

## Chapter Twenty Three

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Tom had just embarked on his first tour of duty after passing out from RDTE. He was leaning on one of the low stone walls that edged the causeway, and desultorily watching the passing traffic. The so-called spring shower that has passed over earlier this morning had now cleared. Somehow, he mused, showers at this time of year always seem to be rather heavier than one expected. Now, it was still chilly and windy, but at least he could see buds forming on the stunted bushes and hedgerows in the vicinity, and could sense that summer was finally on its way.

He felt he had got the measure of the Reserve Defence Training Establishment, after the graduation event a scant few weeks ago. After twenty-four weeks at Cliviger Grange, he was beginning to get a certain restless feeling, wondering if that day would ever come.

In the event, the passing-out ceremony itself was rather low-key and something of an anticlimax. It seemed that the intake at the Grange was never very large, and on this occasion only a few dozen men and women actually graduated. Each of them was presented with a thin pass-book and a folded slip of paper. The latter was written on one side in English and on the other in the Lyndesfarne language, which conveyed to anyone who cared to read it that the holder was entitled to certain responsibilities and privileges, couched in the vaguest possible language, as a probationary member of the Guardians.

There was precious little evidence of an audience from the outside world at the ceremony. No one seemed to have any friends or relatives in attendance, with the unsurprising exception of Stan and Charlie. The families of the two cousins had turned out in force, including an aged but still formidable figure that Tom suspected was their grandmother.

With much noise and enthusiasm, and a certain amount of manifest pride, the extended family cheered their junior members, and applauded politely at the presentation to all of the other newly-minted members of the Guardian corps.

Tom felt like another milestone in his life had been completed. His old friend Alistair was now assigned to the Guides where, as had been predicted, his growing language skills would be a considerable asset. Alistair had explained that this would involve a further series

of instruction sessions with much practical work and on-the-job training, attached to a mentor who it seemed would act much like the old-fashioned idea of a master to an apprentice. It would also involve a lot of travelling, in both worlds.

“I won’t be in the same place two nights running,” Alistair had quipped.

“Just like being in the Army, again!” Tom had rejoined.

The two of them had both promised to keep in touch, although neither of the young men were people to whom the writing of letters would come very naturally. Even so, they thoroughly expected to meet up again in the summer, as both of them had taken up Bram’s out-of-the-blue invitation to return to his parents’ house on the first weekend in July. The letters from Bram, written on the same heavy paper that had been used for their introduction to Guardian school, were becoming increasingly familiar, as they had both remained in occasional contact over the last few months.

The two men shook hands warmly, and then Alistair went to cadge a lift to the crossing to meet with his Guide Master.

One facet of the Guardian’s job which had not been part of the formal training, but was blindingly obvious in hindsight, was the dealings with the British police.

The local policemen were well known to the Guardians. The neighbourhood coppers would turn up at the causeway from time to time, usually riding a bicycle. On one of Tom’s probationary watches at the crossing, Fred – once again acting as his mentor – took the precaution of introducing him to one of the local bobbies. He was an amiable old buffer who had been in these parts of many years, who rejoiced in the name of Percival Nelson.

It was clear that the old bobby was at least somewhat aware of the special nature of the crossing. As long as it was apparent that matters in the region were all under control, the policeman tended to leave well alone, although it was unclear to Tom whether this was simply laziness or a mark of professional courtesy.

As Tom watched the afternoon travellers, Constable Nelson appeared around the bend in the road leading to the crossing, riding very steadily on a black-painted sit-up-and-beg bicycle that was probably nearly as old as he was. Even so, the bright chrome-work of the wheels and handlebars was as good as new, and Tom suspected that the old boy probably polished the machine every day.

The bobby braked to a stop, which took very little effort, and leaned his bike carefully against the wall of the stone building that served as a guard post. He stretched his back then, nodding affably to

Tom, wandered over to join a couple of the more senior Guardians on duty.

Constable Nelson seemed slightly more agitated than usual, and appeared to be keen to impart some urgent intelligence, or perhaps just fresh gossip, to the gathered audience. In any case, after a few minutes chewing the fat with the varied Guardians, the copper remounted his ancient bicycle, and cycled away at a velocity that, Tom considered, was only just fast enough for him to be able to balance upright.

Tom's shift came to an end in the early afternoon came as something of a relief after the early start in what seemed like the middle of the night. As he was sometimes able to do, he cadged a lift in the back of one of the supply trucks returning to the Grange, rather than awaiting the official transport, which always seemed to entail a longer than necessary wait.

The driver, a jobs-worth type, insisted that Tom could not ride in the cab, being "contrary to the regulations", and he was forced to make himself as comfortable as possible in the back, in amongst the miscellaneous cartons and boxes being taken to the Establishment.

Tom found that he was bracing himself to ameliorate the effects of the bumpy ride, while staring idly out of the back of the lorry. He was just musing about the copper and his comical old bike when he caught a flash of polished metal in the trees at the side of the road.

Barely pausing to consider the consequences, Tom banged loudly on the bulkhead between him and the driver.

"Stop!" he shouted.

To Tom's relief, the driver slewed to a halt almost immediately, hurling luggage and passenger around. Tom jumped out and ran around to the front of the lorry, where the driver had wound down his window.

"What's going on?" he asked, sounding peeved at the interruption to the normal routine.

"There's something in the woods back there," Tom shouted, "I'll have a look!"

Tom ran back to the point where he thought he had spotted the metalwork in the hedgerow. Behind him, he could hear the crunch and whine of the truck being reversed, with evident bad grace, by the irate driver.

"Here, look!" Tom shouted again, as the truck pulled alongside him.

It was Constable Nelson's bicycle, which looked like it had been hurriedly concealed under a couple of fallen branches. Tom pulled

away the obscuring foliage, and tugged at the bike handlebars, trying to free it from the undergrowth. To his mounting horror, he found that the reason the bicycle was difficult to move was that the body of the policeman was weighting it down.

“Here, give me a hand,” Tom called to the driver, “I think the copper’s dead!”

Tom was familiar with enough bodies from his wartime experiences to be able to quickly tell that the policeman was quite dead, and that he had been shot fairly recently and at short range, too.

Tom and the driver looked at each other, then sprinted for the truck.

“We’ve got to get back to the guard post, and get some assistance” Tom gasped, clambering into the passenger seat.

The driver grunted his assent, quickly starting the engine and turning in the road with a screech of tyres and a spray of gravel, which contrasted sharply with his previously sedate style of driving.

The return trip to the causeway took about a third of the time, Tom judged, than the outbound section. He hung on for grim death as the lorry bounced and rattled on the road, the driver wrestling expertly with the wheel in an attempt to shave a few seconds of their arrival time.

Tom jumped out of the lorry and sprinted over to Fred, who was chatting to the on-duty Guardians who had just taken over the watch.

“Constable Nelson’s dead!” he gasped, interrupting one of Fred’s familiar anecdotes, “He’s been shot!”

Despite the usually rather relaxed attitude affected by the Guardians, the serious mettle of the corps was now demonstrated by the way the men jumped-to at the news. Both on-duty members and those who had just stood down swung into action without hesitation. Sergeant Brasham, who was the Duty officer, directed the deployment, somehow managing the trick of making himself heard across the bustle without apparently raising his voice.

Fred was instructed to form a party to go back and collect the body, and investigate the scene of the incident. He had a hurried conversation with the lorry driver to ascertain the exact location of the body and bicycle. A few moments later, a small convoy of trucks roared away, including the truck Tom had ridden in himself. He assumed that the driver had volunteered to direct them

Tom had been briefed on standard alert procedures, which was that, when anything unusual was reported, the Guardians should enter a higher state of vigilance which, in these post-war days, still involved small arms being broken out from the secure storage below

the guard building. He and Ifor had been given the job of distributing weapons from the Armoury. The two men wrestled a case of rifles up the stairs before returning as quickly as they could, staggering under the weight of the ammunition boxes.

Other groups had been directed to communicate with the Lyndesfarne Guardians, hurrying off to the signals tower to send an urgent message. Tom knew that they must already know something was going on, since the sound of the alarm siren would have easily carried across the straights in this weather.

Suddenly, there was a roar of engines from the road as three men on motorbikes appeared at speed. One of the Guardians on duty, a man that Tom did not know by name, was standing in the road, waved his arm to stop the machines. The motorcyclists ignored him, and the Guardian was forced to dive to one side as the bikers rushed through the barrier which would have stopped other motorised transport and hurtled along the causeway towards the bridge.

The riders were dressed as tourists, motorcycle enthusiasts of the kind who occasionally appeared at the crossing, and who were usually successfully discouraged from crossing. They were riding bikes which had probably seen military service. All three of the bikes had panniers on either side of the rear wheel, and the riders each wore a heavy rucksack.

“They have explosives!” the Guardian shouted as he picked himself up from the verge.

He had spotted something bulky protruding from the heavily-laden panniers – something they would later discover to be the detonators for the charges.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. Hearing the cry, Tom span around, with one of the rifles from the armoury already in his hands. The ammo box was on the ground just a few steps away. Diving forward, Tom grabbed a magazine and loaded the rifle with a practiced action. With barely a moment to aim, Tom loosed off a shot at the men, understanding that there were only a few seconds before the riders would get to the bend in the causeway and thereby be partially shielded by the stone parapets.

Tom’s shot had hit the leading cyclist in the shoulder. He jerked, losing his grip on the machine and fell off, his motorbike crashing to the cobbles with its engine racing. The second rider, following close behind, collided with the fallen machine and was propelled over the handlebars. The third rider, who had been lagging a little behind the other two, attempted to swerve around the carnage. He lost control,

skidding his machine along the stones of the parapet with a shower of sparks and a scream of tortured metal.

Tom fired again, and a third time. The shots became a fusillade as Ifor and a couple of other Guardians had armed themselves with rifles from the case. The three men on the causeway returned fire with pistols, seeking cover behind their overturned motorbikes. The Guardians took up positions to either side of the causeway entrance, ducking down below the stone walls as bullets ricocheted over their heads. One of the injured men could be seen struggling with the panniers.

“Shoot him!” the Sergeant shouted, “Don’t let them blow up the causeway!”

Guardian reinforcements emerged from the guard post, some carrying Tommy-guns. The men on the causeway were overwhelmed, cut down by machine-gun fire.

The incident debrief was worryingly inconclusive. With all three of the attackers dead, there was little that could be discovered about the origin and motivation for the attack.

The men were identified eventually, presumably, Tom thought, with some assistance from the regular British authorities, but there was nothing unusual in their backgrounds. As far as could be determined, none of the dead men had any connection with Lyndesfarne or the crossing at all. It seemed to be some kind of a sleeper cell, but their affiliation was entirely unclear. Tom got the distinct impression that extensive investigations were being undertaken, but he heard nothing about who or what was really behind the assault.

The motorbikes had been reported stolen in the last six months, in various parts of the North East of England, and never recovered. The weaponry and explosives were German in origin – but this meant nothing, since extensive looting during the War had meant that many guns originally issued to the German military were now circulating on the Black Market.

Tom was publicly congratulated by Major Markham in a short ceremony back at Cliviger Grange some weeks later, as well as recommended for a commendation – he would be “mentioned in dispatches” in the formal reports sent to the Boards of Control in both worlds.

Afterwards, Sergeant Brasham had a more private word with Tom.

“It was only your alarm that saved the day,” he said quietly, “If the motorcyclists had appeared without warning, we would never

have been able to stop them in time. And they could have blown up the bridge. Well done – you’ve the makings of a fine Guardian, young man.”

Fred also sought Tom out afterwards, and spoke about Constable Nelson.

“The poor copper must have just happened on the three attackers on the road,” Fred suggested sadly, “Just bad luck. Percy was a nosy old bastard. I suppose that’s an essential trait in a good copper, but probably did for him in the end.”

Tom nodded in agreement.

“He probably stopped the motorcyclists, and asked what was in the panniers,” the older man continued, “And got shot for his pains, to silence him.”

Fred’s conclusion was that the motorcyclists must have hidden the dead man and his bicycle when they heard the lorry approaching, intending to wait until they thought the coast was clear.

“But their plans were further upset when you spotted the dead man in the undergrowth,” he continued, “And they were probably already rapidly approaching the causeway when you got back there. They knew that their only chance was to break through before we could deploy properly.”

“But what were they trying to achieve?” Tom asked.

“I’m guessing, of course,” Fred concluded, “It was more than just an attempt to blow up the causeway. It could always be rebuilt, after all. No, the real reason was to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the Guardians – to provoke a reaction so that the Boards would insist that the crossing was closed.”