

# Chapter 1

*Every road towards a better state of society is blocked, sooner or later, by war, by threats of war, by preparations for war... war, which is mass murder organized in cold blood.*

## *Ends and Means*

Young men died in wars and old men lied about what they had done in them; George had no intention of falling into either category. He was going to keep his head (when all around were losing theirs), do a good job for a short while and return as soon as possible to Nettie.

He smiled ruefully. Why the silly girl had joined up herself, he would never know. It had quite spoilt their secret engagement ceremony, him knowing that she was off to play at soldiers. Perhaps he should not have told her so.

There had been one of those stormy moments when she tossed her black curls and wondered that he thought so little of her. He hadn't pressed the point; time would do that for him. Time when she was wearing the scratchy, unbecoming fabric of army uniform, time following the orders of some other girl, who could also be better occupied.

Follow orders? Nettie? When, one day not too far away, she promised in church to obey him, she would probably cross her fingers. How could he protect her if she tossed her head and went her own way? Nettie was supposed to be at home, safe, waiting for his return, not charging off round the countryside. She could have no idea what real soldiers like him would be doing on a daily basis.

Truth to tell, he had little idea himself yet, but it had been made clear during the six months training that he must keep his kit in impeccable order and run long distances carrying heavy weights. Whatever its military purpose, (his being not to reason why), he was on his first visit across the border from Scotland, his first trip abroad, and, for all his wide reading, he hung open-mouthed on the foreign sights.

For centuries, the British upper classes had sent their children on a Tour of Europe at their coming of age; for young men of all classes, the Second World War enforced such a Tour on a scale never seen before. For twenty-two-year old Private George Swan Taylor, his Tour started with a lump in the throat.

Goodbye to his parents had not stirred by a hairsbreadth from the Victorian restraint which ruled all their relations. The emotional temperature had risen just enough for his father to say, 'Of course, I no longer expect you to repay your university fees, not with this...' and his

slight hand gesture indicated the station platform, crowded with men in khaki, their sobbing women and small children taking what might be a last look.

‘It will just take longer,’ George replied, earning a nod of approval.

Perhaps George had imagined a flicker of envy in his father’s eyes, his Headmaster father who was recalled from his regiment in 1914 because his country needed its teachers. The photograph of his father in his Black Watch kilt stood proudly on the dresser but the uniform had never left for France with its regiment.

Or perhaps George was wrong and it had been fear for his elder son, controlled through habit. His mother’s, ‘You will write, dear,’ struck him more as a command than a plea, and it had been, as always, Nettie’s hazel eyes which showered him with love and pride. Even if she said nothing, her heart was always in her eyes, sparkling as she smiled for him.

‘Do I look all right?’ she asked him and he regarded her forehead, clear and shining under its halo of fashionably rolled back curls, her red wool coat with a black velvet collar – a present from her sister Jean, who enjoyed spoiling the baby of the family – and he had said, ‘You look fine.’

That was not enough and she pressed, ‘I want you to remember me.’ For two pins he would have run away with her there and then, let the army go hang, let Hitler win the war, but the same eyes would not have let him (she would not have loved him so much, loved he not honour more).

He understood that about his girl only too well. She was in love with romance itself as much as he was in love with her. All he could say was, ‘I’ll remember you,’ and he had looked away from her disappointment. One day he would find the words she wanted.

The glitter in her eyes spilled onto her cheek as she waved, and he watched her through the bobbing heads and shoulders beside him, crowding the train doorway. He screwed up his eyes to sharpen his last glimpse. It was going to be a long... year? Yes, surely a year would do it, earn him time at home, and then back to it, beating the Hun.

How his younger brother David had looked at him when he came home for the weekend and said he’d signed up for the full seven, not just for the duration of the war. George told him, ‘Makes no difference; it will last that long anyway.’ David himself had missed conscription by a narrow squeak, using Uncle Willie’s connections to join the Signals and avoid the Infantry, just before George announced his news.

And then there was a train, and men, and endless physical drill, turning left on command, right on command, eating to command, *yes sir no sir three bags full sir* until you even breathed in unison. Basic bodily functions were an act of anarchism, surprising you with the

reminder that anything, other than your rank, could be private, that anything could be beyond army control.

When he signed up with the Royal Army Medical Corps in September 1939, George left a Chemistry degree course at the University of Dundee for a different sort of higher education. If he were honest, he had been restless, not convinced that he was cut out to be Mr Taylor, the Pharmacist, for the rest of his life, even with Nettie beside him.

Instead, he was becoming Taylor, regressing to the relationship with officers which he'd had with his high school teachers, remembering how to disappear into safe insignificance, doing what he was told. Too many Scots for him to become 'Jock' or 'Haggis' but he supposed those too might become an option. George was ceasing to exist.

Despite the confusion of a heavy snowfall, marching orders, a lorry and another train took the men to Southampton docks, where they boarded *the Amsterdam* within an hour, claimed their fifty cigarettes and iron ration, and bunked down, three to a cabin. They were delayed at Spithead from 3pm till midnight, waiting for an accompanying convoy, but safely reached Cherbourg at 7.30 am on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1940.

George managed a wash and shave in the water trough on the station platform and then forced down some 'stew' for lunch, a slop of meaty mess which made him nostalgic for his mother's cooking. He took up the offer of a visit to see the town with an anticipation which quickly turned to anti-climax. His accompanying officers and sergeant seemed equally unimpressed by the shabby grey buildings and the slovenly air about the town, as sour-faced locals reluctantly opened shutters to poorly stocked shops. If this was the Continent, he had no idea why the rich would holiday here.

Perhaps David would have made more of it, speaking French as he did, but even he would have had to work hard to charm a welcome. At least George had time to stretch his legs before cramming with seven others of the party into a second class carriage at the end of the train, knowing he was lucky to have that much room, as the men had been split into three groups, each looking after a train.

After a surprisingly good night's sleep, George visited the train cookhouse and was revitalised by two slices of ham and bread, and tea. He passed the time when off-duty playing cards or reading his copy of *Ends and Means*, a work he found very much to his own way of thinking. Huxley would have been amused to hear his philosophical work being passed off as 'ways of improving at cards' when George suffered a few pointed queries on his choice of material. It was easier to get on with other chaps if you didn't flaunt your brains too much, very like schooldays.

The French countryside flashed reflections across the pages of George's book, whitening the shadows as the snow thickened, softening trees and fields to rounded silhouettes, icing bridges over broad, shivering rivers.

Standards dropped at lunchtime when George faced more stew but the bar of chocolate at teatime saved the day. There was no drinking water available so the men had to rely on their water bottles and an occasional tea. Before he signed up, George had never really considered what he ate and drank, nor when, but it quickly became the timetable, highlight – or disappointment – and conversation topic of his day.

Duty consisted of an hour with four patients in the Medical Room, at 9pm and 3am, allowing George two spells asleep, which terminated at 9am in a mild, rainy Marseilles. Despite the all-too familiar weather, this was more like it, with the sort of bungalows and scenery that might attract a chap to explore further. No such luck this time and the train took them relentlessly right to the docks and the waiting *Duchess of Atholl*, twenty thousand tons of the best of British shipbuilding, from the Clyde, no doubt. This was definitely more like it; hammocks, four course dinners and waiter service – everything the third class passengers would have had – and paid for. Marvellous!

Bolstered by the good food, a fortnight's pay and a ten shilling sub, a welcome advance payment, George found his sea-legs and his way to the dining-room, with only a few wrong turnings. Even they rewarded him with a blue beyond his experience of Leven and Largo, his Scottish coastal home; a blue to tempt him out on deck in shirt and pants, sunbathing, in February.

Even when the seas grew wilder and ropes were put in place to enable safe movement from door to door, the only grey was the accompanying destroyer. Some of the party were detailed as sentries and submarine look-outs but George was free to sway with the roughening sea, rocking to surprisingly sound sleep in his hammock.

Morning brought the usual army routine of inspection, followed by an hour's gym but the rumour that they would reach Malta at four o'clock lifted the men through early tea, into full marching orders and standby, keeping them buoyant for the two hours until they finally docked.

George later recorded his first impressions in black ink, in his flowing, looped hand with a hint of angularity to digits and each letter 'r', contradicted by extravagance in the tall initial stroke of a 'p' or the additional curling loops on a capital 'W' or 'T'. His makeshift diary was a Stores Writing Tablet of thin lined paper, with a grey card cover.

*Darling,*

*It is due to the fact that one is not allowed to write much that has made my mind up to chronicle to a certain extent the details of my now somewhat varied existence.*

***Monday 19:2:40***

*The first sight of Malta from the harbour is wonderful – maybe you have seen it in the pictures? The houses tiered on the hills all round with arches and semi-tropical trees. Then it began to get dusk and the moon started shining. All the lights around began to twinkle and it added more charm to the scene.*

*About 6.45pm we started to disembark – I can't describe it – all I can say is 'marvellous and wonderful'. All the lights on the hills round about, the moon, the ships' lights for disembarking and the little gondolas sailing around – each with its fairy lamp.*

*We got to the shore at 7.15pm and were met on the landing at Valetta. We were taken to buses and driven about seven miles across the island to what is known as Imtarfa. On arriving we were given supper and then – after talking, went to bed – and I didn't need to be rocked.*

***Tuesday 20:2:40***

*Up at 6am – washed, shaved, cleaned and on parade at 7.15am. Given another Medical Inspection.*

*Breakfast at 8.15am. Wrote a letter to you about 9am and at 10am we were chased out to permit inspection of room. Went across to the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institute) which is only a minute away and I had a nice cup of tea and two cakes. Came back and laid kit for inspection.*

*At two o'clock, the barber walked in and asked if I wanted a hair cut – so I did. It's fine when the barber comes to you! Then we had inspection until 3.30pm and I think I made a good impression. After that we had tea and four of us went for a walk. (Here we do not wear respirators as it is still a peace time station but we must wear belts for protection)*

*I saw anemonies in full bloom – tropical trees and do you remember that cactus my Mother had about 2 feet high – Well! I saw one the same – only it was fifteen feet high! On our walk we were pestered all the time – boys selling things and begging halfpennies.*

*One man collared us and said he would show us the Catacombs – after about twenty yards, I said I wasn't going and turned back. I had only gone a few yards when another joined me as he didn't want to go either. About half an hour later we saw the other two again and they hadn't gone. He had asked them into a 'pub' first and they had managed to get out of it and*

*leave him. The 'natives' will run a mile if you take off your belt but sticking a knife in you in the Catacombs would be a pleasure. Anyway, we got back quite safely at 5.30pm.*

*Then I went to the NAAFI and bought this writing pad – then beat a fellow nicely at table tennis and then went to the pictures in the NAAFI at 6.30pm. It was a very good picture and I got back at 8.30pm when I started writing this.*

*It seems ridiculous, I know, but my face is red as a beetroot with the sun! I wasn't sick on the boat but since I came off it, the ground still insists on rocking! We have a wireless in every barrack room; although the time here is one hour ahead of that in Britain.*

*I think I have done very well for tonight so I will reserve the rest for a later date.  
Goodnight Darling.*

