



**Carter's
Commandos
Book 1**

**Operation
Absolom**



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By

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Carter's Commandos – Book 1

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1 – Parachutes

Wiltshire, June 1941

The light lanced through Carter's eyelids and fought his efforts to remain asleep. Reluctantly he raised his head from the pillow and used his hand to shield his eyes while he identified the cause of this rude awakening. At the foot of his bed stood a soldier.

"Sorry, Sir. Orderly Officer's¹ compliments, but he says can you report to the Guardroom, fighting order². There's a bit of a flap on."

"OK. Tell him I'm on my way." Carter dragged himself out of bed and started to dress, his fingers fumbling with buttons and boot laces as his brain struggled to catch up with his body.

It was probably another drill, Carter thought. These things always were. He'd get to the Guardroom and there would be the CO, stopwatch in hand, timing the speed of his response to the summons. Or maybe it would be someone from Division HQ, sent to test the reactions of the battalion.

Just his luck to be in the duty company for the week. Not just the company, but to command the actual duty platoon that would be the first to be dragged out of bed. He consoled himself with the fact that now he had been woken, his fellow platoon commanders in B Company would also be being woken.

Grabbing his hat from the hook behind the door, he jammed it on his head and hurried through the corridors of the still slumbering Officers' Mess. Outside, the moon shone brightly, illuminating the barracks with a poor substitute for street lights.

As he jogged towards the Guardroom he caught up with some of his platoon, ambling towards the main gate, chatting and laughing.

"What do you think you're doing, walking during a drill. Get a move on, double march." He bellowed as he passed them. Taken by surprise by his sudden appearance, they broke into a run. Carter identified a couple of faces, he'd deal with them later.

Arriving at the Guardroom he pushed his way through the blackout curtain, past the Orderly Sergeant and into the rear office. The Orderly Officer was 'Gunner' Grant, one of the Platoon Commanders from D Company.

"Ah, Steven, I've had orders from Division. There's been a report of thousands of paratroops landing in the Salisbury area. I'll give you the details in a minute. The whole of the South Coast has been put on alert in case this is the start of the invasion.

The invasion again. Since September 1940 the likelihood of a German invasion had dropped dramatically, but still Division used it as the basis for drills such as this.

"OK, well, I suppose we have to go along with this."

The Orderly Officer was taken aback by Carter's reply. "This isn't a joke, Steven. This is for real."

"You mean it's not a drill?"

"No. This is a real report. As I said, the whole of the South Coast, from Dover to Penzance, is in a flap. The Orderly Sergeant will issue live ammunition to you and your men. I've got transport on the way. Your orders are to get down to Salisbury and carry out a reconnaissance and report back on what you find; numbers, apparent intentions, you know the sort of thing."

Carter did know the sort of thing. It was the usual things a defensive reconnaissance patrol would report on.

“OK. where are we going?”

The Orderly Officer pointed to a map of the area posted on the office wall. It showed the area around the barracks between the A303 to the north and Salisbury to the south. “The report was that there are paratroops close to the village of South Newton, about five miles from here.” Carter made a note of the grid reference for the village. “The report said they were landing to the east of the village, so that would place them between there and the village of Lower Woodford. Your orders are to advance to South Newton and carry out a recce in an eastwards direction until you make contact. Then remain and report back. The rest of B Company will follow you, then the rest of the Battalion, once we’ve got them out of their beds.”

It was a daunting task. His platoon was only twenty four men strong, plus himself and the Platoon Sergeant. On the plus side, if there were thousands of paratroops in the area, they wouldn’t be hard to find. “Now, I’ve managed to get a map of the area for you.” He handed Carter a neatly folded map, which Carter knew he would have to unfold and then re-fold so that it was displayed correctly in his map case. He’d often wondered why the Ordnance Survey and the War Office had never got together and agreed on the best way to fold maps for use by the military. For the moment he pushed it inside his battledress blouse.

“OK, I’d better get going.”

He went out into the main Guardroom, where the Orderly Sergeant was doling out boxes of ammunition to the section corporals, fifty rounds per man. These were being passed out through the door to the waiting men. On the end of the counter were two boxes of point four five five calibre ammunition for Carter’s Webley revolver. He scooped them up and pushed them into his ammunition pouches, one on either side of his webbing harness. He would load his revolver as they travelled. First, though, he had to brief his men.

Carter’s Platoon Sergeant, Albert Liddle, was with the waiting men. “Platoon, ’shun!” he called, when he saw Carter appear. It was dark after the brightness of the Guardroom’s interior and Carter’s eyes struggled to adjust. He could only make out the shapes of his men, not any identifying features.

“At ease, men. OK, 4 Platoon.” He started. “This isn’t a drill, it’s the real thing. There have been reports of enemy paratroops landing about five miles to the south of us and we’ve been given the task of going and taking a look to see what they’re up to. Now, you’ve been issued with live ammunition, but you have to take care. That figure looming out of the darkness in front of you may be a Jerry parachutist, but equally it might be some old bloke staggering back home from the pub.” This elicited a chuckle from his men. “Make sure you challenge first, loudly and clearly. If he shoots at you, you may shoot back; even if he is an old bloke on his way back from the pub.” This brought more laughter.

“I’ll brief you again when we get to where we’re going.” As he said it, a 3 Ton lorry pulled to a halt behind him with a squeal of protesting brakes.

“OK, men.” Sgt Liddle shouted. “All aboard lads; chop chop.”

Carter went around to the passenger side and climbed into the cab next to the Service Corps driver. He pulled the map out and showed the man where they were going. “I know it, Sir.” The driver said. “It’ll take about ten minutes to get there.” A hand banged on the roof of

the cab to tell the occupants that the Platoon were all on board. The driver ground the gears and they pulled away into the night.

As they travelled, Carter puzzled over what he had been asked to do. It made no sort of military sense. Not only had the risk of invasion been pretty much discounted since the end of the previous year, Salisbury was such an unlikely place for paratroops to land. It's main claim to fame was its cathedral with its four hundred and four foot spire, but that would only be of interest to tourists, not to Jerry paratroops.

Not only was there nothing of strategic importance in the area, it was too far inland. It must be nearly thirty miles to the nearest point of the coast. That was far too far for a relieving force to penetrate before the paratroops would inevitably be overpowered by the British troops in the area, troops like his own battalion. Even using *Blitzkrieg*³ tactics a German relief force couldn't hope to make it that far inland so quickly. By the same measure, it was too far inland for it to be a raid. No airborne raiding force could hope to make its way back to the coast to take boats back to France. None of it made any sort of tactical or strategic sense.

As they approached their destination, Carter's eye was drawn to flickering lights across the fields to his left. "What the devil's that?" He asked, not really expecting a reply.

The driver stole a glance before returning his eyes to the road. "Looks like a fire to me."

"Yes, that's what I thought. But it's totally against blackout regulations to have a bonfire lit at night. Which means ..." He let his mind join the dots. "... which means it wasn't lit buy anyone from around here. Stop the truck." He ordered.

The driver did as he was told. "Stay here, keep the engine running." Carter said as he climbed down from the cab. He jogged around to the tailgate.

"Everyone off." He ordered. "Four section, you stay here and guard the lorry, make sure no one tries to steal it. The rest of you form line abreast along the road. You see that fire?" he asked, He didn't wait for a reply. "We're going to take a look at it. Keep in line, if you see anything suspicious, call out and we'll stop and take a look."

He led the troops off the road and into the adjacent field. By his reckoning the fire was about half a mile away. Ten minutes' walk so long as they didn't encounter any obstructions, or any enemy paratroops.

The fire had started to dwindle; it had probably started to burn itself out some time before, Now it was just a few stubborn patches of flames in between the twisted skeleton of an aircraft. It was more like a burning dinosaur skeleton than something that might once have flown. In the darkness Carter couldn't be sure what type it had been. A Heinkel perhaps.

The blitz was long passed, but the *Luftwaffe* still paid regular night time visits to Britain's cities, though not with such large numbers of aircraft as in the Summer of 1940. From where it had crashed it had likely been somewhere like Bristol, Newport or Cardiff; Birmingham was an outside bet. It had probably been intercepted by a British night fighter, or maybe hit by anti-aircraft fire and made it as far as this before crashing.

If it was Heinkel then it would have had a crew of five. Was that the answer to the conundrum? Five parachutists, exaggerated into a force of thousands by multiple reports, fear and night time imagination. Carter couldn't be sure, but it was a more likely explanation than an invasion.

Across the fields drifted the sound of lorry engines. Carter turned to see headlights further back along the road. From the thin slits of their headlights he could tell there were at least three vehicles travelling in convoy. That would be about right if it was the rest of B Company. "Sgt Liddle, send a runner back to the road to intercept those vehicles. Pass my compliments to whoever is in charge and tell him what we found. Ask them to wait and I'll be there shortly."

To the rest of the platoon he said "OK, men. Looks like it's the crew of this aircraft that we're looking for. Up to five Jerries, if they all made it out alive. Spread out and search the immediate area. One section go to the left, two section go right, then circle around about a hundred yards out and meet up on the far side. Sgt Liddle is in charge, if you don't find anything, return to the road. Three section come with me in case I need you."

It would be unlikely that the crew would be around here if they had escaped by parachute. The aircraft would have descended at a steep angle, while nature would have blown the crew in whatever direction the wind was blowing, possibly miles from where the aircraft eventually crashed. Carter checked his watch; oh four thirty hours, perhaps another hour before the sun rose to give them any significant light to see by.

Leading three section back the way they had come, Carter made his way to the road. He was greeted by the Company Commander, Maj Congreve, who was standing beside Carter's lorry.

"A crashed Heinkel." Carter reported. "At least, that's what it looks like. It doesn't look much like a Heinkel now though. No sign of the crew but I've got my men doing a local area search. My guess is that they were blown ahead of the aircraft." He pulled his map out of his battledress blouse and spread it on the ground. Kneeling down he shone a torch on it. "We're here, Sir." He pointed to a spot on the line printed on the map that marked the road. "The wind is blowing from the south west, so ..." he traced a line on the map leading towards Andover, "I think they'll be somewhere along this route."

"You're discounting the possibility of an invasion, then." The Company Commander's tone was light, not accusatory.

"Not discounting it totally, Sir, but thinking that the crew of a downed bomber is a more likely explanation for the sighting of parachutes. If there is a battalion of *Fallschirmjäger* out there, then that line of search is as logical as any other."

"If it was an invasion it would be more than a battalion, but I think you are probably right. Given the reports, that line is as good a search route as any. OK, I'll get the rest of the Company out of the trucks. We'll go line abreast from the left-hand side of the crash, while your Platoon can extend the line to the right. We'll search for two miles, then we'll turn back. When we turn we'll split the line in the middle, two platoons to the right hand side and two to the left. If it comes to that we'll use runners to maintain contact.

One hundred and twenty men, advancing at five yard intervals, meant that they would cover a swathe of land six hundred yards wide. When they turned back, they would sweep two more sections of land on either side of the original track, each three hundred yards wide.

"I'm going to radio back to Battalion HQ and suggest they take the rest of the battalion to the far side of the search area, at Lower Woodford and do the same from that side, so we meet in the middle. If there's anything to be found, we'll find it."

Or the crew of the aircraft will slip sideways out of the gap in the middle, but Carter kept the thought to himself. They really needed forces on either side to close the box, but that wasn't his call. The Company Commander had formed his plan and it was Carter's job to follow it.

The two sections of Carter's platoon that had been searching around the aircraft wreckage returned to the road and he quickly briefed his Platoon on the search procedure.

"Keep the noise to a minimum and the chat to zero." He admonished. "If the crew are out there, we don't want them to know we're coming until we trip over them. Keep your eyes peeled on the ground between you as well as to your front, and if you come across any bushes or the like, make sure you give them a thorough examination. In fact fix your bayonets. The sight of those poking through the undergrowth will force anyone into the open." It was true that the vicious spike bayonets were frightening, held at arm's length on the end of a Lee Enfield rifle, it extended a soldier's reach by up to four feet.

He placed Sgt Liddle at the left hand end of the line, where it butted up against 1 Platoon, while he placed himself at the right hand end, the final man at the end of the six hundred yard wide advance. A whistle sounded a single blast and the line moved raggedly forward. They would take their pace from the Company Commander, some three hundred yards away in the middle of the line.

They hiked for a mile, the slow pace of the advance eating up time. The eastern horizon, diagonally to their left, was starting to lighten when Carter heard one of his men call out, stopping the line in a wave motion as the message was passed along it. Carter hurried to see what had caused the halt.

"Over there, Sir." The soldier, a Private by the name of Grimshaw pointed.

Straining his eyes, Carter peered into the early morning gloom. There it was, something rising and falling, shifting in the light breeze; sometimes large, sometimes smaller. A parachute, Carter decided.

"OK, Grimshaw, you come with me." Carter turned to see who the next man in line was, to his right. Pvt King. A reliable sort. "You come too, King. Keep spaced out on either side of me."

The object was about a hundred yards in front. They advanced slowly, expecting a gun shot at any moment, but nothing was heard except the rustle and snap of the parachute, louder as they got closer. From about fifty yards out they could see that there was something bulky lying at the end of the shrouds nearest to them, the parachute being blown away from them. At thirty yards distance Carter was pretty sure it was a man. He jerked as the parachute pulled at him but made no effort to defend himself. Unconscious, Carter thought. Or dead.

His latter suspicion was confirmed when they reached him. He was wearing a one piece flying suit, a leather helmet and goggles concealing most of his face and head. Well, the suit had been one piece. Now it had a great gash across the airman's body, through which internal organs were now poking. It was a wonder that he had made it out of the aircraft at all. Had he died before or after landing? Carter wondered.

He turned to Pvt King. "Go back and find the Company Commander and tell him what we've found. Grimshaw, you stay here until the rest of your section reach you, then make a stretcher using your rifles and gas capes⁴. Take him back to the truck. Be as gentle as you can with him.

Carter jogged back to the search line and detailed off Grimshaw's section to go and assist him with the body. The rest of the line closed up to fill the gap and Carter passed the word along that the line could advance.

There were curious glances as the Platoon passed the dead German. For the new recruits, Carter included, it would be the first time they had seen a dead body. The veterans of Dunkirk would have seen plenty.

They had gone another half mile, the daylight starting to increase rapidly, when a shot rang out. The veterans dived to the ground at once, but the newer recruits were slower to react. "Down!" Sgt Liddle bellowed, bringing an immediate reaction. Carter would reflect later that the men seemed to be more afraid of their Sergeant than they were of gunfire.

Raising himself up, Carter tried to see from where the gun had been fired. The long grass of the meadow defeated him.

"2 Platoon will advance by Sections." Carter called. "Four section first, followed by one and two." Three section was the one detailed to look after the German body. He raised himself onto one knee. "Four section, advance!"

He stood and ran forward with his men, racing about twenty yards before shouting "Down!" His men dropped obediently to the ground, then completed their manoeuvre by scuttling through the grass on their knees and elbows to confuse the aim of any German that had seen where they had gone to ground.

They had only been on their feet for a few seconds, but it had been enough time for Carter to see the humps of some bodies in the grass about fifty yards in front of them. Boots thudded through the grass as the next section advanced and more shots were fired from in front of them. "To your front, cover fire!" Carter bawled. His section let out a ragged volley. It wouldn't be accurate, but it would keep the German's heads down.

Two section went to ground to their front and left and immediately opened fire on the enemy. Carter heard Sgt Liddle shouting at the remaining troop to advance, as two section joined his own men in providing covering fire.

As one section hit the ground, Carter shout "Four section up!" at the same time as he launched himself to his feet. He was just about to order his men to go to ground again when a figure in front of him stood up and began waving its arms frantically. A second stood and he, too, waved his arms. Snatches of German reached Carter's ears.

"Cease firing!" Carter shouted, straining his voice to make himself heard above the cacophony of small arms fire. He had to repeat the order several times before the last rifle fell silent. Carter suspected that most of the rifle magazines were now empty and that was the main reason why his men had stopped firing.

"One section, circle left." He ordered, "and four section circle right. Two section with me. Advance to your front."

They got within ten yards before Carter brought his men to a halt. In front of them four aircrew now stood with their hands in the air. "Do any of you speak English?" Carter called.

"A little." The one on the extreme right said.

"Tell your friends to drop all their weapons. My men will search you."

Pistols were thrown to the ground, followed by knives that had been stored in sheaths stitched into the legs of their flying suits.

Carter detailed four men to stand in front of the prisoners, their bayonets poised just inches from their chests, while four others went around behind them to carry out body searches for more weapons, or anything that could be used as a weapon. The other two sections formed a ring around them, their weapons raised, daring any of the Germans to make a run for it.

“Our gunner, have you seen him?” The English speaker asked.

“I’m sorry. We found his body back there.”

The German translated and there was some muttering from his fellow crew members, but they remained passive enough.

“What happened to you?” Carter asked the German who spoke English.

“We were returning from our mission. We got too close to Bristol and we were hit by *flak*⁵. We continued to here, but our aircraft ...” He used his hands to indicate the aircraft losing a dangerous amount height

Hearing sounds from behind him, Carter turned to see the Company Commander approaching, a section of men spread out behind him to provide an escort. Close by him was a radio operator, bending under the weight of a Type 18 set.

“Well done, Steven.” Congreve said as he approached. “Are they all here?”

“Yes, Sir. With the body they’re all present and accounted for, unless they had any passengers on board.”

“I’ll just report back and see what the CO wants to do now.”

Taking the handset for the radio from the operator, Congreve had a lengthy exchange of radio messages, before turning his attention back to Carter.

“The CO wants us to return to the trucks and wait for him there. We can send the prisoners back to barracks in one of the trucks, under guard.”

“I wonder why the CO wants us to wait?”

“We’ll find out soon enough. Your men can have the honour of escorting the prisoners. Two sections should do it. The rest can wait with the rest of the company until the CO arrives.”

* * *

It was an hour before the rest of the battalion arrived, crossing the farmland from the other edge of the search area.

“No sign of the bastards!” The CO said as he arrived. Although it was still early in the day, the sun was now starting to climb high into the sky. “They must have gone to ground in the forest to wait for their relief force.” He pointed towards the west where trees marked the boundary of a broad forested swathe. It wasn’t a complete barrier. Over the years, patches had been cleared for farms and small holdings, but it was a still a large enough area to rival the New Forest, which lay further south.

The illogicality of the Germans landing so far inland seemed to have escaped Lt Col Neville.

“What if there were no paratroops, Sir? What if all there was is the bomber crew?” Carter ventured.

“Nonsense! The reports said there were thousands of them.”

“But reports can be misleading, especially at night, Sir.” Carter persisted. “There may have been duplicated sightings ...”

“Division said there were thousands. Are you saying that Division has got it wrong?” The CO’s face was starting to turn a dangerous shade of red.

“I think that what Carter means, Sir,” The company commander intervening, his tone conciliatory, “is that with a lack of any sign of paratroops, it is possible that Division has been misinformed.”

“Well I believe that the paratroops are hidden away in the forest. I can smell them, Congreve.” The Colonel tapped his nose. “They’re there alright. Now, I’m going to split you up by companies and allocate grid sections to you all. You are to search each grid section in turn until we find them. You, Carter,” the CO turned his stern gaze on his junior officer, “you seem reluctant to believe they’re there, so you can set up a road block here. Stop and question everyone who passes through the area and find out what they’ve seen. Someone must have seen some sign of them.”

Only if there was a sign to be seen, Carter thought. This was a wild goose chase using men who were already tired after hunting across Salisbury Plain for a non-existent enemy. They had done well to find the German aircrew so quickly, especially in the dark. They should be allowed to return to the barracks for some well-earned rest. None of which Carter said out loud.

Instead he started to organise his remaining men into a road block, two men on either side of the road, with the rest in a defensive perimeter along the sides of the road. He sited Bren guns to fire along the approaches in both directions. All the trucks carried picks and shovels strapped to the outside and Carter now put them to use digging weapons pits. By heaping the soil up as walls they doubled the defensive height without having to dig too deep. It was a method used to construct defences since the days of the Roman legions.

Carter regretted putting his men to such unnecessary work and they would have to fill the pits in again when they were finally stood down, but it would only attract criticism from the CO if he ignored the basics.

Congreve, the Company Commander, crossed over to him and took him to one side. “You did well with that section attack, Steven. It was just the right tactical response against a small force like that.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Just remember, though, to set your Bren guns out on either flank, so they can fire ahead of your line of advance and keep the enemy’s heads down.”

Carter could feel himself blush slightly. Of course, he had forgotten that. Stupid! It was basic stuff. “Sorry, Sir”

“Don’t get too upset about it. It was your first proper opposed action. It’s easy to forget something in the heat of the moment. Just a learning point, that’s all. Something to think about for next time.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“As for this, the CO seems to think that the Germans are still out there, so we had better go and look for them.” He turned and walked back towards the rest of the company, who were standing or sitting about along the side of the closest field.

Carter went to the nearest weapons pit and took a hand at the digging. It was good for morale for the officers to be seen sharing the workload with the men, though not all his peers seemed to think that.

The day wore on, getting hotter. There was no shade along the side of the road and Carter could feel his skin start to prickle with sunburn. On this Sunday morning there was little traffic on the road, just a few farmers going out to tend flocks or herds before returning to eat their Sunday lunches.

Word was sent back by the Company Commander that the invasion alert had been cancelled. As dawn broke along the South Coast it revealed a sea totally empty of enemy shipping. Yet still the CO insisted in continuing the search through the forest. At noon Carter caught sight of him further along the road, accompanied by his radio operator and personal escort, climbing into his car and driving off in the direction of the barracks.

A short while later Carter saw a pair of cyclists approaching. As they drew closer Carter could see that one was a man and the other was a woman, no longer in the first flush of youth. Carter wasn't going to stop them, but they drew to a halt anyway.

"So, did you find those Jerries?" The man asked, a broad smile on his face.

"We captured a German bomber crew. Four survivors and one dead."

"But what about the others? There must 'ave been 'undreds of 'em." The man persisted.

"You saw them?" Carter asked.

"Course I saw 'em. Dropping out of the sky over that direction." He pointed towards the area where the Germans had been found.

"You waz drunk." The woman chimed in, a disapproving look on her face. "I said there was only a few, but would you listen? No, you and Arnold Fitchett wouldn't listen."

"Who rang the police?" Carter asked.

"That was Arnold. He ran to the phone box, while I watched."

"How did you know there were hundreds of them? Surely it was too dark to see clearly."

"Because of the battle." The man beamed. "Hundreds of guns going off all at the same time. Were you and your men involved?"

"Not in a battle. There were a few shots fired later, around five a.m."

"Yes, I 'eard them too, when I got up for milking. But the battle earlier was much bigger."

"What I think you heard was the exploding ammunition from the crashed bomber. The fire heats up the bullets in the machine guns and they go off like fire crackers." Carter explained.

"So there was no battle?"

"You can only have a battle if there are two sides to fight each other. Me and my men were the first to arrive on the scene after the alarm was raised."

"I told you it weren't no invasion." The woman scolded her husband. "Bloody Summer Festival."

"What's a Summer Festival?" Carter asked, curious now that he was able to corroborate his theory that the report of the bomber crew's parachutes had caused a false alarm.

"It's an old tradition around here." The man explained, cutting across his wife before she could speak again. "All the villages around here hold a summer festival, the weekend after Mid Summer's Day. So it was held last night."

"Is there much drinking involved?"

“There certainly is.” The woman snapped, a sour look on her face. “This one was seeing double by the end.”

“Treble more like.” The man laughed.

Carter had always considered the saying ‘seeing double’ to be figurative, but given the reports of thousands of paratroops, where there had only been five, he now reconsidered his view.

“Well, thank you for your help. Rest assured that there are no more German paratroops in the area now.”

“Good job too. I’d ’ave sen them off, don’t you worry.” He said as he climbed back onto his bike.

“You’d a done nothing of the like.” His wife said, also getting back on her bike. “Silly old fool.”

They cycled off down the road, bickering amicably.

An hour later the Company Commander returned, along with his men. “We’ve been recalled to barracks.” He said. “The CO thinks we’ve been out on this ‘training exercise’, as he has renamed it, for long enough.

Carter recounted what the couple on their bikes had told him.

“Easy mistake for a civilian to make, I suppose. Better safe than sorry and it has done no harm for the Battalion’s response capability to be tested.

It was Congreve’s way of dealing with the situation without sounding critical of his superior. Carter ordered his men into a truck and they travelled the short distance back to barracks.

As the Service Corps driver steered them along the road, Carter thought about the morning’s events. Notwithstanding the time wasted after the CO had arrived, he had actually enjoyed the hunt for the German bomber crew. It was the first time he had faced enemy fire, even though it was only a few pistol shots. It had got the adrenalin flowing and sharpened his reactions.

Unfortunately, it only served to throw the tedium of garrison soldiering into a starker contrast.

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Footnotes for Chapter 1.

¹ Orderly Officer – A duty officer who acts in place of the Commanding Officer at night and at weekends. He is authorised to take whatever action he deems fit to deal with an incident until relieved by an officer of more senior rank. Junior officers carry out the duty on a rota basis.

² Fighting order – the equipment that is necessary for a soldier to engage in combat. As well as uniform, helmet and a weapon it will include a webbing harness supporting ammunition pouches, water bottle, bayonet, respirator (gas mask) holder and a small pack containing shaving kit, spare socks and underwear, spare bootlaces, mess tins and, possibly, a small quantity of field rations. Marching order is similar, but the small pack is replaced by a

big pack which is capable of holding spare uniform items, boots and other equipment so that the soldier can maintain himself in the field for longer periods. To the back of the pack will be strapped a ‘trenching tool’, a combined pick axe and shovel with a removable handle. Fighting order may involve burdens of up to 30 lbs (13 kgs) weight, marching order could go up as high as 60 lbs (27 kgs). Special forces, such as commandos or paratroops, would increase this to as much as 80 lbs (36 kgs).

³ *Blitzkrieg* – a military tactic based on using highly mobile forces to concentrate firepower to achieve early breakthroughs and disrupt enemy defences. Used to good effect by the Germans in their invasion of the Low Countries and France in the Spring of 1940.

⁴ Gas cape – a type of waterproof poncho. Invented during the First World War to keep chemical droplets from contaminating soldiers’ uniforms, It was an easy garment to hose down after a gas attack. Mainly used as rainwear or to construct bivouacs during World War II.

⁵ *Flak*. – from the German *Fliegerabwehrkanone* meaning ‘aircraft defence gun’. The word had its origins in World War I but was common to both English and Germans by World War II.

⁶ Mention In Dispatches - As the name implies, an award for soldiers whose name is especially named in dispatches for their conduct, following action in combat. There is no medal, but the recipient receives a certificate and wears a bronze oak leaf badge above their breast pocket to signify the honour. The badge may be worn on the ribbon for the campaign medal for the relevant action, if one was awarded. It is one of only three awards that may be made posthumously.

⁷ Pip – The small cloth or metal badges worn to indicate certain officer ranks. Their official name is “Bath stars”, because they are a miniature version of the star that is the centrepiece of The Order of the Bath. Except for those worn by Guards officers, which are different designs depending on their regiment.

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