men. They stared at me and I stared at them, then we smiled and nodded. I gestured behind me to indicate there were other soldiers outside and in the Italian manner they beckoned us all in as if it were a normal Italian day. My patrol trudged in and the nodding went on all over again as helmets came off and arms and packs were put down while chairs were scraped across the floor and others brought in. Outside there was an uncertain silence. It was just as if the trees told us things.

Have the Germans been here? was my first noun-and-gesture question. Yes, they nodded, glad to give information, they left early this morning (then how could news of their departure have reached Intelligence so soon?). Where did they go? I asked. Oh, they said with sweeping gestures indicating far away, in vehicles—*macchine*.

The women took our army rations and began cooking us a meal, which we ate at the table with knives and forks and spoons. Our bully beef was fried with vegetables to make a padellata of just about everything, and we also had soup. I spoke particularly to a young couple who appeared to be the owners of this house. They were excited by our visit because it indicated, they thought, that the front line had already moved through them.

The other Italians left, a fact that troubled me. I eyed their departing backs. When I asked where they had gone the couple said they lived at another house further up the hill. Then they brought out wine and we toasted each other, thirteen mouths in all. I asked the couple, Were you here this morning when—? and I made shell-fire gestures. They said, Yes, yes, quite as if I had sent over clouds of festive

balloons. I tapped myself and said, *Io, io!*, meaning that it was me who took their roof off. I couldn't believe what I was saying—do you tell the people who very narrowly escape death at your hands that the hands were yours? Was this new soldier in me a bloody idiot? I couldn't believe their degree of calm. But this is the Italian way—to get to the next thing quick and, if it is a good thing, you forget the old thing however bad.

The couple told me that the Germans had behaved very well. And we all nodded at that comforting cliché—After all, they're human like all of us. The young man still gazed at me as if my shells had done him a power of good. He must surely have been relieved to see us sitting at his table happily, our shelling duties safely over.

I asked if I might go upstairs, holding up my binoculars to show them why, and they nodded of course, of course. I closed the door on them all and tiptoed up the stairs which had mercifully been spared by my shells. On the first landing I saw the open sky. Almost half the roof had been ripped away. The bedroom wall had collapsed, and a tree's boughs swayed ever so gently in its place. The carpet of

what must be the master bedroom was covered with smashed tables and mirrors and ceramic pots and jewellery and perfume bottles, while the bed-cover lay under broken roof slates. I was astonished at the force behind these 'light' twenty-five-pounders.

I walked into a smaller room at the rear, intact and quiet. I sat on the bed, keeping to the shadows, and brought the binoculars to my eyes. When I had focussed them I saw I was looking down a village street, most of it obscured by trees. Beyond this was the squat tower of a church and the corner of a square. It was very close.

And all of a sudden a man strolled out into the open, and he was a German, unarmed. He was perhaps seventy yards away. I was fascinated by his tin hat, curling round the ears. I withdrew into the shadows and watched him strolling up and down. Then he tired of it and disappeared. I tiptoed downstairs and opened the dining-room door. I shushed my men quiet. Jerry's still here, I told them.

I whispered to my signaller to get on to my command post, and when I was through to the Battery commander—the major with warm eyes who had sent me on my first F.O.O. job—I gave him my position in

code and told him, The Germans are here, not many yards off. He made an astonished *What?* and quickly said, Put sentries out right away, you shouldn't be there at all, come back as soon as it's dark and keep on your toes. I asked him won't our line draw level to us? shouldn't I stay? and he said urgently no, no, come back. It seemed I was attracting attention at Battalion level for the first time. I thought I knew why—it was my calm. I was witnessing it too, my own calm. Because I really did want to stay. Presumably to be blown up by our own troops that evening.

I didn't put sentries out. Instead I placed a couple of men by the door, inside—the door was luckily on our side of the house, not the enemy's. And that was how we waited, in full kit, arms at the ready, for what seemed days, in silence, watchful. I had half a mind to go upstairs again and spy. But something warned me, don't put out mental waves Jerry might pick up, they can feel you looking sometimes, stay where you are. The couple moved about in awed silence. Not a sound came from the rest of the village. Slowly the sun began going down. And then shadows formed outside. Jerry would send out patrols soon so I decided to move before it was quite dark.

We left the house one by one. This time there was no clanking of belt on gun, no talk at all. The couple was silently regretful, as well they might be, seeing that in fact the front line had not yet passed through them.

We got back to Battalion headquarters in record time and fresh orders were waiting for me. I was to take my three men to join another company altogether—A Company. This was commanded by a man I was to work with happily and often. Everyone called him The Major. He was a regular soldier and had come up from the troops, and his men were as thick as thieves with him, in a conspiracy of loyalty unto death.

It looked as if I was joining the spearhead of an attack. The Major when I joined him next day said he needed to take up a position right below the mighty Monte Poggiolo. We moved up platoon by platoon, running one sunlit tree to the next, with stiff high grass at our feet. We crouched when Spandau fire spat out, making its great clatter from the top of the hill. We climbed sideways as this afforded us best cover and at last we saw the colossal shell-proof monster above us with its

pouting stone walls that must be a metre or more thick.

We spotted a big farmhouse and ran for it. Inside there were sacks of barley, maize, huge onions and aubergines, donkey-panniers of potatoes, grapes that had shrivelled, a stained prodigal wine-press and urns of spoiled milk. Grain was spilled all over the floor. We took up positions in the dark places behind the windows, treading quietly. The rest of the Company came up in sections, at intervals.

When The Major arrived, a big cheerful moustached man with quick eyes and rosy healthy cheeks, we went together up a ladder to the loft, followed by a Bren gunner. We stood together behind the closed window, excited as the gunner placed the Bren gun on a table before the window and set it on its tripod. He fed in a belt of ammunition. The Major went to one side of the window and, squatting, very slowly moved his hand along the window ledge until it touched the frame, then he warily pulled the window open, inch by inch, while I pushed the gun forward and sighted it. Before us rose a field of overgrown grass and at its end a farmhouse lay quiet among its trees with the castle towering behind it on a rising

of its own. It was on the farmhouse that I sighted the gun.

The Major called to a corporal behind him to take out a small patrol. We'll give you covering fire, he said.

The patrol assembled downstairs and left by the back, through the orchard, and came round the side of the house to the front, smack under us. As soon as they broke cover an enemy gun clattered out with a hail of tracer bullets—swift, floating red flames that splattered on to our walls. I shouted to The Major that the fire was coming from a slit trench in front of the enemy house, not the house itself. We knew it would be difficult to winkle it out behind its sandbags. The Major crouched at the gun and sprayed bullets wildly across the field but since they weren't tracer we couldn't see where they were going. I shouted, Tracer, tracer, we need tracer! The Major took up my shout, Bring up some tracer, I'm going to have this bastard!

But the trench went on firing back. The bullets smashed one of the other windows. We were all jumping up and down with excitement, calling out merrily, More to the left, down a bit!

Men rushed up with tracer bullets. The Major tore at the old belt and threw it to the floor but he took some seconds to fit the new one because his hands were trembling so with excitement. The more he pushed down the harder it wedged. Then there spurted a long flowing dotted line of tracers from his gun as he gripped the trigger but they were wide and I tried to push him aside as he lurched about, the sweat pouring down his face, but he kicked out to get me in the shins.

We saw a man's hand, then arm, briefly, at the edge of the enemy trench, pulling down more ammunition. The Major sighted the gun exactly on that spot and fired and I envied him this shower of flaming bullets that hurt us not at all. Our tracers were soon used up. The Major threw down the last belt and shrugged with a smile, turning away from the window. We went back downstairs and smoked, waiting for the tank that was due to come up in support of us. We heard its sullen grinding roar as it neared the house at the back. When it was in position it only needed to fire one cannon, which sent up the earth round the enemy trench in a tall black fountain, and two Germans jumped out with their hands

up, covered with dirt. The patrol ran forward and took them prisoner. The Major shrugged again and told us to get ready to move. We must now occupy the house these Germans had been defending.

Again we went up one section (about half a platoon) at a time, running harder this time, being now in full view of the castle. When we glimpsed it close up we saw that it was girded round with a deep moat or ditch. And the last climb to this ditch was very steep—as well as exposed. Behind the black slits in the castle walls we imagined Jerry watching us. The farmhouse we entered was easy game for them.

The tank commander dismayed us by insisting on bringing up his tank to our new position, thus attracting Jerry's heaviest fire. We argued with him, told him to keep back but he had a facile, swaggering manner, with the square firm tough chin that so often denotes poor nerves. Until now we had been lucky. Nothing heavy had fallen.

Our farmhouse, unruffled within its garden, had particularly small windows, which was useful but made it very dark. The whole of the Company crowded in. This was a breach of war law—you must avoid assembling in a small area easy to target. And

sentries must be posted outside. But it was easier to stand sentry behind the windows, and as for crowding together it—as a matter of military fact—steadied morale.

The Major was worried. He knew we should be outside, being too much under the castle's close gaze. But he decided to hell with it and put his HQ in the kitchen and stationed a Bren gunner in one of the windows. And he didn't put out sentries because we were all expecting a barrage at dusk and nobody wanted to die outside. As a gunner I felt that any observer in the castle would target us and as we were so close his shells would fall wide of us, due to the high trajectory they needed in order to get over the castle and onto us, which surely involved a big margin of error. Not that I expressed this comforting if complicated doctrine to anyone.

Half the men had put their beds down in the barn and half in the main room upstairs. Everyone was in reticent mood, leaden with the sleepiness that often goes with foreboding. I stepped over them to get to a small room to the side of the house on the upper floor where my radio was being set up. Once the tuning signals were over I passed my new map

reference through to the command post. Then I called fire down on a few targets close to the castle to ensure that no enemy would leave the castle without caution. Having my earphones on I didn't hear the first warning sweep and woosh of the barrage when it came and I was almost thrown from my chair by a swift hot blast which came through the window at my side—it was luckily open, otherwise glass fragments would have made a nice mess of me. I jumped up and glanced below. Blue smoke was trailing from the area of the tank parked just underneath me. But the tank was untouched.

That's only the first! I shouted as I ran downstairs to get The Major's orders. Men were huddled round the kitchen windows, guns cocked in case Jerry put his nose round the corner. Just as I reached The Major all hell started coming over. The men upstairs were scrambling downstairs in a great blind clatter and everyone started trying to pile into the kitchen, with The Major shouting, Get out you bastards!

Two fell in awful ominous crashes just behind the house—the firing was devilishly accurate and the men near the back wall started shouting, We're

sitting targets. They wanted to get at the buggers with their hands etc. Where's that tank commander? I asked, I just want to see his face. Because without doubt it was his machine that had drawn the fire. The fatal pungent smell of cordite drifted through the house and rubble was everywhere, I started running round looking for the tank commander to get him to move that bloody great object of his—also because it couldn't possibly help at this late stage.

The men at the windows wanted to start shooting. I found the tank commander near one of the radios downstairs. To my great relief he was looking subdued and pale and thoughtful—all of a sudden he was one of us, only ten years younger than he'd looked before. Men were moving around, jostling each other, trying by motion to stave off the castle's evil eye. The Major kept coming to the kitchen door and shouting, What the bloody hell's going on here? what's the matter? The shells were the matter and the mens' sightless peregrinations went on and everybody was thinking surely, surely the next one has to have all our numbers written on it (for an 88mm. will easily take care of a mansion).

The tall haystack in front of the house caught fire from schrapnel. I had just turned to look at the men crowding together under the stairs—they were making it difficult for my signaller to get through to the kitchen—and suddenly everything became lit up with a bustling generous yellow light followed by the sharp crackle of hungrily burning hay. The men at the windows were shouting, Jerry's in there, shoot for christsake, something's moving! The Bren gunner put a burst into the flames as The Major pushed his way through and said What are you shooting at? And then someone shouted Look! and we heard a woman's long scream and again the gunner put in a burst of fire and he was about to fire again when a girl with long hair ran out of the flames and stood between the house and the burning hay unable to move from terror.

Come in, come in, we shouted—*venire, venire!* Which only made her shriek the louder. And then, just a moment before the haystack began to tumble in on itself an old man and a boy dashed out, then came the rest of the family and without more ado the old man took to his legs which were suddenly youthful and in a flash was behind the house and down the hill with all the family running after him, including the old

women and children and the screaming girl. It was the first and last we saw of them. No wonder they say the sole survivor of the earth's total destruction will be an Italian.

The hay continued to burn but sulkily now. The Bren gunner left his gun pointing at the castle as dusk came on. The shells abated. Men had to stand back from the windows now because the embers lit up their faces.

Two hours later a strong patrol went out stealthily in slippers, their faces blackened and scarves and knitted hats round their heads. They skirted the embers and climbed to the vast wooden door that was, as far as we knew, the castle's only entrance. Then they lay down, forming a semicircle. The door was tight shut. It remained so for the next three hours, until almost midnight.

Then one of the Germans came out and strolled towards the bushes to have a pee. He left the door open behind him. Five men of the patrol got up and crept to the door while two others went silently towards him, one putting himself behind him, another in front. They waited for him to button up. Just as he turned back to the door the two men leapt forward,

one of them stunning him with a blow at the back of his head—he gasped with an instant's astonishment, stood for a moment erect, his eyes staring, appearing to look for someone, then he collapsed. The five men at the door then went inside, tiptoed along the stone corridor until they found the first lighted room. Several Germans were playing cards inside. The men pointed their Tommy guns into their faces and after ten minutes the castle was secure, several other Germans having been found in the upper rooms. They were put in a dungeon near the gate, relieved of their money and valuables, to await the arrival of the quartermaster who would lay on an escort to take them to the rear.

I heard all this, move by move, from the patrol itself. The Major marvelled at this wonder of alert concerted action which involved no casualties on either side. It sounded like a fairy tale and the men of the patrol had a collective bemused look in their tired eyes. But there it was. The castle was empty. And the tank commander could look at it to his little heart's content.

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This kind of fighting felt very different from the wholesale frontal stuff we were used to. We now fitted ourselves into the terrain, fought on smaller fronts, moved forward swiftly and over much shorter distances. We advanced by piecemeal actions devised there and then, and these were hopefully being replicated by similar independent actions on our flanks, though you didn't always know. The key to this was perhaps that the strategy of concerted action between the two armies, which had never worked anyway, had at last been abandoned. The Eighth worked on its own and so did the Fifth.

As a result the terrain opened its treasures to us. Attack was no longer the ponderous business involving massive barrages and start lines. So we were properly in the country we stealthily advanced over, we smelled it and felt the earth. And it began to feel as if we were in artful conspiracy with the most tenderly waking dawns we had ever known, the softest low-cloud rains, and the giddiest of earth scents, dense hot summer ones and dimmer spicier autumnal ones and then the wafts of sodden leaf and snoozing earth in winter, turning that narrow Italian

peninsula into a continent of tiny kingdoms, each the only paradise.

We were now in Tuscany. There was fighting round San Gimignano and the bombardier who had been disgusted by his girlfriend's breath was sent there in an F.O.O. mission. It was his first time. He returned to the guns green in the face as if privy at last to war's murderous intent. He was in a state of walking shell-shock—competent and cogent but only just. He recounted every moment of his narrow shaves but mostly the moment when he suddenly looked into a German's eyes before being thrown off his feet by the blast of a shell. His face wobbled as he spoke, a face that had hitherto been a comedian's. He described it in outrage. He seemed to be saying in his outrage that no one should be asked to witness such things. We all had to hear about the scandal of war. We listened like neighbours in a narrow street when something bad has happened across the way. We sat hushed with disbelief at what we knew a thousand times better. And I think we almost laughed.

Yet he was right. He made me feel ashamed of my having entered the very method of this madness, and allowed myself to be inured to it.

My curiosity about the Germans intensified, if anything. I would reach an enemy post just vacated and stare at the black smouldering shell-holes and ruined rooms, pick my way along, on the look-out for mines, trip wires. There would be no birds. Battle and birds have no association. Scents have gone, other than the smoke that chokes you a little. Did I expect to inure myself? Shouldn't my cheeks wobble like the bombardier's, with the scandal of it?

Whenever we came to deserted or ruined houses we took whatever we wished and, usually, sent it home. We had no thought of pillaging. The word would have offended us. For us the stuff belonged to a vague caravan of nomads who would never return.

If a door didn't open you pushed it open. You slept in babies' cots under the wondering eyes of the mother, you took over kitchens, you fed on the grapes that were coming to fermenting fullness in a last autumn heat. And you easily overlooked the anxious thwarted hunger of those who were being charming to you, charming in a way that, helpfully for us, made it seem that war was somehow not happening, a passing illusion. That was gracious of them.

Once I was in an open field, it must have been after an attack had moved forward because there were prisoners of war standing about, trenches had to be dug for some reason and a few prisoners of war were digging here and there. I took a shovel and handed it to a prisoner who was idle and he shook his head, flat refused to take it. I shrugged. Prisoners weren't under our orders. It took me much puzzling to find out why he refused—I suddenly tumbled to it—he thinks it's for his own grave. Perhaps he had so much death in his belly he believed that when you get caught by the enemy they shoot you. We stood staring at each other without comprehension.

I remember driving a jeep in pitch darkness under a downpour of rain with a fierce bombardment going on, I drove through the swirling mud between two white guiding tapes, swerving and crashing into potholes to avoid the flak and blast that seemed everywhere—and I did it in a calm I couldn't understand, I thought I'm going to get through and the more impossible it gets, the more death seems certain, the more I'll get through. As if the war had come to me at last, adopted me with proud confidence, recognised me as a rightful component.

But such soldiers are also an anxiety for the higher command. The routine of killing and escaping killing must not be taken as the whole of life. We needed to be reminded that life was still there. We officers were exhorted to conduct War Aims discussions in free hours. The very thought of there being any was, for us, damned silly. But it gave us officers something to kick a discussion off with. So we would start asking what kind of world do we want when it's over and before two words were out we seemed to register collectively that it was all a lot of balls, so we quickly trailed off into silence and then started saying whatever came into our pleasure-craving heads.

The idea of getting us to discuss War Aims was nevertheless a devilishly clever one since it planted in us the idea that there were any—and the acceptance of a falsehood is hardly easy to thrust on multitudes. No wonder, when Hitler heard from his Intelligence about War Aims on our side, he promptly ordered his armies to discuss them. Here he had the advantage of simplicity. Naturally his war aim to eliminate the Jews would not come under discussion. He was particularly anxious that his soldiers should

never be stationed close to a concentration camp. The screams were noticed. It had happened once. And he made it his personal order that the two must henceforth never meet.

Otherwise War Aims were as useful to him as they were to us. They introduced the idea that we were here in battle not simply to kill each other but for a purpose which rendered our deaths if not desirable at least worthwhile. And what government clean or foul could resist that?

And he did have a War Aim which his troops could talk about—one fixed military purpose which bestrode all others, namely the destruction of communism.

And the one clear and demonstrable thing his politics achieved was the first communist empire.

10

Unforsaken

Next day, late afternoon, we moved beyond the castle to yet another farmhouse. I had just told my signaller to start up radio contact. I heard him acknowledging the first signals and then he said to me, handing me the mike, Officer to speak. I got the order to leave The Major at once. I was to find another Company which would be going into attack at precisely eight o'clock that evening.

The Major looked at me in surprise, presumably at having his F.O.O. snatched away. I told my signaller to close down. Then I called out to my other men, Prepare to move. The itinerary I had been given was the vaguest possible. I had little daylight left to find my way. It meant crossing to the other Company at a flank, without any of us in the forward lines being clear as to what was happening on that flank. But I didn't get into a grumbling mood—it

appeared those days were firmly over. And in any case we never questioned vague orders. Everyone—including the officer giving you orders—had to rely on the latest scratch Intelligence which could be flat wrong.

The house we had just moved into was on the southern slope of a valley that stretched magnificently before us, with woodland on its right side. We were to take a path through those woods—it lay clear before us in the deepening dusk and nothing could appear safer.

We walked with the usual clinking of metal from our belts and packs. We were sharp and taut, alert for every sound. There was a burst of very loud machine-gun fire to our left, the sound amplified to an extraordinary deafening echo by the valley. I couldn't tell from which side it was coming. Which told me that the path we were taking was in the direction of the enemy, not a friendly battalion. That was my first thought but I put it aside as absurd.

I thought we would soon find white tapes, those infallible guides portending and attending battle. But there was no sign of them. I was used to

piecemeal Intelligence. It could come from false intelligence or an exhausted officer. And as always in this kind of terrain the words 'front line' were a euphemism for what could in minutes become a semicircle.

The only trouble was that I was to accompany an attack going in at 20.00 hrs. I made up my mind to stop at the first house and ask where Jerry was. The Italians always knew. When we came to one, at the edge of a clearing, about half way up the slope, I thumped quietly at the door. There was an instant hush at my knock, then nothing. This time I thumped more insistently but not more loudly and at once the door opened an inch or two. I could see the man's eyes. He was scared but when I pushed firmly on the door to indicate that I wished to speak to him, whether he liked it or not, he opened up so that I could see all of him. I asked him in our awful clipped gibberish, *Inglesi? dove?* It didn't occur to me to ask, more to the point, where the Germans were. He made one of those Italian shrugs with the eyes turned up, that denote ignorance of just about everything. I put my foot further in the door and repeated my question and perhaps he grew more scared

of being ignorant than of cooperating with me because he pointed quickly behind him, up the hill. Are you sure? *sicuro?* are the *inglesi* up there? and he made a noncommittal nod and was about to close the door when I said, OK, you take me there, you. At first he refused and began to back up but I advanced my boot a little and repeated, You, *voi, voi*, take me to the *inglesi*. He pulled on a coat quickly and came outside, not even telling his wife or whomever was there. It was really dark now.

I had him with me at the head of the column, close so that I could grab him if he tried to run, and we all tramped through the steep woods in silence. How was it that the Company we had left was a mile back and still neither battle nor white tape were in sight, for it was past eight by now? There was a chance that the forward line was on a loop or bulge. And there was also the thought that we might at any moment walk smack into crossfire.

We reached the crest at last and stopped just short of a gravel road crossing from left to right. It was a moonless night and we could hardly see to the other side of that road—and how lucky that was. But opposite us appeared to be a tall white house

with a drive, though it was impossible to be sure. A soft breeze played in the leaves around us. The man said in an urgent whisper, *Inglesi, inglesi*, pointing across, and at once a shout, more a scream, came from the other side of the road, HALT! and it was German not British.

I caught hold of the Italian's sleeve and hissed, You've got us in the Bosch line! and he tore himself free and with the most miraculous leap I have ever heard (for we saw nothing) he jumped high in an arc and landed so far down the slope behind us, and so softly, that you couldn't hear the impact of fall. I stood for a swift moment undecided and then dashed across the road diagonally to the right of the sentry's voice onto the road's soft shoulder, fearful that the racket of our boots would make us easy targets. And then I started running faster than my legs had ever carried me—along that soft shoulder. God alone knows what made me choose to run right instead of left. I could hear my men panting and stumbling behind me and in a matter of a second or so as I glanced down I saw phosphorus-painted notices sticking out of the earth and they were marked in big letters MINEN, with a skull and crossbones. They

stood every few yards and I began leaping over them one by one, unable to leave the soft shoulder because Jerry would target the sound of our boots while, this way, silent on the soft earth, the chances were that the sentry was confused or terrified and that we wouldn't set the mines off. But with the first few leaps it went all right, otherwise we would all be finished by now. So I jumped higher and higher and hoped that my men were doing the same. My batman was immediately behind me (on his first F.O.O. mission) and he kept saying frantically, trying to keep his voice down, Sir, sir, it's too heavy, it's too heavy, I can't keep up! But keep up he did and I wasn't about to stop for any man. I reckoned he would keep up with twice the load if he had to. And he did. And all of a sudden I saw a vast barn on the other side of the road and veered towards it. Clattering across the road we rushed into that barn and in a moment were lying breathless in the straw, the radios and batteries and maps and belts thrown down, and all we could hear for the next few minutes were our heavy choked breaths. And very gradually we began to hear the beloved silence of the night and saw the clement merciful stars through the tall open barn door, and

we sank further and thankfully into the straw feeling almost merriment but still wary because of Jerry's closeness, with the thought that he might send a patrol out any minute. We didn't like those Schmeizers of theirs, fired from the hip with a deadly rapid spray of bullets. But the silence went on closing its arms round us and there was another better thought—that equally Jerry might want a peaceful night too. As for the mines we thought about them but we didn't, then or thereafter, talk about them. To think, there had been five pairs of boots jumping over each sign. But we banished it from our minds because we had a superstitious horror of ever mentioning again an escape beyond belief. Only now can I see that the live mines were directly under the phosphorus signs and that they had been put there to deter an unlikely attack from where we had come from.

And then other moods encroached on us as we lay on the quickly warming hay. My batman at my side murmured to me, I wouldn't have thought that of you sir, leaving me with all that stuff. And I hissed back, I've got all the forward positions on my map, do you think I'm going to get myself captured? But I didn't convince myself. He had sewn the thought in

me, coward. And it wouldn't leave me, interfering with the other thoughts I had in my head—that we were in enemy lines and I would have to move on and I didn't even know if the direction I'd taken was right, and perhaps we were now even deeper in Jerry lines. We listened in case a tank started up with its hungry crushing roar, and we waited for a headlight to be shone into the barn. I told myself, All I did was run. My feet did it for me. What else do you do with a German sentry a few feet away? do you stand arguing the toss about who's going to carry what? What was my batman blaming me for? After all, he'd got here, hadn't he, he was alive and well? he hadn't been taken prisoner or shot dead had he? He said nothing more. Perhaps he had already made peace with me. But I couldn't shake it off—this shame that set in like a nausea just when we'd had a reprieve. Happily for soldiers, moods die the quickest death of all.

I rarely consulted my signallers about what was to be done in a tight spot. They were with me for the radio signals after all, not the decisions. Usually I let a decision develop inside me—I left it alone—waited for it to settle. What else could you

do? If I had taken the wrong direction I was committed to it now, up to my eyeballs. I might be even deeper into enemy lines. And going further in. Because I knew I was going to stay near that road, and keep in the same direction. We might end up as prisoners and in that case it would be the end of the war for us. These were my thoughts. But none of us wanted to be taken prisoner. The idea brought a peculiar foreboding inside, a strangeness too terrible. So I had to be sure of the right direction. You couldn't have conferences about it. I had to get us out of this. I relied on my decision just as they did, and still I didn't know what it would be.

I walked to the barn door and looked out and standing there I realised we had got to walk straight on. At a little signal from me they quickly gathered at the door behind me. I took them parallel to the road, which lay on our left now. Our boots made hardly any noise. The marvellously unrushed orbs of the sky continued to be there. After about a hundred yards we came to a path veering to the right and I decided to take it, stepping carefully, as it was narrow. In a few moments I stopped, hushed the others with a sign. We pressed ourselves against a wall.

There was a man standing close to me, in the tiny garden of a house. You couldn't say in this degree of darkness whether his clothes were a uniform or not—he was in shirt sleeves, hatless. And he was sharpening a long knife. He began walking up and down. Sometimes he came within inches of us. Now and then he looked up at the sky, his face large and round and seemingly pale—a German, an Italian? Whenever he looked up he appeared to be smiling but it wasn't a smile. Then he swiftly turned and went back to the house behind him soundlessly. He went in, closing the door. We crept on, still hugging the wall to our side. In a few minutes we emerged close to the road we had abandoned further back, only it was wider now, more important.

A burst of machine-gun fire echoed to the left, that is the north. I couldn't tell if it was a Bren or a Spandau but opted for the Bren and told the others so. It shed a little hope. Burst after burst went into the sky. Then there were rifle shots and the tiny muffled thump of mortar bombs. It seemed there might be a valley on the other side of the road. It would explain the muffled nature of the sounds. Suddenly mortar bombs were exploding right

behind us and we threw ourselves to the ground. Most of them fell on the road. Ahead of us there was a field full of craters and as soon as the mortar-firing died down we dashed to the biggest and deepest one.

We lit cigarettes under our blouses. We heard a track vehicle on the road, just a few yards away, not a tank. Inching myself up to the edge of the crater I saw a mansion-size house on the other side of the road. In its forecourt were vehicles. But the more I stared the less I saw. You can't stay mute for ever and I whispered to the others that the house must be an HQ—come and have a look, I said, is it ours or Jerry's? can you recognise the trucks? are they armoured carriers? They all peeked over the crater's edge and like me got nowhere. Sometimes the vehicles looked like jeeps, sometimes they seemed German. We watched that place on and off for an hour or more. Sometimes it was obvious that the house was British held, sometimes more obvious that Jerry was there. In that case, if it was German, we had simply walked deeper into their line and were in cross-fire land. So where was the attack? Our people must already be far beyond their start lines. If so, where had the

opening barrage got to? and surely shouldn't that barrage be falling right where we were? We stared at the house, studied it. All we saw were our fancies. Not a sound came from that courtyard. We could detect no armed sentry there, no one walking about. The moment I was certain I had identified a vehicle it became floating shadows again. I knew I would walk over to that house sooner or later. I would have to. The only other option was to roam all night and the consequences might be worse than capture. If I found the vehicles to be German was I going to walk into that house just the same? I couldn't answer that one. All I wanted now was for this to end, and I think the men did too, we were sick of the waiting game, our nerves weren't up to it any more. But we still didn't know if our fatigue was the sort that would make us want to give ourselves up.

It was in that moment of wanting the suspense to end that I felt a spasm of confidence. I jumped up and beckoned to them and waited for them to form up behind me. Without troubling to be stealthy—who gave a shit now?—I walked across the road and among the vehicles. There wasn't a jeep among them but there were 5-cwt. trucks and armoured carriers and they

were British. I pushed open the door and we beheld a huge room, brilliantly lit by dags, full of infantrymen, some on sleeping bags, others sitting round. To the left as we went in was a long trellis table with phones and a young officer sat there with two or three men. He looked up at me and suddenly smiled and the first thing he said was 'Hullo, weren't we at Oxford together?'

Battles are never militarily proper. Somewhere the human, the most helpless of animals, will always come forth. Between happiness and astonishment and trying to believe that this wasn't another life, we stood there smiling and nodding. I wracked my brains as to who he was—from an Oxford life that had become a lost lonely dream in a finished epoch. The room with its noise and crammed life whirled about us, a reprieve which had come direct from somewhere bountiful, a somewhere we had no part in. Quickly we moved on to the subject of the Company I was looking for and the young officer said, jumping up, I'll send a runner with you but they're all out, one'll be back shortly, so we sat about smoking and drinking char. The sounds of battle were plentiful on this side of the house. We were indeed on the crest of another

valley and the battle must be happening to the rear of the enemy house whose sentry we had fled from.

A runner came and we set out behind him. A drenching downpour had started. We soon reached the white tape, much of it already trodden into the mud. There were flashing dimmed torches and men carrying supplies and armoured carriers in what seemed a meaningless mess. The sounds of machine guns and mortars came from every angle, or so it seemed to our foolish heads. We passed ruined farmhouses with men standing in the doorways, there were cattle dead at a trough, the familiar corpse stench in the air, the trees had been torn up and we heard anguished weeping—from a soldier? an Italian? I began to understand why I had been pulled out of The Major's company. I was needed here as a reinforcement, an emergency, quickly.

I remember we reached a house, presumably where my new Company commander was but I don't remember the rest of that night—except for one brief picture of myself. I am at the back of a big house, alone, standing there in pitch darkness. I don't know how I got here, but the house is where my men are. I step forward and feel something soft under my foot. I look

down and see a dead German. I keep straining my eyes to make out his shape but he is sunk in the mud. I put my foot forward and there it is again, the yielding nature of a body and I can't understand what I am doing there, what puzzle I am trying to solve but I go on puzzling just the same—is that his face, how pale he is, how helplessly he looks up, how yielding he is. Why do I need to establish his presence better for myself, what is there to say between us, why should I now, after we have survived by the grace of God, be moving my foot in this way and mournfully gazing down as if I should speak to him, recall him to this bitter field?

It was about this time that Captain Maugham came into my command post back at the guns and told me he was off on an F.O.O. assignment. He had lost his helmet and could he borrow mine? He smiled in that diffident yet self-possessed way of his and I said, Of course you can, I never use one anyway, never have. Are you sure? he said. I pulled out the tin hat and gave it to him and as he turned to leave I said, Come back, in the half-joking way we all had. He stopped. I hope so, he said with a moment's diffident blink. And then he went off.

He didn't come back. I heard he died complaining about a pain in his arm, everyone thought he was all right, no wounds visible. I thought of his wife. He never talked about her but you get a feeling of how it is with some couples—lost unless they're close by, missing the precious one like life always beckoning from another place to where the life and light is, leaving you incomplete.

11

Flames

The Eighth army moved north-east from Tuscany. We were now in charge of the east side of the peninsula while the Fifth army stayed on the left. We were sorry to be obliged to skirt Florence and resented the missing the chance of opening, like the first words of an enchanted book, the gates of a ravishing city we seemed already to know ancestrally, as it were.

You couldn't help feeling that the Fifth army was getting all the plum towns—Naples, Rome, Siena, Florence and no doubt, by the time we drew level to it, Bologna as well. It would have been nice to bad-mouth that army but we had too recently been in it, and soldiers like to have their hatreds unalloyed.

Thus it was, by being rudely pushed to the right, that we came within sight of the road that led from Forlì (emphasis on the second syllable, as

denoted by the accent) to Cesena (also on the second syllable), ending in Rimini on the coast and the deep blue glittering Adriatic, whose wash was so much less hauntingly suave than the Mediterranean's. Adriatic waves were thick and buxom and deep dark blue—a more bustling sea than most because narrow.

One day I stopped my jeep and walked down to a narrow stony Adriatic beach and couldn't believe that north and south of me, east and west, there wasn't a soul or vehicle to be seen or heard, only the saucy emphatic crash of the waves. For a moment I had all I saw to myself, yet a road went by a few metres behind me. I knew I would never see or hear a world like that again.

* * *

I was once more detailed to The Major. We were under shell-fire all the way up to the line and finally occupied a house on a slope, with the enemy further up. The Major wasn't satisfied with our position, exposed as we were on both flanks—and with danger from the rear if Jerry was clever enough. We put our sleeping bags down but The Major was restive. However, to withdraw and once again cover the shell-holed road we had come up by could be more costly

than staying put. I persuaded him to stay. He agreed only if I shelled the house further up the hill intermittently through the night so as to pin the enemy down, should he be there.

In the course of my night's shelling the house ahead caught fire and we could see the fields surrounding it in a bright orange glow. Which assured us that any enemy patrol coming from behind that house could be picked off at once. At dawn the Major put out a well-armed patrol and prisoners were quickly taken. We moved up beyond the burning house, leaving it there to smoulder. We pushed through fences and broken gates to our new position.

When the battle noises died down in the evening I strolled back downhill to that burning house. The bushes round it were still smouldering. The upper floor had collapsed altogether. The kitchen door at the back, as I came down to it, swung open. I walked towards it. A dead German officer lay just by it, raised up and all but buried in the debris. I thought I saw a movement in the bushes and jumped round to the side of the house. I heard a woman's voice. I walked back to the door and pushed it open and in the dark hot kitchen I found two elderly women. One was

sitting by the table but she didn't look up when I came in. The flesh of her leg was open. I could hardly see across the room for a thin white smoke. Then the other woman cried out as I came further into the room but not with fright and they managed to raise themselves and come towards me, their hands clasped together in prayer and they began crying out, *Aiuto, aiuto*, that cry for help we heard all the way up this stricken peninsula sacrificed to madness, every soldier knew that word. All night they had sat there in the flames—my flames—flames devised for our night-long safety.

I ran back up to headquarters, knowing my youth was unable to deal with this, and grabbed hold of The Major. They've been there all night, I said. He knew my youth wasn't up to handling it. Together we ran back down, calling stretcher bearers to follow. The Major stood in the kitchen white and appalled and with his arms round those women he shook his head again and again saying, No, no, no, no, no, no.

We saw the truth of the dead and dying now because our assaults were quick and sudden. You came across enemy gun emplacements and dug-outs just vacated by Jerry. You might see his mug of coffee

still there, half full, steaming. I would stare at his quaint mobile kitchens and once when I came across one turned on its side from a shell-burst I opened the covers one by one with the food spilled and cold inside. Another time I ran into a hay barn just abandoned by an enemy rearguard and thought I smelled their cigarette smoke still in the air.

Always this unanswered question, who is this enemy? how did it come about that he had achieved human form, so many millions of demons now cast aside? So it was that we turned over their wallets and watches and photos from home, trying to discover more about demons, how they talked and laughed. And all because we knew it wasn't true.

It is the enemy dead who convince us they are nothing of the sort. One lies akimbo with his last horrified grin. Always round the corner they appear, in barns as you rush in, sometimes head down, in a clean death, one that came too soon for the grimace of shock. So battle instils the opposite of what made you enter it. It softens and then quite steals away your deathly recrimination.

And the tiny women clinging to their burning home—what sort of enemy were they? how did they

deserve to be there in the fire and how did I deserve
to cause it?

12

Kamarad

These days I hardly had time to rest between missions. I was quickly ordered to join The Major again. This time he was already installed in a splendidly stout country villa behind tall iron gates. The road of approach at its side was deserted and still, too open and innocent for my choice. On an impulse, as there was intermittent shelling, I led my men, five or six in all, into the ditch at the roadside. It gave us better cover in the event of our having to throw ourselves down.

Then I took it into my head that I was going to catch a packet if I continued walking at the head. I suspected there might be a sniper somewhere (it was quite impossible) as the view was open all sides except the one that was in our hands. But I thought the two pips, as they now were on my shoulder, denoting a full-blown lieutenant, stood out. So I

waited for my men to pass me and took my place in the rear. This was one of the million sops to blood-thirsty Cerberus that each of us made every day—jumping up to stroll to another spot, leaving one room for another, touching every other tree we walked by, in this way we cheated the eye vigilant for our demise.

I spent the first evening at the villa at an upstairs window listening to the voices of a platoon The Major sent out at night-fall. They were to capture a white cottage about a hundred yards forward, a peaceful jewel, not a farmhouse but set there for pleasure. It hadn't so far been touched by schrapnel. There was no firing. I heard one of our patrol call out in a high-pitched voice, Come out you bastards! It was a strange voice. There was a disturbing allure in it, invitation more than menace. We knew a Spandau was waiting round the corner of that house. And then again—Come out! he cried. Almost a woman's voice. The rest of the attacking platoon seemed to be lying low, waiting. And once more—Let's have you Jerry!

The voice belonged to one small wiry man. Everybody round me was listening too. They always did

when he went out. Especially The Major listened. He knew the capacities of this one small slight ferociously strong cockney who everybody said was rich from the merchandise he stole on such nights. He went out with a clear resolute head, a plan of his own. He neither needed nor heeded others. He showed neither fear before nor satisfaction after. He didn't speak—except to the enemy in his unnerving siren voice. And the men were chary of him, respectful but chary. They never questioned him, only gazed, riled him a bit, cautiously.

A short time back he had taken six prisoners single-handed. He told them to line up and lay out in front of them everything they had—money, watches, pens. Then in a single burst of fire he shot them dead. That was a story told about him. But it wasn't his customary way of killing. He used a knife. He would come up slowly and silently behind Jerry and slit his throat. And he was able to throw his siren voice to somewhere else, so that a shot in his direction would miss. Those were the stories about him.

There was sudden fire from the enemy and then in the hush that followed we heard a scuffle and a

groan. We could just make out the platoon running forward, closer to the white house, then came another burst of gun-fire. It went on thus for an hour. At last they trooped back, led by the small wiry one, who had a bullet wound in the calf of his right leg. He sat down and tended the wound, his eyes restless, excited, also resentful in case another trooper should come near him. You felt everyone was the enemy for him, he didn't make allowances for nationality or allegiance. A trooper came over and said, Here's a dressing, holding it out. All the cockney said was a quiet, Fuck the dressing, without even looking up, making The Major smile.

I arranged with The Major for another attack the next morning to smother the enemy gun. I was to lay down some fire and we would bring a tank up. The wiry cockney was insulted by the idea of a tank. It wasn't the way to fight. He said he was going out again, tonight, in his slippers as always, his face black. But he spent all night moaning with pain. He was eventually stretchered out. During the night I ordered intermittent fire from the guns. My head kept slumping forward with fatigue as I passed the orders down—Fire by order...10,9,8,7... At dawn the tank came

up, fired its cannon twice while a fresh platoon moved forward. Enemy shells began to paste us and the tank moved back, the platoon retired.

It became sunny and I walked outside where a pleasant bordered courtyard made it seem a war-free zone, especially as it was hidden from Jerry. The shade of the trees, the motionless well-tended borders and the mellow response of the stone walls to the sun made a place where, unobserved, so we thought, you could smoke quietly and chat.

I saw three officers talking together and joined them for a bit. Then I wandered off. Just as I turned the corner of the house a mortar bomb fell smack in the courtyard where I had just been. I walked back and one of the officers I had been talking to lay on the ground, his eyes staring aghast. He was grey, trembling violently in the last throes. A stretcher came up and took him inside. When he died one of the officers brought a blanket and covered him. And this officer kept coming back to turn the blanket down from his face and gaze at him, then replace it, in a vigil that lasted till dusk.

You can't get used to the unexpected, expect it as you might. Of course you know that the bell is

always tolling and it may or may not be for you but it tolls so madly, so minute by minute, it is bound to seem to be always in some measure tolling for you and there is no escape from it, even when it has tolled, in a split-second choice, for someone else.

By the middle of that afternoon we were a mile behind the forward line, so quick was the advance on our flanks. Peace came to that indolent mansion that basked as ever, flaunted its borders, whispered with the breeze.

I rested in that patrician home, sure that my regiment wouldn't require me for another mission just yet. Which of course was a premonition of the opposite. Twigs were burning in the hearth from something fried or boiled. Occasionally I asked for a glass of Marsala from the cellar where the family hid. They were prodigal with their store.

The order had been given for B Company to pass through us. Being fresh, they would occupy positions well forward, in the thick of the fighting that was now going on ahead of me. Our small wiry man with the bullet wound had been taken to a first-aid post, whence he would be taken to hospital.

The Major told me he didn't envy B Company, they were in for a bad time. We ate lunch from our mess tins, waiting for them to come up. Nothing happened for about fifty minutes. Then a signal came over my radio. My signaller started, probably with thoughts close to mine. He looked up at me and said, Officer to speak.

I went shaking to the mike, no doubt looking calm and ready, and I was told, You will join B Company, you will get all the tactical information from the commanding officer of the company, you will prepare to move now, any questions? No sir.

I threw the mike into the signaller's lap and called out to the others, Prepare to move, and there was the long groan we all knew so well. And to my signaller I said, You can close down. I felt like calling the duty officer at Battery HQ and giving him a piece of my mind but of course I didn't. Instead I told The Major as casually as possible that I'd been detailed to B Company and he said, Christ, off again?

My batman shouted for me from upstairs. Where did I wish to sleep that night? He was unrolling my bag. I said, Prepare to move, didn't they tell you?

When I heard B Company outside I went to meet the major in command. He was tall with an easy-going, non-committal, perhaps vague manner. He told me there was an assembly point we all had to move on to. It was clearly going to be something big. He spoke pleasantly, distantly. We were to move at dawn next morning.

We were outside before dawn, puffing and blowing against the chill. The C.O. and I walked ahead. We went by a copse charred at its edges and a farmhouse with its roof caved in. The assembly point was a moderately sized house, walls intact. Every room was already crowded. A few radios had been set up. Men were playing cards. I recognised some old faces. It was a cheerful, not to say festive atmosphere as companies arrived fresh from the rear while others departed for the forward posts. Then we of B Company moved on.

After a time we reached fields that had the stillness of a battlefield to be.

Our designated house was open to the enemy on three sides, with only the rear approachable. It was in a steep dip below us. We had to be mindful of the noise we made, over sixty of us, as we dropped down

into a ditch behind the house, then scrambled up it to reach the entrance of a great cattle shed. There was one mercy—no one could have seen us occupy it.

Also the house stood on its own single hillock, giving us commanding views to the front and our left flank. Our concealed avenue of escape at the rear, through rising woodland, was our best asset, balancing our precarious tactical situation—we all knew we were sticking out in enemy territory—with this assured escape route.

Two Germans lay dead in the cattle shed, under a cobwebbed window. They each had their arms held rigid in the air, vertical, and that was how they remained while we were in possession of the house. Further on, opening from the cattle shed, you came to a vast room that took up pretty well the whole ground floor. It gave off to tiny rooms which we used for observation, behind tiny windows dark with dust.

We shed our equipment. I liked the Company commander. He had a quiet geniality. Yet he seemed to observe things distantly rather than taking charge. By now it was a sunny morning. We felt sure we had entered the house unobserved but one never knew—uncertainty was to dog us all the time we were there.

I set up the radio in one of the tiny rooms where hams had once been hung. From here we could see, immediately below us on our left flank, not more than thirty yards away, another, smaller house. A thick barrier of bushes lay between us. We could gaze down into the house's rear courtyard and were grateful to see a British armoured carrier there. It was a boost to find our left flank covered, even though we, both they and us, might still be sticking out like the tips of sore thumbs into enemy land.

It didn't take us long to discover that in fact we were well inside enemy land, all sixty of us. I think few F.O.O.s could ever have found themselves in German lines with so many well-armed men round them.

If I wanted to observe the area straight in front I had to put myself in a much bigger store-room with long barred windows. These gave me an ample view left and right as well as forward and, being dusty and cobwebbed, they made us invisible from outside.

A long table right under these windows ran the length of the wall—convenient both for its view and for positioning a Bren gun. I kept my radio and signallers in the big room because at this lookout window silence was essential.

The field before us sloped very slightly downwards, then proceeded flat for a hundred yards or more to a road that crossed from left to right a hundred yards or more ahead.

Preparing for a long stay I set myself up with a machine-gunner at my right side. I saw this grimy nook as the house's principal look-out post, and this it certainly turned out to be. Together the machine gunner and I sat in the hush and waited for events to present themselves. Our question, Does Jerry know we're here? was quickly followed by, Of course he does (but we never found out if he did).

My signaller in the big room quickly coded our map reference and sent it back to my command post. I wanted to register a target in the field ahead. This much self-exposure was necessary. I waited for Guns Ready and gave the order to fire. After a few moments there was a mounting swish above our heads and a shell landed just beyond the road that lay before us. I ordered the target to be registered, then I registered the fields to the left and right flank.

We all expected an attack that evening. There was an uneasy atmosphere, especially as we could hear the grind of nearby enemy tanks, perhaps the most

feared noise in battle because a tank can crush you without pause, not to say push down without effort your walls.

When dusk came double sentries were posted at the windows and the barn door. After a time I went to sit with my men in the big room. Pretty well the whole Company was gathered there now.

Armchairs and settees had been brought in from the other rooms. Suddenly there was a crash and a scream. Part of the cattle shed wall next door had been blown in. Brick dust came drifting through. I hoped this wasn't an answering shell to my registration one. It would mean Jerry had seen us coming in. A stretcher was rushed to the wounded man, one of our sentries. He was put down next the dead Germans. We thought he had little hope of life. He kept crying out to be brought in among us. Our commanding officer did nothing. So the stretcher bearers brought him close to our door, where he could hear us, though this exposed him to greater danger.

People weren't obeying the commanding officer. I think The Major had told me that this man was a replacement, perhaps even a reinforcement, i.e. entirely fresh to the game. I began to dislike him,

making an unjust shift in my affections of the kind soldiers are good at. The hole in the stable wall turned out to have been made by a bazooka, which is fired from the shoulder. And this posed the problem of where it could have been fired from, if not from the rear, namely from behind the British-occupied house at our side. At that rate the soldiers in there were even more exposed than we.

But a bazooka was better news than artillery, from the lethality point of view. At least I was satisfied that Jerry wasn't answering me.

Somehow, without an order having been given, we sixty-odd men came to a collective understanding that even though we were probably being observed we must behave as if we weren't. The bazooka shot might have been a try-on to provoke response. So we mustn't respond.

In the absence of any orders from our infantry commander I put it around—as if I had already taken the command over—that our machine gunners should be careful not to respond to fire. The sentries didn't move.

There was another crash—this to our left flank. Sentries reported that a Jerry patrol was out. But if

so they didn't come near us. The evening passed without event.

Once the sentries had been changed we put down our sleeping bags. The men's spirit seemed to be going. This happens when the leadership crumbles—a lightning transformation into listless gloom. Dr. Johnson once argued that subordination was essential to mankind. In battle the moment it collapses the field is lost. Our sentries sat smoking cynically. The predicted attack didn't happen. But all night we heard the jarring scream of Jerry tanks. In the case of our having to run it would be messy escaping via the back—sixty or more men clambering up a narrow strip of hill, however concealed. And we had nothing so useful as a bazooka, the only hand-held instrument in existence with armour-piercing capacity.

At first light I went to the tiny window overlooking the house on our left. The armoured carrier was still there. We ate, sat in silence, confident that nothing would happen in daylight. In this we were mistaken. In the early afternoon there was the screeching roar of a tank and it was coming nearer. I had just sat down by my machine gunner and heard him gasp. Straight ahead, on the road that cut

across the field before us, a German tank was moving from left to right, a mighty towering structure indeed, and slow. Then it stopped, dead in front of us. And a Jerry patrol, perhaps eight men, appeared from behind it, looking straight in our direction. It was something you never saw, a bunch of enemy apparently unaware of you in broad daylight, and so close. But why had the tank stopped if not because Jerry was perfectly aware of us? Well, they might be thinking that only the house next door was occupied. After all, they had probably been chased out of it.

So my non-response policy was continued, especially as the tank rendered defence on our side useless.

Very slowly the tank's long gun began turning. It turned on us. It stopped, dead on us, our house. We sat utterly motionless. The mouth of a big gun holds you. We stared into its black hole, without even thought of resistance. One cannon would do for us with ease. We were goners. And to our bafflement that gun turret moved back again, away from us to the left, and in its leisurely ponderous way it drew to a halt on the British-held house to our left.

The moment this happened the Jerry patrol ran forward and lay down in the furrows, conspicuously, making signs to each other. And they waited for the tank to send its cannon shot. It fired once, emitting a white lazy puff of smoke, and its cannon missed. Then it fired again and was smack on target and our own house wobbled in the massive crash as a yellow cloud of rubble went up. Covered by it the Germans ran forward. They came across the field one by one, each giving cover to the other, swift, in perfect drill. It was a model tangential attack. They disappeared from view immediately below us, closing on the house at our side. The machine gunner and I looked at each other and blew out the air as if we shared the same breath. A reprieve again, not to be believed like all of them so that you always ask, Were we really saved or shifted to another life?

Our sentries came and reported that the British had run out of the other house, some of them hatless, they had disappeared in the trees of the slope behind. I dashed to the side-window and saw one of the Germans stroll out and gaze at the armoured carrier, moving round it inquisitively. I could see every feature of his plump face. Why did they seem so

sure that we weren't here? He would never have strolled out of the house in such a casual fashion otherwise.

Why didn't they do a quick recce on our house? But this, surely, they must be leaving to the dark hours. They could never risk another daylight operation. Then why had they risked one just now? And surely that operation argued that they knew nothing of our presence here? So our thoughts tortured each other.

I decided to treat an attack this evening as a certainty. In that case I must prepare for it. The enemy tank was principally on my mind—the appearance of one meant an armoured division not far away. I had to make sure that somehow those tanks were pinned down.

When the owner of our house went outside to draw water a Jerry machine-gunner opened up on him with blue tracer bullets from the house next door. A bad sign. But it made an attack that evening look more certain. The farmer lost some flesh off a finger. Then the bullets came showering over the house, smashing the windows. So they did know we were here. We cursed the farmer out. He cowered back to his

hiding place. Civilians rarely had any idea of what the soldiery was up to. For him we were just sitting it out in his house. Proprietors who kept to the darkness of their cellars fared best.

To our bafflement, despite having fired bullets at us, the Jerry patrol appeared again—right under our noses, as before, hardly twenty yards away. They were chatting, huddled together in the natural way we soldiers had because nature's binding guarantee of continued life had been withdrawn.

The machine-gunner and I sat gazing at them in disbelief. We could almost hear their voices. They had no way of escaping us. We could have had them all dead in a second. The sensible, practical thing was to kill them. I made a very quick calculation. It was practical but not sensible. It would bring down immediate retaliation on us. Tanks would finish us off, every man of us.

The truth was also that I didn't believe for an instant I would kill them, I didn't want to do it, I refused to do it. I saw their families before my eyes—an involuntary image, I did nothing to call it up. I put my hand on the machine gunner's arm and mutely shook my head. No firing. And he nodded. That

was the best thing I did in all my life. It wasn't strategy on my part. My gunner's quick nod showed he felt the same. No death in cold blood. A thousand times in my life, all through these years, I have offered up thanks for that hand on my gunner's arm.

The Germans crossed the field on the same diagonal line as their attack, without the smallest effort to take cover. They got to the road again and disappeared. But almost certainly they had left a strong force in the house at our side, and this had entered the house from the extreme left flank, hidden to us.

Our Company major had been sitting in the big room all this time just staring in front of him. The orders he gave came from trembling lips and made no sense. His voice had all but gone. He sat there with an almost green pallor, close to the chimney, his eyes sightless. He was clearly in shell-shock true and proper. His hands trembled violently. Shell-shock is muscular paralysis. There is almost no awareness of what is going on, just a state of blindly staring shock.

The sergeant-major, legendary for his firmness, lay under the staircase in a doomed stupor. I had to

step over his body to get to my look-out post and he hardly stirred. Among soldiers the collapse of one man's nervous system, especially an officer's, is a deadly contagion that spreads.

An army cannot stop to attend to such cases. A stretcher will not be called because the man is to all intents and purposes still whole.

An army is a vast moving city of destruction and necessarily it looks away from shell-shock cases. It has never studied them, never produced a technique for their management. An army cannot sympathise too deeply—especially with a state that arises from its own destructive identity, the deeply unstated madness at its heart. It might slip, all too fatally, into its own identity. It is why shell-shock quickly spreads, a miracle virus, seizing the limbs and with secret healing smile immobilising them.

Thus it was that we no longer looked at the major, never so much as thought of him again, or spoke to him. During all that transpired in the next few hours he remained where he was near the chimney, his trembling only accelerated by the noise and debris, and I think none of us knew what happened to him afterwards.

In me his collapse induced a certain excitement (so artfully does war work its mystical charms). I could take command. I could devise the evening defence of our position. I trusted myself if I acted alone. I trusted my own orders because they came from guidance, not from me. I let them happen.

Then one of my signallers (the same tall youth who had tried to run away on the mountain) came stumbling over to me and said, trying to hide his voice from the infantrymen, Let me go back sir, I can't go on. His lips were quivering. He couldn't have fallen better into my scheme of things. I feigned anger and this anger was another aid for me. If the major's lonely staring state wasn't going to spread I had better do something about it quick.

That tall youth served my purpose. He was trying to say something to me and I couldn't make it out. I shouted, What? what?, intending my voice to carry. He went into a kind of crouching position by my knees and what with tanks grinding in the distance I leaned down to him to hear better. The infantrymen had their eyes on us. I pushed the boy away and yelled, I don't care who hears this, I don't care if Jerry hears—you're disgusting to me, I don't want you near

me, I said. Look at you grovelling. Two of my own men came over and tried to draw him away, whispering to him. But he persisted, he said he had to be sent back, his nerves had gone. And I went on saying, Get away from me, come back when you're human (the poor soul was being altogether this).

And I wasn't angry. Not in the least. He just gave me the chance to show an impatience that sounded like anger. I felt the boy was safe—this was just his way of taking breath for the next hell, a sort of surrogate shock. So when I shouted at him I seemed to be telling him that he was really all right, he would make the transition.

And of course I was doing this for the other men too. I meant the sting of my rebuke for them, for the simple reason, as I knew, that their spirit had gone to the dogs. A sense of theatre came over me from my childhood—I knew suddenly how I should be in this crisis. I told my signaller, still in a loud voice, to contact my command post, put an officer on, I must speak soonest, I said. And when he reported to me, Officer speaking, I took the mike and said, I want all the guns of the sector to stand by, repeat all guns. An attack is expected this evening, repeat this

evening. It will be supported by tanks. I wish to set up a programme of fire across the whole divisional or Corps front. All guns were to stand by at sundown, I said. I myself will give the order to fire, the target reference I will be giving you is the house in which we are at this moment. You will fire on this house. This house is within yards of another house on our immediate left flank, it was this morning attacked and reoccupied, repeat reoccupied, and it is now in enemy hands.

I said I wished to ask the gunners across the whole front to exercise care in carrying out the programme. They would have to raise their trajectories very slightly above my map reference so that shells would fall as much as possible on the fields immediately north of us, though some must inevitably fall either on us or very close.

The word Understood came through from the other end of the line. Then I waited and everyone else waited too. By late afternoon my plan was confirmed: all guns will be on standby by 18.00 hrs. I repeated this in a loud voice for everyone in the room to hear. The guns will be on Stand By at 18.00 hrs. The eyes of every man except the poor commanding officer

were on me. By five o'clock I had worked out the firing programme and relayed this to my command post.

Then I jumped up and began walking among the infantrymen. I felt great elation and started pointing at them and ridiculing them, I did some mock trembling, I laughed at the way they were lolling and slumping. I started addressing them. I told them I can save you if you want me to. I said I can do this by bringing down heavy fire so near this house that our lives will be in great danger. Many of the shells will hit this house. I therefore require your permission. I have to have your agreement. Will you risk it? There is no other way. We're in too tight a spot. We're in enemy lines. You have to put yourselves in my hands. If you do, if you're prepared to leave everything to me, I will save you, I will get most of you out of here alive. And finally I said, You're good men, all of you, so for God's sake don't give up.

I was throwing out my voice like an actor and yet I wasn't acting at all, I wasn't even responsible for my words—they were quickly fed into my head. Some of those men might be five or more years older than I but they didn't seem so. I was taken aback by

the power I had over them, which was the power they gave me, and it happened without the slightest effort on my part. It felt like a role that had been decided on and which I had been awaiting and even, unknown to myself, planning, and here I was obediently fitting into it, a stranger to what I was doing, facilitating it only. No courage happens at such events. You are simply taken over.

Sometimes your own life comes forward and lets itself be taken over and you know nothing about it until it happens, and then, even then, you are a spectator.

I seemed to have more energy than all the men put together and I think this was because, with every word I spoke, I felt more and more convinced that, yes, we were OK now (how much easier it is to lead than to be led). And also I felt that this confidence of mine was due to the fact that I and I alone was in charge, I was free and no commanders, no headquarters controlled this battle, the outcome of which might even decide the fate of the whole sector. And these men were making this possible for me. Their assent was feeding me.

They agreed. I made sure that not one man objected. And this energy of mine also came from my own simple wish to survive. What we call courage lies very close to what we easily call cowardice. Neither word is appropriate to battle. The two words simply describe two different kinds of shock—the one impels you to flee and the other impels you to stand firm. The one grows out of the other. It is like the actor who sweats with fear as he makes his first entrance on first night. If he didn't sweat a bit all would be lost. There is much the same tension in the forward lines, springing readily from great fear.

I now had a roomful of eager men who wouldn't fuss, much less panic. They returned to their sentry posts as the sun went down. The signaller who had crumbled not many hours before came over and said, I'm sorry, I'm all right now. I simply said, Go to your post.

Most strangely of all, I found I didn't believe in the success of my plan. I was astonished at this. I thought the Germans will blow holes in our walls with their bazookas, throw hand grenades in at the windows. They will easily, with the implacable strength of tanks behind them, surround us and take

the few survivors among us prisoner. And somehow this solid conviction managed to lie under a weight of total confidence—which confidence revealed itself in my calm, my good cheer, not my thoughts.

Radio contact started. The count-down from 10 to zero drew near. Headquarters wanted to know, Will you take responsibility for the closeness of the target? Yes, I said, I will take responsibility. I made sure my voice was heard all over the room. It was almost nightfall. I waited for the guns to report Standing By. This took some time as the word had to be repeated from the guns to each command post on the entire front, and from them further up. When the word Ready came at last—for this had to trickle down the hierarchy too—I gave the order Fire.

In what seemed only a few seconds the first whisper came, then the next, then there was a full metallic shriek in the sky and the first shells crashed down just behind the house. Then the second wave came, the shells began to fly over in choirs, with a ceaseless thunder that shook the walls and the men began to shout and the choking stench of cordite filled the rooms as shells fell smack in the entrance of the cattle shed and the poor devil on his

stretcher screamed to be brought in—for God's sake why was he out there at all, what the hell were the stretcher people doing? But in such noise his voice made but a murmur, the shells hit our walls causing showers of rubble, everybody was coughing as dust cascaded down the roof and into the chimneys. It seemed to go on endlessly—if I wished I could stop the firing at any moment, within a minute, even thirty seconds it would stop but I was waiting for a sign and at last I heard a shout from a machine gunner at one of the windows, They're outside, outside! Jerry's outside!

I heard another shout, Fire you silly bastard! At once a machine gun sounded out and in reply came a shower of blue tracer bullets from the neighbouring house, lighting up the clouds of rubble and dust. Somebody shouted for me and I jumped up, scrambling across the room—who wants me? who wants me? A trooper at one of the windows caught hold of me and said, A German's just looked in, he stared down my gun, there's a whole bloody section out there!

The shell-fire was beginning to abate and I rushed back to the radio and gave the order, Repeat, repeat. And within a few moments the same choirs came

over, several shells falling together, then a rain of dozens. Flak was hitting the ceiling and the machine guns started to fight it out again. Then at last voices at the windows, with the word that brought balm and safety and joy and thanksgiving to us all, Kamerad, Kamerad, Kamerad! and a sentry shouted, They're got their hands up. Somebody else shouted back, Keep your gun on 'em! I scrambled to my radio as the Germans came in, bunched together, anxious to be among us as we were to have them. I grabbed the mike and shouted, Stop firing, stop firing, stop firing.

And at last the fields outside were silent. We started chatting with our prisoners and they took out their photos. We agreed in dumb language that war was bloody silly. I would have liked to ask them questions about what they had known of our presence here but they were quickly whisked off to the rear echelons.

I was pulled out of the line a few days later and when I got back to the guns I was asked to write a description of everything that happened that night. Our colonel paid my command post a visit and took a look at me. I was told that writing a description was

the preliminary to being put up for a medal. I didn't refuse to do it, I simply didn't do it. I had no more thought of putting down words on the subject than I had of shooting myself.

I knew of two officers who had written themselves up after an exploit, and I thought that was shameful, and they both got their decoration. For me it was just an ignominious thing to sit down and play the reporter with death. And also I thought it was an ignominious way of making an award.

I heard whispers from infantrymen over the coming months when I was on other F.O.O. assignments. I'd been cited for a Military Cross, they said. They were certain about it. I think The Major had put it about, since my informants were from his Company. But in a zone of non-communication like the army you can be certain of nothing.

I was proud, excited and as quickly I was ashamed of feeling excitement. I didn't even remember my suicide plan, nor did I realise that I had just fulfilled it, yet without my devoutly wished-for death.

13

Nerves

We were now clearly winning. From June 8th to July 25th 1944 (no fewer than five years after the war was declared) the Normandy coast had been invaded by our allied armies.

Never had preparations for a series of simple assaults been prepared with such—you could say meticulous—care, though some would say fanatical ease to an extreme of craven fussiness. But this perhaps had its purpose. The warily detailed snail's progress was such that an impression grew among us that the various highly moral and unswervingly upright 100% successful Western commands were waiting for the war between Germany and Russia to reach its hoped-for conclusion of total mutual erasure (it was how Stalin saw it too).

You might say that this was outrageous, beyond all reasonable expectation. But the fact that it was also wily power politics could not be denied.

That invasion name 'Overlord' was not for nothing. The Overlords running our lives and determining our deaths would not tolerate from their armies anything less than an assurance that their vast dignity would not suffer, however much ours did. And that dignity (which in its frightful saturation bombing of German cities was after all only performing a clinical operation) meant to survive the war too—so we heard: an Overlord court would be set up and the criminals of the nazi regime would be put on trial, in a neat typically mealy-mouthed inference that on our hands was no blood. Soldiers can hardly object to a war they have signed up for but turning it into a moral quest—no, that is a cynicism too far.

As for the Italian front, we were within an ace, as always, of pushing the Germans across the Italian Alps, where they would walk smack into Overlords advancing across their own country.

Our own local high command was getting excited. It urged us to make one last push which would put us

behind the German line and cut off Jerry's Alpine escape route for good and all. Yes, for one last time we were to gird our grimy loins.

On the other hand (and this was the hand we always considered most), while we were clearly winning the war we still hadn't. And we had heard of quick pushes before. Therefrom had sprung many a tale of cock-up.

In fact the Germans, stung by the imminence of their defeat, were at this moment discovering in themselves a new defiance, just as their people at home, stung by the allied atrocity of the blanket and fire bombing of their cities, had already been moved to greater passive resistance than ever before.

Our senior officers were falling over themselves to talk to us. Yes, we were actually spoken to, all but implored to rouse ourselves for one last show. And those ropey words, groaning under their weight of corn, 'the armour will pass through', were once more brought out.

And we, our cynicism so deep that it corroded our judgement, believed every word of it.

By now we were well north of the Faenza-Rimini line. And this was flat country, that is quite

baffling for us. As far as the Alps there were undulating plains and one river on the heel of another, and these great open distances promised swift advances but on the other hand (yes, that same crucial hand) having no cover could mean—once more—a close coordination across a whole front which we allies had proved we were no bloody good at.

And there was that strangely moving tendency in the allied forces to grind to a halt whenever a speedy advance was of the essence. Even the successful disembarkation at Caen, in the Normandy landings, went—to quote General Montgomery, who led them—exactly according to plan. What he didn't mention was that the capture of the town of Caen was supposed to happen on the first day but it didn't—because the forward command, namely he, didn't move. Had he moved he would have encountered no resistance. As it was, two enemy divisions leapt into the hole and managed to delay the taking of Caen for a month. So the landing didn't go according to plan, did it? The answer was certainly not his incompetence but the fact that his genius for finding holes in the enemy line came from his awareness of the holes he, like any other commander, left exposed

in his own, your own mistakes being all you really learn from in an army.

* * *

My first F.O.O. engagement in this new show was in the late autumn, when we were coming into the plains close to lake Comacchio with their numberless rivers. Finding my infantry commander now required hard driving, and this time it turned out to be a wild goose chase. Pure chaos under sunlight. Believing I had arrived at the start line I gazed in confusion at what was obviously a forward line, with combat going on at the crest of a long gradual slope before me. In other words we were moving so fast that start lines were no more than assembly positions.

The slope was criss-crossed with hastily dug trenches and within them men stared about them apathetically as hand grenades came over and made their brief puffing impact and thud. I stood gaping from a narrow pathway with bushes close on either side. Men near the crest were lopping grenades back, they would run crouched to within a few feet of the enemy and tear out the pin and throw. Then new ones came back.

There were rifle shots I couldn't locate. So Jerry must be on a flank, as well as in front, perhaps in some woodland that hadn't been cleared—but this was my nerves (which I suddenly realised had gone) talking, not my judgement.

I climbed to where I saw a group of officers in shirt sleeves. They had cheerful begrimed faces. I asked if they knew where my Company was and one of them said, You'd better be quick, they'll be crossing the river by now. There were dead Germans close by and we chatted comfortably among them on this golden afternoon.

I had come forward in an armoured carrier, a conveyance we hated because of its noisy tracks. For the past hour my signaller had been telling me, They want to know our position, command post are asking for our map reference, they'd like to know how things are going, whether you need to register any targets etc. etc., and my inactivity was added proof to me that my nerves were playing up. I told my driver to move and I would follow on foot, and the carrier shrieked and seesawed to the cover of a church.

I ducked to avoid splinters from a close shell and almost toppled over a grinning enemy boy, his

arms outstretched in a last appeal, staring directly into my eyes. I ran past another an enemy even younger slumped dead on an upturned hand-cart, his head near the ground, his feet towards the church steeple.

The men were waiting for me and with simulated calm I told them to remount. Then I jumped in too and nodded to my driver to move. As the carrier swung away I made a top-speed gesture—a clenched fist waved sharply up and down—and he careered the vehicle between the trees like a speed boat, rolling and weaving, until we had climbed the hill and saw before us a flat plain crossed with a vast dried-up pebble-bed river, glassy here and there with little pools, which may have been the Adige or the Po—I was well past such details. It was a hundred yards or more across and open to the sky, with low-lying banks. I ordered a stop. I got in a blue funk about crossing. How did I mean to handle this ghostly white expanse in a track vehicle making enough racket to wake the devil? But how was I to give any order at all unless I knew for certain that the other bank was in our hands? I could hardly call my command post for

field information—even coded it wouldn't be allowed through.

At least no flak was flying. Was I going to stare at river pebbles all day? The one thing I couldn't get out of myself was action. I was just going through the motions—busy studying my map, taking out my compass for a reading, staring through my binoculars. And the only thing on my mind was I'm going to be killed and this is bloody silly because I did my suicide thing and that was supposed to be the end and here I am at it again and I'm not looking for suicide because there isn't much of a real life to dispose of here.

Then, as always—it really did seem that old soldiers never die but only fade away—something happened within me and took the matter into its own hands. Suddenly to the far right flank I saw tanks crossing the river-bed in a long column, and they were our tanks. No flak was bothering them, which would have been the case if they had been enemy tanks in flight. But by the same token they might be crossing unobserved and I would certainly find myself up the creek if I crossed ahead of our own tanks. The contesting thoughts bounced on each other and not

one of them was serious. Meanwhile the landscape before us was a peaceful Constable study.

We had no rations, not even water. I had shut the radio. The sun was beginning to go down in a red vision. We chatted and the men seemed to accept that all was well, only that we were taking our time to get over there. And this in turn encouraged me. I was suddenly persuaded that I was waiting for the tank force to get across before I moved. And who was there to say I wasn't right, that my nerves had done me a service? But my inert state and the guilt that went with it rendered judgement one way or the other useless.

All of a sudden I found myself telling the driver, OK, let's go, and again I did the clenched-fist sign. And the engine's roar, the lurch and roll of the tracks seemed to confirm my decision and we began a bumping, racing, smacking dash across a river that had no interest in us, splashing through the shallow pools, a joy ride for boys and we were suddenly all looking forward to a hot meal soonest.

We screamed up the bank on the other side and at once we were in the soft air of a dense leafy wood whose floor muffled our tracks. And at last we

emerged from the woods and with little difficulty found a dark humped farmhouse, and there my Company was lodged. What a sweat of fear for that most pursued and cosseted lady of battle, Fanny Adams.

In the forecourt, piled high, there were long belts of German ammunition, Schmeizers in perfect nick, several Rabbit's Ears binoculars, discarded radios and Spandau tripods, and beyond the forecourt, more astonishing than this evidence of enemy positions seized, an autumn countryside untouched by military action or any action but that of the all-providing sky, the trees intact and courteously acknowledging the last of the sun at this moment of the evening angelus.

I strolled into the house fearful of a reprimand for being so bloody late but instead I looked into the C.O.'s eyes and they almost beseeched forgiveness of me for not having been found.

It was as if he, the Company major, had been playing hide and seek with me, not vice versa. I've been looking for you everywhere I said. Oh, he said, we were dead beat so I decided to kip down here for the night. It's all clear further up, he said, I'll

be sending a patrol out though, just in case. With a self-reproaching dodge of the head.

He was a handsome robust man in his mid-thirties and his hair was greying at the temples. Three times this man had been decorated. His was by now a legendary name. If he took a company forward it always got there. He never withdrew. And it began to dawn on me that I was looking at my double, an older brother who had exhausted like me the quota of his reprieves. He glanced about him secretly, his face drawn, his shoulders almost cringed forward in a premature self-defence. He rarely gave an order now. His adoring soldiers moved round him softly, not needing spoken orders any more.

I took out the map and asked him the routine question that he must have heard a hundred times, Any SOS targets for the night? I squatted and spread the map on the floor, shining a torch on it. He stared at it without really seeing it. I pointed out several places near the house that might serve as targets and he nodded all the time but said nothing. Then I got up and this seemed to afford him pleasure, and he almost let out a sigh of relief, sitting deeper in his chair, when I left the room.

Our driver found a large bread oven at the back and we had our hot meal by it. We ate ravenously. And we slept there.

Tomorrow was going to be the day. The armour would now pass through the hole that had been made in the enemy line. The dawn was cold and sunlit. An even frost was spread over the hills. Far below us we could see the road to the north, between lower hills. And there we saw hundreds of vehicles, presumably waiting for the tanks to pass through.

Behind us, to the north, some firing started. Which meant either that we weren't in the forward lines after all or that we had been pushed back. I had breakfast with my men. I decided I wanted to see the armour pass through, witness it from on high, which meant getting as far forward of it as possible. I asked the legendary Company major, Will you come? He shook his head with a dark look not at me but the floor. But a little later, when I asked him if I could borrow a lighter vehicle than my armoured carrier, he said, I'll be coming. He wore heavy fur gloves and kept on making a hissing noise with his teeth as I drove uphill on paths frozen hard, in a sudden relapse to winter that would quickly melt. We

came out into a great hush—broken now and then by cannon-fire below. I spotted a cottage at the edge of a field of maize. I found myself in an hilarious mood, humming, lightly hitting the steering wheel with my hand. We went into the cottage and at every window there were infantrymen watching not the passing through of our tanks but a tank battle. There were English tanks gutted and broken up. We watched a German tank punching an English one to death.

That evening only burning tanks remained. A scandal brewed. One more general was transferred to the Far East, not a word said. The peaceful occupation of Austria would certainly take place. The rounding up of thousands of prisoners would take place too. But not yet.

14

Defeat

We were suddenly snatched away to Greece. It was obvious, though not to us, that the Italian campaign was being wound down, like a road-show that had toured too long and even the tyres were gone. What we didn't know, and what we never knew, was that we were no longer even in the Eighth army. The old 10th Corps, containing our two divisions, was now skeletal, that is no longer in battle function.

The story is that on December 3 1944 the foreign secretary Anthony Eden felt he needed 5000 Italy-based troops in Greece to stop it sinking into civil war.

On the other hand (yes, that hand figured high in politics too) the Chief of the Imperial Staff, Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, said the figure should be 80.000, which was quite a difference.

Over the ensuing weeks Eden's quote went up to 40.000. And then, in a matter of days, he doubled it, that is to Alanbrooke's first estimate. It was then decided at cabinet level (between the 23rd and 30th of December 1944) to send our division into the zone without delay. We were even mentioned at cabinet level. To think, the 46th Division got a mention so high up—Ginger (or rather No Longer Ginger) must have felt bucked indeed.

We had no idea that a civil war was brewing in Greece of all places—for the good reason that it wasn't. Greece was a peaceful, harmless backwater. But we did become aware of the fact that the communist party was the bitter enemy of the country's National Guard, who were on the side of the Greek king, whose war-time residence was in London. And it became all too clear that we had come in order to forestall a communist take-over.

But we couldn't be told this because we soldiers had no quarrel with the communists, apart from our not being communists. The hard work Stalin had put in throughout the Thirties to persuade us throughout Europe that the Soviet Union was an enlightened community of happy citizens had worked miracles. So

he was an untouchable for us, being the very beacon of our Struggle against Fascism.

Naturally our coalition government at home, both its Labour and its Tory part, was unwilling to upset allied apple carts by revealing such a plan. In fact they shared our attitude of regarding communism as the enemy but only in a friendly sort of way. It was Churchill we were suspicious of, the man who had risen on our shoulders and who had to be watched. The trouble was that in the House of Commons he was unbeatable. More than once when members of parliament wished to record a vote of no confidence in him they backed down solely because of his great popularity. So you could say we had hung ourselves on our own petards.

We wanted Churchill as our war leader and were determined he wouldn't last a minute after the war was over. We were true to our word. To the bafflement of the world we threw him and his party out---it was called 'the soldier's vote'.

Our official job in Greece, our Battery commander told us, was to administer two hundred and fifty square miles between Nea Epidaurus, a fishing

village on the Saronic Gulf, and the city of Nauplion.

We were paraded occasionally in front of the citizens of Nauplion to show both a military presence and a peaceful intent. They, the friendliest of people, didn't at all seem about to make war on each other.

We lived in clean safe rooms while the National Guard shot at imaginary enemies (so we thought) at night.

I established my headquarters in Ligourion, about an hour's drive on mountain roads from Nauplion, and within sight of the amphitheatre of Epidaurus. I would drive to the amphitheatre daily and sit alone on its stone seats, with on my left the pine grove where Aesculapios, son of Apollo, still kept a healing presence. From the highest tier, quite alone in a silence that stretched to the highest heavens, I would gaze across the valley to the mountains behind Arakhnaion, lost in slight tints of blue and grey and russet on warm sunlit mornings which in times of peace would echo with tourists trying out the theatre's still perfect acoustics from the circular orchestra seventy feet below me. It was

built nearly two and a half millennia ago and seated audiences of fourteen thousand people. Its front row was of pink limestone, the rest of the audience sat on white. The hill on which it stood, whose curve it took advantage of, was the hill of Cynortios. Fourteen thousand people could be seated here, the crowds must have poured in festively from great distances. Low woodland hugged it all round while Arakhnaion, as the distant mountain it gazed across at, was the point to which you would naturally raise your eyes when moved to ponder something said or half sung below. The actor was miraculously in voice and presence from wherever you sat.

I sat there for hours taking advantage of war's silence, and the emptiness. It wasn't difficult to see how ancient Greece had brought an extraordinary order to harsh mountains on the one hand (over a sixth of Greece's surface) and the consoling villages and plains never far from water. War was a bagatelle for them. You needed it to get something you didn't have but wanted. That was how they put it. Like every other civilisation we know about war was a staple of survival for them.

I was administering this whole area with its many wonders built and natural, yet it never once occurred to me that I had any power. Perhaps because I didn't.

I received a few deputations from the villagers. I took reports from my own men when they returned from missions that had resulted from my orders ('go and see if they really have no water'). I listened to the mayor of one place arguing the toss with the mayor of another, understanding neither. I chose a man in rags as my interpreter. He stayed with me all day, shooing away children and getting hold of good wine for me. He talked highly about my powers to his friends, and especially to his enemies. He didn't know what my powers were but then neither did I.

I arranged for the collection of food and medical supplies in trucks. None of it occupied more than a couple of hours a day. I arranged for expeditions across the mountains with donkeys because I liked to visit the villages and sit with the chieftains while they sang and talked. I compiled reports about rickets, tuberculosis (the scourge) and scabies. I badgered and bullied a doctor to find a bed in his hospital for my interpreter's little girl

who had dark tubercular bruises on her chest and stomach. The doctor told me, All my beds are taken with very serious cases. Then he took me outside and whispered to me, I've examined this girl many times, she is dying, she is better at home.

I was taken by the mayor of the fishing village Nea Epidaurus into the hills above it and shown a vast open well full of corpses. They had been stood at the lip of the well, knifed in the back and then pushed. There were girls. On top of them a gauntlet had been thrown. The Mayor said the murderers were still in the hills, partisans. Eighty people are down there, he said. I gazed at them, the familiar stench in my throat, and looked helpless.

I visited Arakhnaion whose chieftain spoke no Greek and sang for me so tenderly and ardently that his wife knelt down and pummelled his knees, weeping, begging him to stop.

One night I was called out to visit an isolated house. We went along with the National Guard as usual. The alarmed, good-looking couple whom we had woken up stood by while one of the guards opened, without permission, a big chest in the sitting room. He asked me to examine the books. They were communist

essays of the kind I had received at the age of fourteen from Radio Moscow. I looked at the guards. I said, These are communist tracts. Yes! they said. But what about it? I asked. They looked perplexed. These people are communists! they said. But so are our allies, I said. This was astonishing for them—not of course the fact but the saying of it out loud.

I turned away from the Guards and apologised to the couple, closing the chest. Then I shook their hands and ushered the armed men out.

Of course mine wasn't the only sortie of this kind. Captain H. was incensed. We talked about it hotly. We weren't going to pursue Churchill's private vendettas and wondered what the hell the Labour party, which was half of the government, was doing in seconding such a policy etc. etc.

And ours weren't the only dissident voices. Word was sent up the command hierarchy, discreetly, from captain to major, from major to colonel to brigadier to general, that political witch-hunting didn't come within our military remit.

And, as discreetly, word came down the same command ladder that there would be no more searches. Someone must have realised that this was combustible

mutiny material. It didn't once occur to us that letting Greece become communist might not be to our advantage.

All we knew was that Churchill was in our bad books. But why hadn't we cottoned on to his real character much earlier? Was it his fault that we hadn't? Had we troubled to investigate a single one of his ideas as to what constituted a war against Hitler (for we still believed that we were engaged in one)?

In actually living fact we had never been interested in his actual war performance. War speeches are always a bore but his had a special quality of deception which we no more saw through than we listened to them. The 1940 speech about how we were going to fight 'on the beaches, in the streets' against the invading nazis, which has gone down in the press room archives as one that stirred us to a new fighting spirit (even aroused us from pacifism), did nothing of the kind. It scared the living daylights out of us as it was meant to. How could we be invaded if we had the greatest navy in the world, and Hitler only had a few boats? How could

invaders get through? And why did he try to rally us for war when war had been on at least a year?

And when that speech was coupled a few days later by the announcement that in the case of invasion the government and the royal family would be clearing off to Canada for the duration (presumably with the greatest navy in the world) it looked like a decision of open abandonment. We regarded ourselves as belonging to the most powerful nation on earth, with the greatest empire ever known, so why was he pulling us down? Did it have something to do with his being the progeny of one of those aristocratic marriages with American heiresses? Did he simply prefer America (we know he did personally)? Or was his abandonment of us simply the logic of the times? Was he saying that our power in the Thirties had been a conviction, not a fact backed up economically? After all, we on the Left had been saying this very thing for years, we had decried the empire as the prize of an exploiting class which had incidentally exploited us too. So what were we after now? Were we suddenly casting about for reasons why the old Britain we had hated so deeply should survive? Did we believe that Churchill had failed to read our real

message? Perhaps he had read it---with his quiet genius for war politics---all too understandingly.

* * *

We returned to Italy just in time for more charitable work.

The Italian war was now over, though neither the European nor the Far Eastern wars were, not quite. Mussolini and his mistress were captured by the Italian partisans (28th April 1945) and hung upside down on meat hooks in Milan for everyone to see and shoot at. Their corpses swayed a fraction with the impact of new bullets. Photographs of this deathly moralist spree were seen by the whole world, evoking shudders of distaste. We know from photographs that Fifth Army soldiers were present at that lapse of law and order but perhaps it was thought impolitic to confront armed partisans.

The enemy had at last been out-flanked. Chaos (the first-born of war) began. There were now numberless prisoners of war to be billeted and fed, and we were needed to handle them, in haste. So we were sped at top speed up the Italian peninsula to Udine near the Yugoslav border where we at once set up a prisoner-of-war camp in a vast empty barracks.

The great race to reach Berlin first was on, a race not between Germans and we allied ones, as you might have thought, but between two of the allies, the USA and the USSR. And a similar though much less important race was going on for Vienna, in which we would soon be involved.

We weren't so much perplexed as moved to silent wonder when a notice board appeared on a wall outside our barracks showing a large-scale map of eastern Germany (so it had to have high-level approval). On it was shown the forward line of the Americans and the forward line of the Reds as they came ever closer to each other in a race to get to Berlin in what promised to be the opening feature of world war three.

Our camp became overcrowded to bursting point within moments of our having set it up. We specialised in enemy officers, most of them from crack SS divisions.

Every morning we British and SS officers and women of various nationalities crowded round the notice board like punters at Sandown as the Russians slowed and our own polyglot armies quickened. Sometimes it looked hopeless for the Americans—they

would take days, perhaps weeks, getting there, while the Russians were already close to Berlin's eastern outskirts.

And sometimes the Americans made a spurt forward, and the Russians, to our enormous relief, were halted for a bit. Yes, to our relief (where on earth did that suddenly come from?).

By an osmosis so deep that we were entirely unconscious of it we had changed into, well, not exactly enemies of the Soviet Union but rivals and bitter ones at that.

Good bye to left-wing pretensions—Stalin was now out to extend his frontiers as far across Europe as he could get and we knew it. And he had his eye on Manchuria too and indeed he later walked into it and in order to make it seem a legitimate act of war he deliberately prolonged the war with Japan--by the simple act of disregarding the Japanese emperor's pleas of surrender. Here, though (for in certain respects the war alliance was as strong as ever), he was in agreement with the allies, whose physicists also needed an extension of the Japanese war in order to give their atom bomb the chance of a live

demonstration. And these people were going to put the nazis on trial!

One morning I noticed something deeply peculiar on the notice board. Or rather, I tumbled suddenly to its import. Little Poland was now securely behind Soviet lines, and a hell of a way behind. It was captive. And this was the Poland whose independence we had entered the war to guarantee. A Soviet possession. And it would clearly remain so--though none of us guessed it would be for nearly fifty years.

No wonder General Sikorski, leader of the Free Poles in London, had been such an embarrassment for our government. It is said he was furious when he heard that Churchill had agreed to Stalin keeping those chunks of Poland he had, so to speak, slipped into while Hitler's sudden ally at the opening of world war two. But, much more likely, he feared the truth, that independent Poland had been struck off the political agenda. And it had.

He narrowly escaped death in 1942 when his plane, bound for Washington from Montreal, had to make an emergency landing due to its two engines cutting out on takeoff. No wonder his wife felt, when

he did crash to his death July 4th 1943 after another faulty takeoff during a flight from Egypt, that he had been got rid of, especially as he died in the same kind of plane as the Duke of Kent had crashed to his death in a year and one month before, and even more especially as her husband and the Duke had been close associates--there had even been plans for the Duke to be Poland's monarch. The name 'Sikorski' was prudently dropped from conversation.

I remember the rubbish the press rooms served up to us about the Duke of Kent's death. He was 'on active service' and travelling in a plane to Portugal. There was a Churchill lookalike on board and a German fighter plane attacked Kent's plane and brought it down. You just couldn't believe it. And there is something candid about the most cynical lies---they are transparent. In fact, as we now know without doubt, Kent was on his way to Sweden (at a pinch Iceland) and his plane crashed on takeoff from Scotland. It was the same type of plane as Sikorski had died in. And Kent was trained in Intelligence. And Sweden was the country where peace negotiations took place. Had it been decided not only to cut short all peace talks with Hitler (this is said to have

been Churchill's first decision on taking office) but also to get rid of the top people connected with the peace initiative?

Rubbish was also served up to us about a crash landing in Scotland on May 10 1941. Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy, was in it. The news item of his arrival had to be searched for in the papers. I think I came across it on a page 4, tucked away as a brief statement occupying hardly two column inches, quite as if it was nothing in the world for the second-in-command of a nation at war with you to fly over and see how you were doing. Again, its suave cynicism was the giveaway. We all knew he had come over to put the final touches to a peace treaty between the two countries. And I think we all knew that this would be the end of Hess. It is a story too cruel to be told perhaps, and for that reason it never will be.

Conspiracy theories of course. Press rooms, the seasoned dressers-up of conspiracy, frown on them. But, being one of the conspirators, a soldier develops a certain nose for such.

* * *

Naturally our prisoners-of-war basked in the irony and ineptitude of it all. They saw, as we still

didn't, that nearly six years of war had been fought solely on behalf of two huge powers who could regard both Britain and Germany as provinces—the first bankrupt, the second in ruins.

Of course there was hilarity among the SS officers. The corridors echoed with it. Here were their two main enemies moving faster than they had ever done during the war. Speed (none of your nonsense about unconsolidated rears or exposed flanks) was suddenly more of the essence than it had ever been in world war two. Was, then, world war three going to be waged according to the speed and stealth strategy that should have been adopted for world war two? had Two been a sort of training camp for Three? was it all right just to go on with war since none of us were by now trained for anything else?

Also, with the Americans hot-footing it to halt the Red Scourge and the Russians burning tyres to halt the Forces of Capitalism, it began seriously to look as if during all these six years we had done nothing more than reduce our closest anti-Red friends, namely the Germans, to rubble.

Each morning we looked at that board and the odds became ever shorter. There was no longer anything in it for the punter. The Russians were clearly going to get there first, if by a whisker.

Perhaps those SS officers saw things more realistically than we did because they had lost everything. We British still had our ideals, that is we thought we had won. We simply didn't see that other people had walked off with all the prizes. Nor, being fellow idealists, did the Americans see that they were the main prize-winners, indeed that they had become the foremost power of the world. It took over fifty years for both them and the world to fully wake up to this, though it was perfectly obvious on the first day of peace.

There were reasons for this seeming modesty on the American side, the chief among them being the favourite Washington rhetoric that the USA had entered the war out of the kindness of her heart, indeed just to help out an old friend in a tight spot. But no serious foreign policy can be fired by emotions as silly as this. War has to be worked out, and in detail. Quite rightly the negotiations for American entry were long and detailed, and contained

much bargaining; not to say a handing over of at least one huge British investment; plus bullion. In a word, war has to be pondered with national interests in mind, and an eye to sufficiency of resources. Above all, war's staggering costs must be seen to promise plentiful reward 'at the end'.

One little known fact about war is that it is immeasurably harder to organise than peace. Your labour force must be mobilised in a perilously short time to pursuits that will not bring in money. That force must become munitions workers, professional killers, nurses, code-breakers, home-front rescue and medical teams. Every human action, and most thoughts, must now be devoted to the destruction of foreign territories and peoples. Yet the food must still be produced, so it would be madness to mobilise everyone into killers and arms makers. The 'war machine', as it is called, must night and day be kept efficient, as the machine of peace need not.

Do we think that this total and always sudden switchover requires no discussion, above all about the unthinkable expense ahead--so great that it will topple most of the rich and bring low the former controlling classes?

How could war-rhetoric have gone into these practical details? We wouldn't have stomached it for a minute. Bargaining and scheming about war? A war population must have its feelings aroused. It must be moved, even deeply. Credit-and-debit columns are an intrusion. In WW2 we were extremely sceptical about war rhetoric, and we consumed it hungrily.

When Churchill's rhetoric told us that we were weak and must needs defend ourselves, even though not a day before we had been the strongest nation in the world in possession of the strongest navy in the world and the biggest empire yet, we were jolted by fear because we felt he knew better than we did; we were flattered by his high-flying account of how we were all going to defend ourselves to the death when the German boot touched British soil.

As Hermann Göring said at the Nüremberg trials, it is the fare that all governments intent on war must provide.

Thus it was that Roosevelt and Churchill were able to weave the fairy tale that Britain was suddenly on its knees while America, known for her ardour on behalf of just causes, was coming into war out of moral indignation at Hitler's behaviour.

This was not at all how most Americans felt. For one thing, they didn't have the Germans sixty miles away. For another, a second world war so few years after the first seemed frankly like crass incompetence to them. Not until Pearl Harbour, namely when they felt menaced by a neighbour, could they be persuaded to enter a war so deeply wrapped up in non sequiturs---and so far away.

Nor was world power a thought in most American heads at that time, let alone a goal. In fact America was frequently called Isolationist. She was bent on commerce, not war, least of all other people's. Yet--and this 'yet' helped the war argument--her markets were already, as a matter of practical fact, on the road to world domination. So war might, if Roosevelt arranged things successfully, begin to appear not only right but advantageous. As we all know, it is the arms business that needs to be excited first. We mustn't blush at such truths. The Struggle against Fascism required arms just as capitalism did. In truth, no war conducted without an advantage in mind has ever happened.

Only in 1945 when war was over did the new banner of America the Saviour begin to flap in the

breeze. It was too good a political chance for the West to turn down. And in any case this is the classical way of dignifying the frightful carnage that all war is, which carnage must be forgotten in a cloud of justice. So for fifty years any Briton who criticised Washington policies was told, usually in the letters-pages of British newspapers, that he or she had a 'short memory', i.e. he or she owed their very existence to America.

What a strange thing it is that none of us consented to that war, neither Americans nor French nor Germans nor British. For a lot of us WW1 had been a worse than useless enterprise that fatuously abolished the Austro-Hungarian empire by turning it into small states so weak that in a flash Germany towered above them, and soon moved into them.

Yet that 1914 war was fought with a certain spirit, an innocent suicidal fervour. It was called 'the war to end all war' and what could be more innocent than that, given the fact that 'the war to end all peace' would have been a better description?

This second world war had no such spirit. The women didn't try to pin the white feather of cowardice on your lapel if you happened to walk war-

time London's streets out of uniform. They didn't stand in line waving and cheering the troops on their way to embarkation for overseas. Far from running after truckloads of departing soldiers and throwing bunches of flowers at them, as in WW1, women in WW2 had war-jobs and they embarked for overseas duties as men did.

The truth is that war is no more a specifically male activity than peace. That is another of the military fairy tales designed to maintain war as a sane and even venerable activity. A female army would almost certainly choose different strategies but the moment the first shot was fired and terror went through the female organism there would be rapid resort to quickly thought-out defensive positions. Shock, after all, is shared by male and female. The same nervous system is at work.

War happens, in a strange biological osmosis, as a result of its happening. Accidental statements, strange decisions, a sense of hush-hush are its harmless harbingers. The stuff of dreams. So how could the most relentlessly physical thing we know arise from nothings on the air?

But this is war's most illusory and illusive mask. It plays within the brain ; evolving like a self-hypnosis. No one can say quite how it happens for the good reason that human choice never came into it.

That was how world war two started. Chamberlain simply announced it. As automatically as night after day there was the issuing of gas masks, then the order to sew blackout material on your curtains, then the building of bomb shelters at the bottom of your garden, then the ration books.

But why did Chamberlain declare war? He didn't want war. He was privy to all the peace negotiations that were going on. He was even thinking of substituting Hermann Göring, Germany's air chief, for Hitler, so close was he to the nazi government. He was a shrewd politician.

And that declaration was 'tragically ill-timed, causing the deaths of tens of millions of people'. Those were Churchill's words---after the war. What he didn't add was that he was in Chamberlain's cabinet at the time and not only fully approved the declaration but (according to the French ambassador) so elated that he could hardly speak. He said it

would be over in six weeks; a walkover. But neither the French nor British armies could reach Poland, where this six-weeks war would be fought.

So what pushed Chamberlain's hand to declare war? It certainly wasn't Churchill, or any other member of his party. It was the most dreaded thing for a politician (when it turns against him)---public opinion.

And we on the Left were making that opinion. We forced him to hide his friendship with the nazis--- suddenly withdraw from the enthusiasm his own Foreign Office had always shown towards Hitler, with top diplomats appearing at the nazi rallies; rubbing shoulders with the leaders. Indeed they made such a fuss of Hitler as to give nazism a seal of respectable approval in German eyes.

So here was Chamberlain forced to show sudden hostility to Hitler, while the last thing he or we of the Left wanted was war. Indeed that declaration was so unreal, so flabbergastingly uncalled for, that nothing happened for six months, in what the American press rooms called The Phoney War. No shots were fired, naturally---because peace talks were still on.

Useless for us to go on the streets declaring ourselves for or against war. It is like going on the streets for or against thunderstorms.

And why did Chamberlain cosset and spoil the nazis? He was pursuing a foreign policy, and he shared this foreign policy with France and America. Hitler had done something miraculous. From the ruins and starvation of the first world war he had in very few years built a fully-employed Germany potentially strong enough to stand up to Stalin. Now that was by no means a disreputable foreign policy. It was pursued for fifty years after the war, by common consent among all the western powers: in fact, it divided the world in two, the Soviet zone on one side and the West on the other side of an 'iron curtain' (Churchill's phrase).

So we entered this sleepwalk of fearful destruction to achieve a foreign policy which Chamberlain had suddenly been obliged to hide? In peace this would be a contradiction. In war it is simply part of the sleepwalk.

The body-count from that long six-year sleep was 50.000.000, military and civilian. In the firstv

world war 8.000.000 died; 20.000.000 were wounded (it being mostly a non-civilian war).

We have no official body-count for the fifty years after the war because the world was divided into armed camps dedicated, both sides, to the invention of ever more lethal weapons with which if the need came to destroy entirely each other and every vestige of the living earth. Is war then just an appetiser producing hunger for itself the greater according to its destructive extent, so that finally fills millions of peace-loving heads (as those heads think) with thoughts of explosion; quick-firing weapons at the hip; torture and the poisoning of earth and animal and sky and soil and waters as an engaging video game?

* * *

One morning the colonel of an SS regiment; a tall handsome man with white hair; invited me to his quarters for breakfast after I had made a standard welfare enquiry about his troops. I think I was something of a favourite for SS officers because I stood tall and blond—prime Aryan material (they made no bones about this). The two of us waited, sitting

on camp chairs, while his batman prepared the chicory.

He told me he was the pre-Nazi type of career soldier. Hitler's great mistake, he said, was to go to war with Britain. The two countries had clear interests in common.

I couldn't see this at all. What I saw, with cross eyes, was the colonel as a late apologist for a war he alone had caused. I saw him as a Jew-exterminator. It didn't occur to me that the subject of Hitler's extermination of the Jewish civilisation in Europe had never been treated by the allies as of the slightest relevance, despite the fact that the deliberately long war gave a safe licence to Hitler's followers to complete the Final Solution.

If I couldn't see what the colonel was talking about it was because of my own clichés, one of them being that this war had been against the nazis, so that I was in agreement with his mistaken view of the war, while incensed by his attitude.

The colonel said, I have an English wife. Even this statement I took to be an extra bid for my approval. Yet if anyone had called me a prig I would have been hurt. Somewhere inside me I knew I was, and

I hated being so full of self-righteousness (the moral stance of blindness):

The barracks had four separate buildings and a vast quadrangle. In any other country it would have looked bleak but the festive Italian light (close as we were to Venice) turned it into a bustling township. SS battalions arrived from Austria continuously, in flight from the Red Army advance. They raced to get to a British camp also because the Yugoslavs wished to lay the same red hands on them. Officers often arrived in Mercedes Benz limos, dressed in shiny black raincoats.

Rumours went round the camp as quick as a breath. Everyone was to be sent to Canada. Everyone was to be released shortly because, after all, what country would want to maintain so many thousands of foreigners? Then suddenly everyone was to be taken to a prison island (Procida, Nauplion?) for no fewer than twelve years.

But no one looked afraid. In any case Germans have a remarkable composure in crisis. The only ones to look afraid, mortally so, were the Hitler Youth. The poor children watched us cautiously with their

heads down. Like us they had been taught that they were to fight demons, and unlike us believed it.

I was happy in that place. This was peace, however loud. I even dared to dream of when I would be back at Oxford with my head in a book (as if this camp were a foretaste). I slept in a high-ceilinged room with elegant tall windows and great bare walls. The nights were deliriously, excitingly hot and sleepless, with a bloodhound continually barking outside and lights flashing in at the windows and the starting up of engines as troops came in and others went out to God knows where. One had to remind oneself that this camp was a miracle—the Germans in it didn't want to kill you and you didn't want to kill them. It gave these crowded halls and corridors the feel of an excellently serviced congress full of delegates from hell with suddenly no agenda.

The very anomalies and absurdities, such as the pets and women of every nationality once attached to the German fighting force, and every language being spoken, and our ignorance of exactly who and how many our inmates were, and the soirées that came about in remote parts of the building, were the prison's

raison d'être quite as if the Italians had devised it as the last earthly festa.

One of my tasks was to search the officers as they came in; immediately they came in. I was constantly called out of my bed which, because the whole experience was deeply restful for me, I accepted happily as one would an on-going Family Do. I would have to dash along the corridor to stop a quarrel over food. Or there was trouble over a woman prisoner—this was routine. All of us officers were on constant call in an orgy of social engagements, and in the quiet moments we sat together turning over the watches and cameras and binoculars that resulted from our 'searches' (a euphemism from higher up which meant stripping the prisoner of all but very personal items like underpants and bootlaces). Since we treated this as a joke, and strangely the joke seemed to be shared by the enemy too, we never felt predatory or acquisitive about it. Besides, there was such a glut of these victory gifts. What is the point of seventeen wrist watches on your arm?

An open German car pulled into the prison after midnight and a thick-set officer with a truculent gaze jumped down from the dashboard clearly intending

to walk straight into the barracks and leave the vehicle where it stood. It contained three or four women. What about these women? I asked him. What about them? he said in English. Where are they supposed to stay, I asked, with you? as fellow prisoners? are they German? His answer was, Will I need women where I'm going? Then, half addressing the SS officers standing around, he translated what he'd said into German, which got a big laugh from the enemy.

The girls, as it always turned out, were mistresses and prostitutes, which filled us officers on the victorious side with a quiet green glow of retrospective envy, when we considered that we could have advanced up the Italian peninsula in constant concubinage. Yet those German armies had lived much more frugally than we had. They had used about half the supplies we used, from food to ammunition. They wasted infinitely less equipment (such as empty petrol cans). Endless resources make you throw half of them away.

During an otherwise calm night one of my men ran into the guardroom and asked me to come quick. We nipped along the corridor and up some stairs and I

heard a woman screaming. I pushed open a door into a long hall with pillars and there before me, perfectly at their ease, sat an SS officer and a middle-aged German woman. They had an oil lamp between them, on a small table—a Victorian picture called Contentment at the End of a Long Day. I eyed the oil lamp, realising that what those officers handed over was probably about equal to what they didn't. A woman was lying on a camp bed at the end of the hall, in half darkness. What's the matter with her? I asked. The officer shrugged. I asked the woman opposite him, You're German aren't you? She nodded and said in English, She is frightened. Why did she scream? I asked. She is Italian, she said, very excitable, she calls for her husband. I walked over to the Italian woman and told her to come with me. Then I asked the officer, Was it you who frightened her? And he shook his head with mock solemnity. The Italian woman was still shaking and sobbing. She said, I'm Italian and in my own country. She said her husband was a doctor. Where is he? I asked. In the south, she said. Why aren't you with him? I asked. I've come from Austria, she said. That was all the explanation you ever got from the women—I'm here because I'm here. I took her

to the guardroom and got her a bed. By the morning she had gone. She must have solicited a hitch south from one of our drivers who no doubt struck a fleshly bargain with her.

Further north, close to the Tarvisio Pass into Austria, there was a huge concourse of various peoples—Caucasians, Domanov Cossacks, Hungarians who had served under the Germans, Chetnicks (who had fought the Germans within Yugoslavia), Croats, Slovenes, Cossacks under General Pannwitz and Yugoslavs who had fought for Germany under General von Seeler. Tito's agents were trying to take a lot of them prisoner. This had been agreed with the allies but the Yugoslavs were also trying to occupy southern Austria and the Venezia-Giulia area for keeps, which had definitely not been agreed.

The Yugoslavs seemed too truculent to become friends. They were on what I thought a moral high horse and deplored the way we treated our prisoners like guests. Their attitude to Germans, as to Italians, was that they were trash. I had to drive into Yugoslavia one day to talk over a welfare question and was indiscreet enough to take a German soldier with me as interpreter. It nearly got me

arrested inside the Yugoslav border. The officer who received me was so enraged he could only glare at me, and he refused to hear or address the German youth. For him the war was an ideology. And as it was supposed to be the same for me I realised he was right—for himself. As for myself, the morality junk had all washed away in blood.

I little thought that this man might have reasons other than moral ones. I doubt if I even knew that Yugoslavia had been occupied by the Germans since 1941. And how could my 22 years know that 10% of the population (which at that time was around 16,000,000) had been tortured or whipped or starved or strangled or knifed to death in atrocities?

The allied rule was that the peoples who 'faced' us were our prisoners, while those who 'faced' Yugoslav forces were theirs. So there was no doubt where most of these displaced peoples wished to face—camps like ours: hence the fact that so many poured down into Italy—flying from Soviet troops but also from the equal threat of imprisonment and worse from Tito's men.

All around the search-shed there were piles of German bank notes swirling in the breeze. They had

suddenly been declared defunct and useless; so prisoners stood gazing wistfully at piles of money which not a week before would have made them millionaires; and when no one was looking they made a vain hoard.

Every time I confronted a new batch of officers I made a set speech—an interpreter translated. I said; You must give up your fire-arms; ammunition; maps; compasses; military documents; binoculars; and obviously since there are so many of you I must rely on your honour as officers to hand these things over. They seemed to enjoy this appeal to what they felt was the Aryan in them; and naturally held certain things back.

These SS officers were mostly tall; healthy young men—the first I had yet seen of that imaginary German army cooked up by the press rooms as strapping and implacable troops drilled to robot status; so different from that strangely inoffensive collection of clerks; academics and youths of every shape and size; more bewildered than determined; more lost than indoctrinated; that made up the armies against which we actually fought. Gertrude Stein's experience of the German soldier in occupied France was exactly the

same. She couldn't believe how unlike the invented 'Nazi troops' these boys were, and how like they were to the boys at home.

One day some officers came in bleeding and bandaged. They complained they had been stoned by our Jewish Brigade. They looked to me for redress. I told them, You're lucky not to be massacred for what you did to the Jews. It was astonishing to see their hurt righteous faces without the slightest grasp of what I was saying.

In the afternoon heat a crowd gathered in one of the smaller quadrangles. Two Russian women were screaming hysterically. I stood watching them from the back of the crowd. I recognised one of the SS women standing close to me and I called her over. What's going on? I asked. She said these women have just heard they're going to be sent back to Russia which means they'll be shot for having attached themselves to a German column. The Russian women were looking about them, sobbing, talking to everyone, and no one understood them. We all lost interest.

* * *

A few weeks later we were driving in convoy through the winding mysterious Tarvisio Pass. For the

second time I felt I was journeying back to a place I knew deeply without having set foot in it. During our halts the mountain hush closed about us. We came to Villach, then Klagenfurt, then Graz. We bathed in the Wörthersee and took photos.

It was the British 5th Corps under General Sir Charles Keightley that halted the Russians in Austria. That is, the two armies sat down cheek to cheek, with simulated bonhomie. Of course the Russians knew that they would have to move back to their internationally agreed lines when the war was officially over. It was the least of allied problems. Southern Austria was milling with different nationalities. Thousands of German soldiers were waiting to be registered as prisoners of war, many of them sick (a whole group had been left unattended with gangrene). There were various Cossack formations, whole corps of Hungarian soldiers as well as non-communist Yugoslavs under German command (like the Slovenes in the Russky Corps) and a whole Bulgarian army. And they were mostly going in different directions.

At last we were among the Austrians who had nice lamp shades and carpets and knew about tea and were

blond (apart, as in our own case, from the dark ones). We felt acknowledged and even, almost, repatriated.

I sat in my room in a little village near Klagenfurt and read newly arrived books from England behind curtains in the evening, on a silent lane.

My first duty in this strange allied peace was to help exercise the Cossack horses that had come to us as a special gift from the Soviet government. Why and how we had become candidates for this gift we didn't know but we hauled up sacks of corn for our welcome guests, we watered them and sheltered them and with beautiful tackle (another gift) and divinely comfortable saddles (yet another) we mounted them. Those who like me had never ridden before learned in a matter of minutes under the eye of a reticent young major who indicated how to mount, how to sit, how to hold the feet in stirrups, how to canter, trot and gallop, how to brush down, how to remove tackle and saddle and muck out the stables, all by means of a series of differently modulated grunts. We learned how to measure the right degree of tightness in the girth by putting a wary hand underneath, how to heave ourselves onto the horse's back in one clean jump,

hands gripping the saddle and one leg over. We enjoyed the way our horses moved round impatiently before we even had both feet in the stirrups. And the man who grunted his horse wisdom at us had a whole regiment of officers to instruct.

The Cossack horses were small and swift and once in the gallop all but impossible to rein in, having been taught to do this in service of the blind headlong Cossack attack. I galloped alone through the woods. One day my mare, who had a distressful habit of twisting her haunches when at speed (this also taught) sent me flying off on the left side with my left foot still in the stirrup and dragged me along for quite fifty yards with the back of my head bumping on the gravel path. My riding major simply grunted, These horses are made for grass.

We soon realised how we had come by these gifts. One day we were put in charge of a long convoy consisting of Cossack families to be conveyed back to the Red Army at Judenberg.

It seemed to us outrageous that these simple people should be returned to a regime which we all knew would kill the lot of them. We were up in arms about it, senior as well as junior officers. Even the

war minister P.J.Grigg; as we now know; complained to the foreign secretary Anthony Eden. Churchill; always careful about matters of common humanity; suggested to Eden that we should stall on the hand-over; in the diplomatic manner. But Eden wouldn't have it. An official war diary of the period (that of the 3rd Battalion Welsh Guards) called the whole thing 'an act of unparalleled duplicity'.

These Cossacks could be brutal. In the Venezia-Giulia area a group of them had kicked a priest to death. But they weren't being sent back for brutality any more than for being simple kindly folk; which they also were.

The lie that won us over was that everything had been settled with the Soviet authorities. These men and women and children were being conveyed to Judenberg in order to be rehabilitated as Russians. Stalin's people had assured us that this was a serious promise because farmers were so badly needed in the Soviets now. And we swallowed it. And it may have been true. Or not. Even certainly not.

The Cossacks seemed happy in our convoy of trucks; waving to us from the back; holding their children up to wave to us. They had been fed with a

lie too, a different one. While for us they were giving themselves up happily to the Red Army, they had been told that under no circumstances would they be given up to the Red Army. That was Eden's little joke.

After travelling some miles we began to slow up. The Cossacks craned round the side of the trucks, curious to see where they were going to be housed. And what told us the truth about their fate was their sudden confusion, their eyes wide open with fear, their last-minute searching round for avenues of escape, as they recognised this Red Army road-block that was virtually the Soviet frontier.

They began chattering wildly among themselves, turning round to look at us, unable to believe it. Yet they seemed to understand that we soldiers weren't responsible. They began beckoning to us, not to save themselves but to give us their possessions, they were holding out their trinkets and gaudy shawls for us to take, their arms laden, but of course we only mimed back to them, No, you're going to be all right—divided as we were now between the truth and the low-down lie.

And then, as their trucks moved and ours stood still we sat back and in common with those Cossacks mourned. This time it was too late for mutinous attitudes. We simply stared, as they did. But our feelings about it were shared all the way up the military command. Only this time there was no answer, no climbing down. The job had been done.

Our days were now a round of idleness. I spent much time driving my jeep here and there unnecessarily. We had no administrative duties because the Austrians ran their own lives. I went to the opera in Graz, had fun going round afterwards to the dressing rooms and talking with the girls.

One day in Klagenfurt I saw a young man walking along in a British uniform which clearly didn't fit him, and which didn't bear any insignia. I drew up beside him and asked him sternly, What are you doing in that uniform? He blanched and stared at me and at first couldn't get his words out. It transpired he had just been released from a concentration camp, he was Jewish and this was what they had given him to wear. He was all but trembling, staring at me to see what new nemesis this was. And now I had the task of retracing my steps with placatory smiles and useless

words that he couldn't understand; and for the life of me I couldn't bring a smile back on his face, and my expecting a smile was another preposterous emotion in me. Finally after shaking him by the hand I drove away slowly and didn't want to drive, only sit there and put my head down on the steering wheel and wonder what the devil, what the devil? where has all this led me?