

Chapter Eight

During that summer working on the farm, Alistair, Bram and Tom put in many long hot hours at their tasks. They were rewarded by three hearty meals a day and a modest wage at the end of the week. In the evening, when the farm work was done and they had eaten their dinner, they did what young men of their background often did when they had no particular commitments of an evening and a little money burning a hole in their pocket. They went to the pub.

The village lay at the end of a winding and often dusty lane down the hill from the farm. There was rarely any traffic on it, especially after dark. This was just as well, given that this was the route they used to make their way back late in the evening after consuming a few pints of the local strong dark ale.

The village boasted two pubs at opposite ends of the High Street. These were located on the major route through the parish – hardly a main road, thought Tom – with the clear intent of intercepting arriving travellers as soon as possible. The comrades faced a tough decision every evening when reaching the end of the lane from the farm: turn right or left. This invariably required a certain amount of discussion and negotiation.

Usually, they would turn left and make their way to the “Black Bull”, which had the advantage of being larger and slightly closer to the farm. This hostelry was frequented by workers and labourers from the surrounding area, and was often very jolly and raucous. There was regularly music and singing around the piano later in the evening, with one or another of the men grinding out an energetic and often suggestive ditty. Always lively and amusing, Tom had considered, but not the best place for a quiet pint after a hard day working on the land.

For a change, it was possible to go to the “Ship and Anchor” at the other end of the village. This pub tended to be frequented by an older, or at least quieter, clientele: quiet men, and a few women, of middle age who looked like they had seen a lot of life and, in some cases, genuinely had the scars to show for it. It was a place to enjoy a quiet chat with one’s companions; the regulars tended to keep themselves to themselves.

One evening, after a strenuous and exhausting day digging ditches, the three companions were sitting in the farm kitchen where

they had just taken their evening meal. Bram appeared distracted, caught up in his own thoughts, so Tom turned to Alistair and asked him if he wanted to go for a drink this evening. Alistair agreed immediately, so Tom interrupted Bram's thoughts and asked Bram if he wanted to accompany them. He appeared to consider for a moment then, coming to a decision, said, "Not tonight, chaps. I'm feeling a bit tired this evening. I think I'll stay here and perhaps make a few jottings."

He waved his notebook to emphasise the point.

"Fair enough," Tom said, turning back to Alistair, "Let's go, then."

The two men picked up their hats and set off. At the road junction, they decided wordlessly that the "Ship" was the choice for the evening. The aches caused by their digging had hardly been eased by the stroll down the hill, and they both felt that a quiet pint or two of muscle relaxant would help them sleep.

The interior of the "Ship" was low-ceilinged and rather dark, and both public bar and lounge were separated into sections by dividers of polished wood and etched glass. The three men made their way into the public bar, which was not particularly crowded and where their rough clothing would not be remarked upon, and the beer was slightly cheaper. The old wooden floor was scarred by the passage of many boots and stained by the spillage of many drinks.

Alistair got in their regular round, and the two men moved to sit in one of the divided sections, sliding their way onto the worn seating nearly as scarred as the floor and placing their glasses on the round wooden table. After drinking deeply from their pints to quench their thirst, the two men started a desultory conversation comparing the ditch-digging work they had been engaged in and various experiences while in the Army. They then fell to recalling some of the strange tales they have been told over the years.

As they chatted, an obviously ex-military man passed by their seats, and then doubled back to interrupt them, having overheard some of their conversation. They were on nodding terms with this old soldier, and had been given to understand from gossip around the bar that he had served with the royal artillery during the War. He was probably in reality only a little older than any of the companions, but looked prematurely aged, with grey hair and pallid skin that suggested, Tom considered, some unpleasant experiences in his past, a view emphasised by the burns and scars on his face and hands.

The old gunner smiled lopsidedly.

“I’ve heard a few things about you lads,” he said in a low hoarse voice which suggested that he was unable to speak any louder.

“What have you heard about us?” Alistair replied, politely but with a distinct undertone of suspicion.

“Well, I’ve heard that you boys have seen a bit of action in the War, and heard some things that few soldiers get to know about.”

Alistair appeared to relax a little.

“That’s true enough,” he allowed, “And I dare say that you’ve been in the thick of it a time or two.”

“Care to join us?” Tom interjected, indicating a seat.

The old gunner pulled up the offered chair and sat down.

“The local gossip has it that you were stationed hereabouts during the War,” Tom continued, repeating something that he had picked up on previous visits to this particular hostelry.

“Ha,” the other man snorted, “It’s no great secret, I suppose. I was based at a shore battery not far from the harbour at Seahouses, aways to the south of that strange island of Lyndesfarne. Smack bang in the middle of nowhere. Now, I don’t know whether you lads know the coastline hereabouts.”

Tom and Alistair shook their heads slowly.

“Ah, well. It’s a lonely part of the world. There are long windswept beaches with uneven sand and dangerous rocks and tiny islets, some barely uncovered even at low tide. In most places, it’s difficult to get a boat up to the beach, although there are a few spots where a skilled pilot can get a craft inshore without damage, at least in good weather. The whole area was the haunt of smugglers and highwaymen in times past. And you can see why – pretty unforgiving and desolate, all round.”

“And because the coastline was so isolated, an astonishing quantity of coastal defences had been erected. The beaches were practically covered in concrete tank traps and barbed wire.”

He sat back contemplatively for a moment.

“You know,” he reflected, “I’ve been out there few months ago, just for a bit of a noisy ‘round. And most of the defences have already been removed. Particularly efficient for the War Ministry, don’t you think?”

The gunner sucked at his teeth for a few seconds, evidently lost in thought. Then he shook his head, and refocused his attention on Tom and Alistair.

“At the start of the War,” he resumed, “We had a standard complement of gunners, a rough and ready crew, led by a crusty old

gunnery Sergeant who had probably been sinking ships with gunfire since before you or I were born.”

“The Sarge soon had us whipped into shape,” the gunner continued, “And a finer gunnery crew you couldn’t wish to find.”

The two companions nodded together, having both experienced the sharp tongue and savage wit of the average Sergeant-Major. The gunner returned to his tale.

“It was the beginning of 1940, when it seemed that a seaborne invasion would be upon us any day, that our little troupe was augmented by a couple of rather quiet young men. They had, well, a slightly strange appearance, although you would be hard-pushed to say exactly what was unusual about them. They both looked as if they were extremely uncomfortable in military uniform and they seemed to be muffled up in greatcoats in all weathers.”

“The young strangers both held the rank of lieutenant,” the older man continued, “So they outranked everyone in the place. They gave their infrequent orders as polite requests to the Sergeant. Amazingly, they were held in grudging respect by the Sarge, who did not usually have a great deal of time of officers.”

Both Tom and Alistair grinned wryly, very well aware of the frequent tension between young commissioned officers and veteran NCOs.

“What did these men do?” Alistair asked, genuinely puzzled.

The gunner sat back in his seat.

“They sat in the magazine and, well, did something to the shells,” he confided.

“What do you mean, did something?” Alistair asked,

“Well, there’s the thing. We never could work out exactly what they did but, whatever it was, they spent ages doing it.”

The gunner looked lost in thought for a few moments, then continued.

“They always looked tired afterwards,” he said slowly, as if this particular observation was one he had not made before, “Drained and shaking with fatigue.”

“But did they have some special tools or equipment?” Alistair inquired.

“Nothing at all. They always arrived and left empty-handed.”

“So how do you know that they had done anything?” Alistair persisted.

“Oh, you could always tell which shells had received their attention,” the old gunner answered, “There seemed to be some kind

of a sparkle inside the brass of the cartridge, but never in the steel of the shell itself.”

“Sparkle?” said Tom and Alistair together.

“Oh yes. It was as if there were tiny orange lights somehow inside the brass. I was sure that they actually moved within the metal, but only when you caught a glance out of the corner of your eye. If you watched them closely, they were always completely stationary.”

The old gunner could see that both Tom and Alistair were itching to find out exactly what was so special about these shells.

“The special shells, they almost never missed,” he said, sitting back in his chair with the air of one who has finally delivered a message.

“So you actually fired them in anger?” Alistair asked, with a slightly morbid fascination.

“Oh yes,” he replied, “Several times.”

The two young men were rapt, and waited rather impatiently for the old gunner to continue.

“Now, at that period, of course we maintained a twenty-four hour watch, with teams of spotters with powerful binoculars scanning the horizon. We also had short wave radio equipment, but usually other intelligence was communicated by field telephone, in order to maintain a radio silence as much as possible.”

The gunner paused for a moment, and the others leant closer so as not to miss anything he said.

“Now, when enemy ships came into view, we were instructed to get the range with the ordinary shells, and only then use the special ones. You lads have seen military service, in the infantry, right?”

Again, Tom and Alistair nodded in unison.

“We were in Germany, at the end,” Alistair said.

“Fair enough. But have you seen long-range guns in action?”

“Not close up,” Tom replied, “But we have been on the receiving end of an artillery barrage a time or two.”

“I dare say that’s true enough. But on this particular night back in 1940, we were the focus of an invasion. We weren’t sure at the time, but it became clear that this action was actually a fairly serious attempt to get an expeditionary force onto a beachhead near here.”

“Oh, it was described as an exploratory raid in the official reports, but it was pretty serious from where I was sitting. Actually, I wasn’t sitting – I was running around like a blue-arsed fly. Our heavy guns were in constant action, and I think we actually used most of those special shells.”

“The noise and the smoke were tremendous,” the old gunner reminisced, “The pounding of those big guns letting off their salvos was deafening, and the stench of cordite in the air was enough to make you retch. But, we made several direct hits on the invading craft and sunk at least one of them.”

“My battery was a prime target for the enemy guns, of course, and we took a direct hit from the German destroyer *Königen Louise*. I later heard that this was almost the last salvo got off by that ship, before she was sunk by gunfire from our defences.”

The gunner looked sunken in despondency for a few moments.

“We took a hit in the magazine, which exploded. The Sarge and most of the other men were killed,” he said slowly, “Somehow I was thrown clear by the blast. I thought I was going to die, but after a terrible wait, I was found and taken to a first aid post. I may well be the only survivor from the old battery.”

The gunner again paused, evidently in thought of his old companions now long since deceased. He touched one of the more livid scars on his face broodingly.

“I was invalided out of the army,” he resumed, his gravely voice now even quieter. “I was in recuperation for many years, allowing my scars to heal. It’s only recently that I’ve finally managed to recover my voice, and even now my throat gets sore when I speak for very long.”

The older man stretched, then stood up, leaning forward and leaning on the table to look Alistair and Tom in the eyes.

“I’ve never told this story to anyone before,” he said, “But you seemed to me to be lads who’d understand.”

Without another word, he turned and left the pub.