

Preface

Between 1914 and 1945, Europe collectively lost its mind. Before the guns of August roared over the fields of Flanders and the flames of the First World War consumed many millions, Europe's nations had led the world in every sphere that mattered, from science, industrial innovation and medicine to fashion, literature, music and culture. Through colonial empires compiled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the countries of Western Europe exerted tremendous economic power processing raw materials into finished goods, and with the vast proceeds created sumptuous imperial capitals in London, Paris and Berlin. Europe's dominance of world trade seemed complete.

By the time General Alfred Jodl, the Chief of Operations Staff of what was left of the German Army, signed the unconditional German Instrument of Surrender at Allied Headquarters in Reims on 7 May 1945, the continent had been devastated. From the Atlantic shore to the foothills of the Ural Mountains, many of its ancient cities lay in ruins, millions had died and unspeakable, unimaginable atrocities had taken place in the death camps and elsewhere. After the slaughter and horror of two world wars, a sustained period of economic depression and the chaos wrought by resurgent, murderous nationalism in Italy, Germany and Spain, and the rise of a ruthless dictatorship in the Soviet Union, Europe

was exhausted. Into the power vacuum stepped the United States of America, its mighty, innovative economy sparking revival and renewal in the West, while in the East the Soviet Union took an iron grip, controlling puppet states from Poland to Bulgaria. The powerhouse of the world before 1914, Europe found itself in eclipse at the end of the Second World War.

It could have been worse, much worse. One European country alone avoided total disaster, and the actions of its people between 1939 and the end of 1941 prevented an even greater catastrophe. Great Britain summoned up the last shreds of all its ancient power to resist and repel invasion by the relentless, all-conquering armies of Nazi Germany. The shocking fall of France in the early summer of 1940 had brought the squadrons of Adolf Hitler's Panzer tanks to the very brink of total victory, to the shores of the English Channel, their guns pointed at the white cliffs only 20 miles distant. The shattering impact of Blitzkrieg had been to create a new German empire, the lightning conquest of all of north-western Europe, the humiliation of historic nations and the creation of a leviathan, a war machine fuelled by the enslaved economies conquered or compelled in 1940.

The evacuation from Dunkirk had brought back most of Britain's regular army but left almost all of its precious equipment on the beaches. If Hitler had not dithered, incredulous at his own success, and maintained momentum after victory in France, the Germans could have rained down Blitzkrieg on Britain's flimsy defences. Screaming out of the skies over Kent and Sussex, the Stuka dive-bombers could have smashed a gaping hole in such ramparts as could be marshalled, and the Panzers would have poured through it, racing towards London. But Hitler hesitated, and then miscalculated.

In the febrile, breathless summer months of 1940, Britain gathered together all her residual resilience, and while the Germans debated and delayed any decision on the other side of

the Channel, frantic preparations were put in place to repel them. From the outset, it was clear that, unlike the soldiers' war of 1914 to 1918, this conflict would be a people's war. Men, women and children, everyone, would be directly involved, wherever they lived. The much diminished and now poorly equipped British Army would have to be reinforced by a massive civilian effort of every sort.

Britain did not stand alone in 1940. Many Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Indians, South Africans and others from the Empire and Commonwealth joined Free French, Polish and Czech fighters to stand against the Nazis. But there was only one place they could muster, only one European nation that doggedly refused to bow to Hitler's will. If Great Britain had fallen or been forced to sue for a humiliating peace, what would have amounted to surrender, then German control of Europe would have been complete and her collective strength made even greater.

Much of this book is an account of ordinary people who found themselves living through extraordinary times and who found themselves capable of exceptional, dogged courage. Very few of them fired a shot in anger, but all of them attempted to 'do their bit' to rescue their nation, their communities, their families, their descendants from the merciless clutches of the Nazis.

More than 80 years since the end of the war, very many of these stories have been irretrievably lost, and not only because those who might have told them have died. During the war and long after 1945, a dark cloak of secrecy was thrown over much of what they did. Thousands of civilians who did vital war work were compelled to sign the Official Secrets Act, and almost all of them, patriots in their blood and bone, kept silent, even with their families, and took their stories to the grave. Post-war governments closed files, or destroyed them, and closed down any enquiries as the Cold War threatened to become warmer and it seemed prudent to say as little as possible about how the last one

was won. But sufficient testimony has survived, and, increasingly, more government disclosure has at last allowed some of these stories to see the light, and for the everyday heroism of the men and women who fought the secret war for Britain to be memorialised and celebrated.

Absences, silences and omissions can sometimes be as eloquent as hard facts, and all figure in the stories of the secret organisations whose activities supply the spine of this book. But they can also contribute to a tangle of loose ends, or impenetrable Gordian knots of confusion and wilful unclarity. On occasion thickets of acronyms hide both the woods and the trees, and in many instances such obfuscation was deliberate. Few, if any, secret warriors could see the whole picture, and much was withheld from the most senior people, up to and even including the prime minister. Security was often made all the more secure by blind ignorance. Anyone who wishes to take a deep dive into the detailed literature on Britain's secret war had best keep a thumb firmly planted in the glossary, and a notepad to hand.

The price of victory in 1945 was not only counted in an unparalleled degree of human suffering; it also changed profoundly the political map of the world. Great Britain used up the last few ounces of its ancient greatness to defeat Germany, Italy and Japan. The economy was ruined not only by the Luftwaffe's bombs but also the enormous price paid for American and Canadian aid and involvement. The vast debt of \$9.5 billion, including interest, was not repaid until 2006. After the war, the British Empire was no longer sustainable, and by the 1960s, it had all but disappeared. And while Great Britain had avoided subjugation by Germany, the nation was forced to surrender its political and financial independence to North America.

Victory in the Second World War ended an unprecedented period of human slaughter. Between 1914 and 1945 Europeans orchestrated a string of conflicts that killed many more people

than all previous wars in human history. And if Britain lost its greatness in a titanic struggle to end that carnage, then it was a price worth paying. In the pages that follow are the fragmented stories of some of the people who willingly paid that price. Not all of them are attractive, and not all of them behaved well, but enough of them were selfless patriots who refused to surrender to darkness, to tyranny and the extinguishing of all that was decent. They knew that a manifest evil stalked Europe and they were determined to defeat it. It was their finest hour.

I

The Assassins

It was silent, sepulchral and pitch-black, the motionless air thick with memory and the faint echoes of everyday courage, of anxiety, boredom and bad jokes. When I clicked on my torch, its beam made out brick walls and a curved ceiling of corrugated iron. I was standing in a bunker, buried underground in an ancient hilltop wood. But it was no tomb: rather, a hidden, little-known monument to the dogged tenacity of ordinary people who were determined to force the course of history to change, determined to defend their country and its communities against the invasion of a vicious, murderous tyranny. The brave men who inhabited the bunker trained as assassins, saboteurs and guerilla fighters prepared to kill ruthlessly and without hesitation if necessary, and they themselves were prepared to be killed.

‘We don’t like folk going up there,’ said the farmer.

I had parked in the steading at Greenhead, not much more than a mile to the east of my own fields, near the town of Selkirk in the Scottish Borders.

‘They might get stuck. A lot of trees went down in the storm a couple of weeks ago. Ground might not be all that stable.’

With the reassurance that I wouldn’t do anything daft and that I had a mobile phone and a torch, I gave the young man my name but didn’t insist that I go up the hill, even though Scotland’s right

to roam legislation allows responsible access. As I knew from my own experience, common sense coupled with courtesy is the best approach.

‘Okay, if you don’t want me to go up there, I get it. I’ve had enough daft people parking in my own field entries, blocking gates, kids smashing vodka bottles and leaving litter all over the place.’

The farmer was busy. He had stopped his forklift to talk to me. He nodded, smiled and gave me good directions.

It was a raw, bitter February afternoon with sleet coming in on a brisk westerly. As I climbed up through steep hillside pasture, I regretted leaving my gloves in the car. On my left, I could see the tall TV mast that used to be the sole source of broadcast news and entertainment before the internet and satellites replaced the need for line-of-sight transmission. Its location was no accident – the vistas were long and mostly uninterrupted. The bunker I was looking for had been dug and built on that hill in the early years of the Second World War for the same reasons. Those who hid in it needed the earliest possible warning of any approach, and they also wanted the ability to detect the distant movement of troops or convoys in the valleys below.

Traces of their presence were strewn around the old wood, half-hidden in drifts of leaves from last autumn. By the dyke that kept the sheep out lay a rusted iron bed frame and an old jerrycan. Earthenware pipes used as air vents poked out of the ground, and where one of the ancient beeches had been felled by the recent gale, its root bole had ripped up a scatter of yellow bricks from the earth. Several sheets of ancient, corrugated iron had been picked up in the 80mph winds and deposited against the trunk of another huge blow-down.

The entrance was unmistakable. At the foot of three hardwoods that were probably not there in 1940, I came across what looked like a long, brick-lined trench filled with leaf litter. But at

one end I could make out the beginnings of a very narrow and dark passageway. It curved to the right before appearing to come to a dead end. This was in fact a blast wall intended to mitigate the impact of grenades thrown down the brick-lined entrance. Immediately on the right was the main chamber, now disfigured by aerosol-can graffiti, some of it appropriate, or at least related. I could see two swastikas on the end wall. On the floor below it was another iron bedstead, once used by someone who was prepared to suffer great sacrifice to prevent that symbol of Nazism from disfiguring Britain.

On the afternoon of 4 June 1940, Winston Churchill got to his feet in the House of Commons. After dealing with the threat of imminent invasion, he uttered these immortal words: 'we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.' It is rumoured that Churchill then turned to a colleague and whispered, 'And we'll fight them with the butt ends of broken beer bottles because that's bloody well all we've got!'

It was a speech that would ring out across the world and down the decades, stirring a deep and visceral patriotism, its words more powerful than weapons. But it was also a manifesto. In May 1940, Major Laurence Grand, Director of the Secret Intelligence Service's Section D (the 'D' stood for Destruction), wrote directly to the new prime minister suggesting the creation of a secret guerilla army, a British resistance force, that would obstruct and delay the progress of a German invasion. As a young subaltern, Grand had fought alongside T.E. Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia – against the Turkish army and had seen how effective and disruptive the Bedouin irregulars could be. And he knew that Churchill had fought in the Boer War, where local farmers had caused havoc with their hit-and-run commando raids. When the prime minister received Major Grand's proposal to set up the

Home Defence Scheme (HDS), he immediately agreed and gave its creation his full backing. Grand later wrote:

Recruitment went well. The qualifications were courage, intelligence and discretion, and the bait was a certainty of execution if caught. The results were the finest body of men that have ever been collected. All classes and trades were represented, bankers and poachers, clergymen and burglars, farmers and lawyers, policemen and shopkeepers, every sort and kind of trade and interest, and the whole representing a cross-section of England that would never submit to being ruled by an invader.

The HDS was soon absorbed into the Home Front's army command structure under General Hastings Lionel 'Pug' Ismay, Churchill's Chief of Staff and close confidant, and in a meeting at Chequers on 30 June, considerable resources were committed to its rapid creation. Under Intelligence Officers, a network of regions was set up that stretched from Caithness to Cornwall. Each recruited patrols of six to eight men who would be based at secret bunkers (known as Operational Bases, or OBs) placed in strategic positions, like the one above Greenhead Farm.

Familiarity with the surrounding countryside was vital, a matter of life and death, for patrols were to operate only at night. After the German invasion, their targets were to be ammunition and fuel dumps, bridges, railways, trains, airfields, transport depots and any points where enemy movement might be impeded. Those who volunteered took an immense risk, and so did their families, even though they knew nothing of what they were doing. In occupied France, wives, children and grandparents had been summarily shot if no satisfactory explanation for the absence of a father, brother or son could be given. And the underground OBs were allocated tinned rations that would last for only a fortnight,

the accepted life expectancy of an active patrol in Nazi-occupied Britain.

At regional headquarters – mainly large country houses commandeered by the army – an intensive training programme was initiated. Patrol members were taught the techniques of silent killing with a knife or garotte, as well as how to use explosives and hone their firearm skills. Assassination would certainly be a key part of the guerilla war, and not only the killing of enemy sentries, officers or leaders. Anyone with information about the make-up of a patrol and the whereabouts of an OB would be summarily, rapidly, executed as German Panzers spearheaded an advance across the south-east of England. Bridge Patrol, in Kent, had been spotted near their OB by a local gamekeeper who boasted that he ‘knew what was going on’, and orders were issued for his elimination ‘when the balloon goes up’. An old couple who lived in a cottage too near an OB in Cornwall would be shot at the approach of the Germans. The patrol agreed to draw lots to determine which member would break into their house at night and execute them in their beds. Senior police officers had necessarily been part of the vetting process for members of this guerilla army, and because they had knowledge of the identities of patrol members, they too would be systematically assassinated when the invasion took place. And very high on any list there were known Nazi sympathisers as well as Fifth Columnists who would supply valuable local knowledge to the invaders. They too would have to be eliminated. This was no Dad’s Army, but a ruthless, courageous and determined secret force of saboteurs, spies and trained killers.

The Home Defence Scheme was renamed the Auxiliary Units, a deliberately vague term designed to protect its covert nature. Patrol members were known as ‘Auxiliers’. Their rapid creation and deployment allowed Winston Churchill to begin his speech of 4 June 1940 by offering no guarantees against imminent

invasion, but nevertheless promising the most dogged resistance possible:

We shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone . . . and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.

This was not wishful thinking based on a vague, hopeful belief in British patriotism: it was an expression of policy. For the Empire and the USA, the New World, to come to the rescue, what Churchill needed was delay: not a collapse as happened in France in the summer of 1940 but a continuing struggle, a fierce, heroic, self-sacrificing resistance. The Auxiliary Units would fight on for years, until the end, and, if necessary, alone. There would be no surrender.