JOHN RANDALL AND M J TROW

THE LAST GENTLEMAN OF THE SAS

The moving testimony from the first Allied officer to enter Belsen at the end of the Second World War

About the Book

In 1945, John Randall was the first Allied officer to enter Bergen-Belsen – the concentration camp that would reveal the horrors of the Holocaust to the world. Now in his 90s, Randall was one of that league of extraordinary gentlemen handpicked for suicidally dangerous missions behind enemy lines in North Africa, Italy, France and Germany throughout the Second World War.

He was a man of his class and of his times. He hated the Germans, liked the French and was unimpressed by the Americans and the Arabs. He was an outrageous flirt, as might be expected of a man who served in Phantom alongside film stars David Niven and Hugh Williams. He played rugby with Paddy Mayne, the larger-than-life colonel of the SAS and winner of four DSOs. He pushed Randolph Churchill, son of the Prime Minister, out of an aeroplane. He wined and dined in nightclubs as part of the generation that lived for each day because they might not see another.

This extraordinary true story, partly based on previously unpublished diaries, presents a different slant on that mighty war through the eyes of a restless young man eager for action and adventure.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Acknowledgements
Prologue: The Gates of Hell

1. A Chip Off the Old Block
2. The Phoniest of Wars
3. An Officer and a Gentleman
4. ‘So this is War’
5. ‘Grin, you Bugger, grin!’
6. Omega and Alpha
7. Glamorous Phantom
8. Out of Africa
9. The Bunch of Misfits
10. In the Belly of the Beast
11. Seven Brave Men
12. ‘Is Paris Burning?’
13. A Miracle in Belsen

Epilogue: We Shall Remember Them
Picture Section
Notes
Select Bibliography
About the Authors
Copyright

THE LAST GENTLEMAN – OF THE – SAS

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PROLOGUE

The Gates of Hell

An ordinary road. A warm spring day, 'Somewhere in Germany'. Lieutenant John Randall was actually 30 miles south of Luneburg Heath and forests of pines and silver birch clothed the road. There was something terrible about riding ahead of a main army, even though Randall and his driver, Corporal Brown, had been effectively doing this for months and all their training had been directed towards it. Like the horsed Light Cavalry of 50 years earlier, they were the eyes and ears of the main army, the van, the front line, the Forlorn Hope, whatever analogy military men have used over time. To say that they were exposed, alone and vulnerable does not begin to describe it. At any moment, behind any tree in those thousands of trees, there could have been a sniper, a Waffen SS unit, someone who had these two men of 1 SAS in the cross-hairs of his sights. It was April 1945 and Hitler's Third Reich was falling apart. That made some Germans desperate, bent on revenge, determined to take as many Allies as they could with them when they went down.

There were just the two of the Allies that day in an open-topped, khaki and green painted jeep, complete with twin Browning machine guns and a bazooka. The thing jolted in every rutted pot hole and jarred a man's spine to buggery. Of course, there were rumours of where the Germans were, confirmed or not confirmed by aerial reconnaissance. But the retreat was happening so fast now that reconnaissance of the conventional type became pointless. They had chased

the Wehrmacht all the way from the beaches of Normandy, through the long months of a French autumn and winter, and were now deep inside the invincible Reich itself. It had not been easy and anybody who thought taking on Hitler in his own backyard would be child’s play was deeply deluded.

With Brown’s eyes pinned on the road, it was Randall who saw them first, a pair of huge gates to the right, the sunshine dappling on the curling wrought iron. They were wide open and beyond them a rutted path curved into the trees. He did not know what this was; some country house, perhaps, which the Wehrmacht had probably occupied long ago just as the British Army had tended to do back home. Randall told Brown to spin the wheel; they would take a look.

For the rest of his life, John Randall wished he had not made that decision. Because what he saw was the stuff of nightmare. And anybody who witnessed what these men did would have their lives changed by it. Everybody who saw what lay beyond those gates in the hours and days ahead was brought face to face with the most unimaginable evil. The Russian Red Army had seen it already as they drove into the Reich from the east, but at that stage the British had nothing to do with them and, anyway, their tales would not have been believed. No, a man had to see this place for himself. It had to be confronted – *they* had to confront it because this was what they had gone to war for in the first place. What had Neville Chamberlain said in his speech to the nation on 3 September 1939? ‘It is the evil things that we will be fighting against; brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution.’ In essence, of course, he was right. But he had no idea.

From the day John Randall decided to turn into that gateway, the British perception of Germany and the Germans would never be the same again.

The first thing he noticed was the potential danger. It became instinctive in a unit like 1 SAS; men developed a nose for it. The drone of an engine, the snap of a twig, a passing civilian with a weapon-shaped bulge under his coat. This particular danger was more obvious; SS guards in their field grey and caps with death's head badges, watching them. Brown drove slowly, at perhaps three miles an hour. Randall had his pistol in his hand, but already he could count more than the clip held. Would he have time to reload in the event of a firefight? Could he swing the Brownings into action or even grab the bazooka in time? The peculiar thing was that the guards showed no sign of fight at all. The gates and the barbed wire told the men of 1 SAS that this was some sort of camp, so perhaps the men they met were not the fanatical Waffen SS who had been ordered by their Führer to sell every foot of ground with their lives. They were armed, certainly, but their rifles and machine guns lay idly by and they almost ignored the newcomers.

The whole thing was surreal. Randall had seen beaten men before, trudging columns of the vanquished on the road, now their prisoners. Men with blank stares and empty eyes, shot to hell and back and not knowing what day it was. In France, in Germany, in North Africa – the look was the same. But these men were not like that. They were fit and well. It was just that the fight had gone out of them and there were not many of them there.

The jeep had travelled perhaps 30 yards. Randall noticed the low wooden buildings beyond some sort of gatehouse, huts extending row upon row, like makeshift army barracks anywhere in Europe. He was aware of a strange smell. A smell that became overpowering as that surreal journey continued. It was sickly sweet, a smell of decay. A smell of death.

First one, then two, then a handful of people came towards the jeep. Corporal Brown jammed on his brakes

and they both sat there, motionless, with the engine idling. The hair on Randall's scalp was crawling and he could not look at the man beside him. That was because he could not take his eyes off the swarm of humanity now threatening to engulf the jeep; a tide of human beings as Dante or Hieronymus Bosch imagined them, in print and on canvas. Some of them were wearing striped uniforms, once black and white and now a sickly grey. Some wore odd scraps of clothing, rags wrapped round bleeding feet or hanging off sores. Some were stark naked, men, women and children, utterly unconcerned about their nakedness. Their eyes were sunk into their heads, the bones of their skulls jutting under skin as yellow and fragile as old parchment. Their hands reached out to the SAS men, grabbing at their sleeves, their trousers, anything they could reach.

The crescendo of noise from them was like nothing Randall had ever heard. A babble of every language in Europe, all of them asking for food, for clothes, for bandages, for help. They clearly recognised the newcomers as something different from their guards. The vehicle, the uniforms, the sudden unannounced arrival and the lack of a swastika. They did not recognise the winged dagger on their cap badges, but they knew they were not German. There was a crescendo of smell too that rose like a wave. Randall could not find a word for it. The best he could do was the slurry pit of some God-forsaken farmyard. The hands began to tug at his Denison smock and there were hundreds of them by now.

It all sounds like a scene from an over-the-top science-fiction film of the 1970s, the undead rising from their graves. In 1945, Randall and Brown had seen nothing like that on their cinema screens, but they had to tell themselves over and over again in those moments that these were people, human beings who desperately needed help.

John Randall stood up in the jeep and told them that he was a British officer, that there were others behind him, thousands of them, and they would bring food and medicine and freedom for them all. Not many of them could have heard him in that noise. Probably not many of them understood what he was saying even if they did hear. English was an alien tongue. And freedom more alien still.

Randall hissed at Brown to move on or they would have dragged them from the jeep. He gunned the engine and blasted his horn, forcing the ragged crowd to break for long enough for them to outrun them. Still the SS did nothing, just watched the scene as if it was newsreel stuff back home, an inverted sort of propaganda that Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's film-maker, might have made. Behind them, the crowd was surging, swarming as if it had a mind of its own, but, on its edges, individuals began to break away, walking like the lost souls they were. Randall had just told them that he was a British officer. So what? Where had the British been for so long? Now they were here, standard bearers of the greatest empire in history, they were two men and a jeep, with no food, no medicine, no help at all. They hadn't even killed a guard.

About 30 yards further on, the SAS men drove to the edge of what Randall could only describe as a grotesque potato patch. Except it was not potatoes lying in the shallow earth; it was people and they were dead. Had he thought about it, he would have been grateful that this was April and not the height of summer or the scene would have been made more ghastly by the flies, black and heavy on their human feast. They lay in heaps, bleached white, caked with their own excrement, arms and legs interlocked like some appalling Dance of Death. Durer would have known scenes like this, so would any survivor of the Black Death, standing on the edge of the plague pits they once dug beyond cities when the pestilence was at its worst. So decomposed were some of the bodies it was no longer

possible to tell their sex. Breasts had deflated, long empty of milk for dead babies. Hair was matted to scalps. Genitals had disappeared into the fatty slush they call adipocere.

And over them squatted human vultures. They were picking over the corpses, tearing off a striped jacket here, a cap there, a pair of ripped, ragged trousers and a shapeless pair of clogs. Dead men's shoes. They didn't notice the SAS patrol, fresh, young, healthy, aliens from a different world where things like this didn't happen. Randall couldn't find any words now, so he motioned his driver on. About 50 yards further into the camp, they came across a pit from hell. It was perhaps 50 feet square and 20 feet deep, the bottom littered with more corpses, older than the 'potato patch' they had left behind. If the stench so far had been appalling, now it was unbelievable. They both fought down the need to retch and did their best to keep themselves, somehow, together. Gases expand in bloated bodies and the whole pit twitched like a dying animal as first one corpse, then another, twisted and rolled. Eyes sunken and dead. Mouths hanging open. Beyond all help. Beyond all care. Beyond all belief.

It could not have been more than half an hour, yet it seemed like years. Randall and Brown stayed with the jeep, their guns at the ready, just in case any of the SS remembered they were supposed to be fighting the British. There was a snarl of an engine behind them and another SAS jeep was following them through the camp. Randall had never been so glad to see 'reinforcements' in his life, even though there were only two of them. At the wheel was Sergeant Reg Seekings, one of the most formidable of the 'Originals' who had fought with L Detachment all across North Africa and into Italy. He should have won a VC for that. Randall knew his look of old; the one he had on his face now as he sat behind the wheel of his jeep; a look that said, 'Somebody's going to pay for this.' Next to him was

Randall's squadron leader, Major John Tonkin, and he was a handy man to have at your side too. In one mission earlier in the year, he had got cut off in a cornfield. His orders had been to capture SS cipher books and, in the excitement of a firefight, he had had to go back to get them. Crawling through needle-sharp corn stalks, he came so close to the SS while planting bombs near them that their discarded chocolate wrappers fluttered down on his head. However, standing in that camp required courage of a different kind and all four men of the SAS hoped they had it.

They stood beside their jeeps staring at the horror in front of them. As they watched, a knot of Germans walked warily towards them. All the SAS guns were out now, nobody knowing quite what to expect. In the centre stood a stocky man with deep-set glittering eyes, his hair oily black and uncombed, his scarred cheeks covered in a few days' beard growth. His eyebrows were thick and beetling, and he looked a nasty piece of work. So did the blonde woman standing alongside him, wearing a dark-blue prison-guard uniform. She was younger than Randall, with large ice-blue eyes and thin lips twisted in a permanent sneer.

The man's lips parted in a half smile, the one he no doubt showed to all visitors. And he introduced himself. 'I am Josef Kramer,' he said. 'Welcome to KL Bergen-Belsen.'

1

A Chip Off the Old Block

The Allied officer who was first into Bergen-Belsen was born on 21 February 1920 into a world very different from today. In that month, the League of Nations was launched in London in the pious hope that there would never be another war in Europe. That seemed unlikely, because, also in that month, Leon Trotsky's Red Army was driving back the Whites along the Trans-Siberian railway. Their leader, Admiral Kolchak, had been executed in Irkutsk and his body thrown into a frozen river. He died, according to an eyewitness, 'like an Englishman'. In Germany, Left and Right continued to contend for control of the city streets, with violence in Berlin being directed against the Jews, who, Right-wingers said, had started the war in the first place.

The cost of the Great War, both in terms of human casualties and materiel, was staggering. At sea, where the world had learned the terrible reality of U-boat warfare, Britain had lost over 900,000 tonnes of shipping, easily the heaviest loss of any combatant country. Three-quarters of a million Britons died and 200,000 from the British Empire. Men spoke of the 'lost generation' and poets such as Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon spoke for them.

John Randall's father, also John, was part of the generation of young men who went to war in 1914, with flags flying and drums beating. It was infamously a war that would be over by Christmas and it was one of the most

pointless ever fought. Randall's father was a captain in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, an elite regiment originally raised in 1755. Its motto was *Celer et Audax*, swift and bold, and its battle honours are impressive. In the Great War alone, it saw action everywhere on the Western Front, from Mons to Courtrai. It also fought in Italy and Macedonia, but John Randall Senior fought in Flanders.

His mother, Margaret May Newman, was training to be an opera singer in Brussels under the tutelage of Elizabeth Lehmann, and she would have a huge impact on John Hugh, born to her in Hampstead that February. The letters he wrote during the war in which he fought, and the numerous entries in his diaries, make it clear that she was a very important person in his life and there is no embarrassment at all in the fact that to the end of her days he called her 'Mummie'.

Hampstead, in 1920, was still, essentially, a village in suburbia where little had changed, despite the upheaval of war. The heath nearby was originally a medieval hunting ground and the village itself became a fashionable spa in the 18th century, where various politicians and men-about-town met to take the chalybeate waters. Samuel Johnson lived there for a while, as did the poet Keats and the artist John Constable. In 1906, a Garden Suburb had been set up with rules established by Henrietta Barnett. Every class of society was welcome, roads would be tree-lined and 40 feet wide, and there was a strong emphasis on quiet – even church bells were prohibited. Architects like Edward Lutyens and C.A. Voysey were brought in to build imaginative, beautiful cottages. It did not *quite* work out, however, because the roads were too narrow for public transport and the working class found the place artificial and decamped to the East End where they felt more at home. When the tube arrived in 1907, its platforms were 192 feet down – the deepest on the entire Underground system.

If middle-class Hampstead muddled on as before, the same could not be said of the Randalls. John's father, rather unusually for an Englishman, had been a 'Mountie' in Canada before the Great War, and it may be that there was a wanderlust in his blood. Alternatively, for many men with experiences of the trenches, settling down to life in post-war Britain was not that easy. There were serious strikes among coal miners, which were a forerunner of the altogether more spectacular General Strike of 1926. Ireland was in the grip of virtual civil war with Black and Tans on the streets of Dublin and there were 94 attacks on police stations in May 1921 alone. So John Randall Senior decided to take his family out to Kenya to try his hand at farming.

The disappearance of the British Empire is one of the most bewildering episodes of recent history, not because it happened but because of the speed at which it happened. What John Randall's father chose to do in 1921 was what many restless and ambitious young men had done in various remote hill stations of the Empire for 200 years. Today, it would be unthinkable. Even the pronunciation of 'Kenya' has changed.

In 1921, British East Africa comprised Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, and was the living legacy of the 'Scramble for Africa' that had dominated the last quarter of the 19th century. Germany and Italy, both new states jockeying for power and pre-eminence, had challenged Britain as the owner of the largest empire the world had ever known, and the 'dark continent', at once so mysterious[1] and so potentially rich, seemed the obvious hunting ground. Kenya had been a British Protectorate until July 1920 when it was annexed to the Crown. The lowland areas were fertile, producing flax, coffee, wheat, maize, sisal, tea and pyrethrum, and the uplands grew sugar, coconuts and

cotton. There was a lively trade in hides and skins, with large sheep and ostrich farms and cattle ranches.

While his father was running a coffee plantation up-country, little John spent his first years toddling with Masai and 'Loombier' tribesmen. In fact, when the Randall family came home two years later, he spoke as many Bantu words as he did English. The Masai tribesmen in particular, with their red-dyed hair, their tall imposing figures and their long-horned cattle, must have had an incredible effect on a little boy from far-away Hampstead. The 'Loombier' (John's memory of the name) were the Luhya tribe, people of the clan or those of the same hearth. From the 1890s until the Mau-Mau troubles 60 years later, both tribes lived peacefully with the British.

It may be that Randall's father realised that farming was not for him or perhaps the Kenyan episode was only ever intended to be short-lived. Either way, the Randalls were back in England by 1923, this time in Maida Vale. Young John was sent to Arnold House School where the headmistress was the daunting Miss Hanson who had established the place in 1905. Beginning with a mere nine boys, she had set out to rival the men in preparing suitable lads for public school. To get the attention of prospective parents, she had borrowed a carriage and pair from a local doctor before the Great War and made sure she was seen riding around in it.

Randall was not a natural academic, but he was a good all-round sportsman, naturally strong and with a surprising turn of speed. He won prizes on that score and his particular friend in those years was Reid Dick, the son of the famous sculptor who made the magnificent stone lions on the Menin Gate. At the age of nine, young John was sent away to boarding school as so many of his generation were and he entered the Preparatory School of St Lawrence College in Ramsgate. This was not mere chance; it was his father's *alma mater*.

The town itself of course – not that a ‘new bug’ would have had much chance to see it – was already a popular holiday resort by the late 1920s, made possible by the railways. It was seventy-four miles from London, and to a nine-year-old boy that must have seemed the far side of the moon. Steamers set out from here to various Channel ports and the town had been one of those hit by Zeppelin raids in the Great War. There was a promenade bustling from May to September and wide sandy beaches.

St Lawrence College was founded in 1879 as South Eastern College as a single house, like so many Victorian educational establishments. The buildings that Randall would have known, in imposing Gothic red brick, were established five years later but the chapel was still new when he arrived. Because of the risk of aerial bombing, the school had been evacuated to Chester in 1915, well out of range of any aircraft that the Kaiser’s Germany could send over.

John Randall hated it. He had not actually learned very much at Arnold House and non-academics got no sympathy from gowned masters who all had degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. There was a rigorous system of competition in place, which would make educationalists wince today. Marks in tests were read out in morning prayers in the new chapel every Friday. Three poor results meant detention and Randall achieved a school record once of thirteen in one week! The headmaster was a bully of the old school – Randall disliked him intensely and on one occasion he was ordered to the man’s study for the usual ‘six of the best’. While John waited in the dismal corridor outside, listening to the hiss and thump of the cane, the headmaster suddenly popped his head out of the door and said to him, ‘Are you the last?’

‘No, sir,’ Randall said. ‘Two more.’

‘I told you,’ the headmaster said, a sadist to the last, ‘to go to the end of the queue.’ And so the torture continued.

Because of his mother's musicality, she inevitably wanted the boy to learn the piano. But the instrument owned by St Lawrence Junior School was a clapped-out, honky-tonk one that refused to stay in tune. Like everything else he was to do in his life, John Randall gave it 100 per cent, but in the end a career as a concert pianist was not for him!

The one saving grace at St Lawrence Junior School actually came in the form of two people. One was the matron, a kindly lady who was everybody's fairy godmother and who remembered John's father when he had been there. The other was the odd-job man, 'Boots', a wonderful old boy who would go into Ramsgate with John's pocket money and buy birthday presents for the lad's parents.

Moving to the senior school at 14 was like a breath of fresh air. Young Randall was a member of Tower House, the oldest of the boarding houses set up in 1889. Once the College had been the academic home of doctors' and clergymen's sons, but now the boys came from all walks of life. Many of the staff were clerics, however, and John got his head down as well as he could to cope with the rigours of History, French, Maths and Science. Where he really excelled was on the sports field. The school was built on two sides of a road, linked by an underground passage, and there were extensive playing fields beyond that. He loved cricket, football, rugby, hockey and athletics, and played for the First XI and First XV. He was also captain of boxing and always remembered the stern advice his father had given him: 'I'll teach you to box; and never let me hear about you bullying another boy.' It was a lesson for life and the attitudes that young Randall learned on the playing field stayed with him too.

I have in front of me three pieces of John Randall's life from this period. One is a photograph of him in his striped rugger shirt. It was a present to his parents dated half term, summer 1937, and must have been one of the last taken before he left school. The second is, in effect, his

passport to the adult world. It is a postcard, posted exactly one year before the outbreak of the Second World War and addressed to John at the Old Cottage, Riverhead, Kent, to where the family had moved by this time. On the back are the results of his school certificate examination. He was not bad on the Acts of the Apostles, better on the New Testament. His Chaucer and Shakespeare were on a par and his History and Geography stood finely balanced too. His French was impressive, as was his Maths, and the master sending through the results wrote 'Well done!' on the bottom.

T.G. Mallinson, John's housemaster who had taught him French, was even more forthcoming three days later. 'Magnificent!' he wrote on another postcard. 'Delighted at your French credit. So Private Tuition was not in vain! Hearty congratulations on your school certificate with the three credits. Please tell your father how pleased I am – I don't suppose you'll forget to tell those relations who so much despised your chances.' Knowing John Randall as I do, I am sure he was modesty itself about that!

The late 1930s may have been an inauspicious time to enter the world of business, but it was where John Randall went anyway. His mother and various friends with connections got him an interview at Shell Mex House and, as an 18 year old with clear management potential, he started work as an office boy!

That summer, a pair of slacks would cost a nattily attired gent 30 shillings;[2] shorts would be 17/6d. He would have to pay one penny for a fresh peach and the same amount would get him two oranges. Perhaps John Randall had gone into the wrong business; in August, footballer Bryn Jones transferred from Wolves to Arsenal for a record fee of £13,000. And no doubt Randall was delighted that Len Hutton and England's cricketers annihilated Australia by an innings and 578 runs at the Oval.

In September, the news that dominated Europe and covered the front pages of British newspapers was the Munich crisis. As Nazi Germany sought to add yet more territory to the Reich in its policy of *lebensraum* (living space), the Chancellor Adolf Hitler had already effectively annexed Austria and was now claiming that the Czech Sudetenland should be added too. The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, became a footnote in history as the first occupant of Number 10 to fly, and he obtained a promise in writing from Hitler that the Sudetenland would be the last of his conquests.

Chamberlain has become synonymous with appeasement. 'I am a man of peace to the depths of my soul,' he once said. 'Armed conflict between nations is a nightmare to me.' He was briefly the hero of the hour at Heston Aerodrome, waving Hitler's infamous 'scrap of paper' and promising, 'I believe it is peace for our time.'

It was not. And John Randall's generation paid the price.

2

The Phoniest of Wars

John Randall had only been at Shell Mex House a few months when war broke out.

'I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street,' the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, broadcast to the nation. It was Sunday, 3 September, and thousands of very worried people sat huddled around their wireless sets to hear Chamberlain explain, 'This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note stating that, unless we heard from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that, consequently, this country is at war with Germany.'

And so Britain embarked on the People's War, a unique experience in which the streets of cities and even country lanes would become the front line. Everybody was expected to put on a uniform and 'do their bit'. The first bomb had already gone off – not dropped by the Luftwaffe, but planted by the IRA in Broadgate, Coventry, nine days *before* Chamberlain's announcement. Five people had died and scores more were injured.

Even so, the Mass-Observation Unit[1] reported that only one Briton in five actually expected war, and those few who had television sets must have been astounded when the BBC's service shut down in the middle of a Mickey Mouse cartoon and most of the football matches scheduled for 2

September were cancelled. Most of the West Ham team were already in uncomfortable, itchy khaki battledress by the next day.

At 11.27 a.m. on that ‘Chamberlain Sunday’, the air-raid sirens wailed over London for the first time. Men in tin hats with the initials ARP stencilled on them herded people into the Underground stations. Worshippers in St Paul’s Cathedral hurried down to the crypt. But it was all a false alarm. A single French fighter had flown into British airspace and triggered the early-warning radar system.

Then followed a long lull before the storm. In France, they called it *drôle de guerre* (the funny war); in Germany, *Sitzkrieg* (the armchair war) because nothing (except in Poland) seemed to be happening. There was no patriotic rush to join the colours as there had been in the summer of 1914, when every young man of John Randall’s age had queued outside their local recruitment office and been shipped off, with the minimum of training, to halt the German advance through Belgium. Randall’s father had fought in that war; his uncle George had been killed at Ypres. John’s was a wiser and more circumspect generation, made more so by the fact that *some* men who fought in the People’s War had fought in the Great War too.

Chamberlain’s government had decided that, in the event of war, the conscription introduced in 1916 should be brought into immediate effect. That did not mean that the dreaded buff envelope of the call-up fell on the morning mats of every male aged 18 to 41 immediately and simultaneously. In keeping with the spirit of the times, however, Shell Mex gave relevant employees the option. Randall received a courteous letter – if he wished to join the forces, he was to feel free to do so. It was good advice and he took it. The truth was that John was bored at home – ‘browned off’ was the phrase of the ’40s – and itching for some excitement. He wanted to be a fighter pilot. His

parents’ reaction was predictable. His mother fretted about her only son, as mothers will; his father expected it.

‘The Few’ would not become iconic heroes until the summer of 1940 when dog-fights took place in the skies over southern England and the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, immortalised them in his famous speech.[2] But they were already the ‘Brylcreem boys’, with a swagger and élan that might be expected of the newest branch of the services. The training of pilots took time, however, and John Randall, like many 19 year olds, was a young man in a hurry. He contacted his local unit, the 83rd Light Aircraft Battery of the Royal Artillery, with its headquarters in Sevenoaks, just up the road from his home. The town was a quiet quarter of what J.B. Priestley called the ‘old England’ of leafy lanes and a traditional way of life. It boasted the Vine, one of the oldest cricket clubs in the country. And, perhaps in keeping with Sevenoaks’ air of gentility, the commanding officer of the 83rd was Major Victor Cazalet.

Cazalet was a fascinating character, one of many whom Randall would meet over the next five years. He was a gentleman of the old school, 44 years old at the outbreak of war and MP for Chippenham in Wiltshire. He had been commissioned into the Queen’s Own West Kent Yeomanry in 1915, at a time when the regiment still had its horses, and had won the Military Cross two years later. He had won the Chippenham seat as a Conservative in 1924, the year in which the Right shuddered because Ramsay MacDonald became the first Labour Prime Minister. His sister, Thelma Cazalet-Keir, was also a Tory MP and a leading feminist at a time when women were still campaigning for voting equality with men.[3]

Cazalet was out of step with his time in the sense that he was a member of the Ninth Church of Christ Scientist, in London, then a rather shadowy cult with a small following.

His political leanings, however, were more conventional. The Spanish Civil War polarised Europe’s stance on the Left–Right political spectrum. Thinking men took sides, either to stop the threat of Fascism or to stem the rising tide of Communism – exactly the same dilemma that had led to the rise of Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany. Cazalet backed Franco’s Phalange and served on the Friends of National Spain committee.

In the Commons, Cazalet often spoke in support of his friend Winston Churchill, in the wilderness in the 1930s and at times almost a lone voice against the appeasement of Neville Chamberlain. It was Churchill who had given Cazalet the green light to set up the 83rd and this spoke volumes not only for the mindset of the man who would become the dogged hero of Number 10 but also for the whole quasi-amateur spirit of 1939–40. Country gentlemen had defended their hearths and homes for centuries; in fact, units like the West Kent Yeomanry had been specifically set up for that purpose in the 1790s to guard against attack from Revolutionary France. Throughout his wartime leadership as Prime Minister, Churchill delighted in the unconventional and approved wholeheartedly of both the elite units John Randall was later to join – Phantom and the SAS.

Cazalet lived in the grounds of Cranbrook School, 25 miles from Sevenoaks, one of the few in the vulnerable county of Kent that did not evacuate its pupils. It was here that Randall, as a mere 19-year-old gunner in the Royal Artillery, shook the hand of the soon-to-be-great, and already famous, Winston Churchill. People either loved Churchill or hated him, and Randall was in the first camp from that very first meeting. Branded a failure so often in his life, early in 1940 Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty (a post he had held in the Great War) and a member of Chamberlain’s War Cabinet. The homburg, the

spotted bow tie and the cigar were to become the visible icons of dogged Britishness in the months ahead.

John Randall was less enthusiastic about Cazalet's other friends. Many of them were thespians from the London stage and, since at the time Cazalet's unit had no uniforms and no guns, they spent their time putting on concert parties. If you ask John Randall today about this, he will say, 'You can guess what sort of shows they were.' Several of these men were quite openly homosexual, at a time when such activity was illegal. Henry Labouchere's 'blackmailers' charter', the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1884, which had outlawed homosexuality, was still current and would stay on the statute books until 1967.

The drill Randall learned was basic. Marching (which he grew to hate) in hob-nailed boots; how to load, strip and fire a .303 rifle and a short course on the gas attacks that everybody expected any minute.[4] He was also taught how to handle a Lewis gun.[5]

Promotion to sergeant did not just give John Randall stripes on the sleeves of his battledress; it also gave him a chance to manage men. To be fair, he had already had a taste of that at school, with his captaincy of various teams, but this was different. This was the outside world. And this was war. Even so, there was again an amateurishness about this time. 'I managed to get away with it,' he says today about his role in man-management. 'If anybody disagreed with me, I thumped them.' The thirty-five men of the 83rd were photographed in three ranks outside the makeshift Mess hut sometime in 1940. John Randall is standing at the back, second from the left, looking grim and determined, at ease with his hands behind his back, his white-banded field cap tucked under his right shoulder strap. He is clearly one of the youngest men there, 20 when this photograph was taken, and that fact alone must have given him problems.

By May 1940, Sergeant Randall found himself on duty guarding Chatham Docks, one of the oldest naval bases in the country and the birthplace of Nelson's HMS *Victory*. It was not a victory that Randall was witnessing now, however. It was a defeat. Neville Chamberlain had resigned after three days of agonising, and the reins of government passed to Churchill on 10 May. That was the day Hitler's Wehrmacht struck west and the phoney war was phoney no more. By the end of the month, the British Expeditionary Force had been effectively surrounded and the only means of escape was off the beaches at Dunkirk. Belgium had surrendered, and 750,000 Germans were forcing the British back into the sea. The roads were choked with refugees, clogging troop movements; survivors came back with stories of British heroism and German atrocities in equal number. Men, women and children were mown down on the roads, their bodies flung into ditches, but wave after wave of the Wehrmacht kept on coming, taking terrible punishment from the beleaguered British, but coming on nonetheless.

On 4 June, Operation Dynamo was launched. Every ship and boat available – the navy's destroyers and mine-sweepers, Channel ferries, river-launches, even fishing vessels – risked the sea crossing to get the troops off. The lines of battered, exhausted men waited patiently and waded up to their necks out to sea to reach the boats, some of which went back again and again. This was the army that John Randall saw limping home via Chatham. They were 'poor wretched fellows', he remembers, walking half asleep, with wounds under filthy bandages. Although 338,226 men were saved at Dunkirk, thousands had surrendered and had to be left behind. As did most of the guns, tanks and ammunition of an army that could ill afford to lose anything at all.

Churchill's rhetoric in the Commons reached new heights. That same day, he promised that '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 never surrender.'[6] Anthony Eden, Churchill's Minister of War, sitting near him on the Treasury benches, muttered to a colleague, 'Fight? What with? Broken bottles?' In time, the defeat would become the 'miracle' of Dunkirk and today it is celebrated almost as a victory. J.B. Priestley, broadcasting the day after Dynamo, began the turn-around propaganda:

> Our great-grandchildren, when they learn how we began this war by snatching glory out of defeat, and swept on to victory, may also learn how the little holiday steamers made an excursion to hell and came back victorious.[7]

At least, by the time he saw the shell-shocked columns hobbling home at Chatham, John Randall had a gun.

He had one, too, three months later and this time he was guarding Detling Aerodrome. Luftwaffe reconnaissance photographs showed quite clearly that British fighter planes, Spitfires and Hurricanes, were on the tarmac at Detling so it was the target for a major raid on 13 August. In fact, the airfield was used by Coastal Command only for the occasional refuel, unlike the nearby bases of Hawkinge and Biggin Hill. The attack on Detling was a classic example of the right hand not knowing what the left was doing. The Observer Corps had seen a huge bomber squadron coming in over the Kent coast but they had no direct telephone link to Detling. The information had to be relayed via their headquarters at Maidstone who believed the target was actually the Shorts-Pobjoys factory in Rochester further north. A delivery boy in the nearby village of Bredhurst saw the hangars burn and the ammunition dump go up like a vast firework display. Smoke drifted for miles. Sixty-seven people were killed and ninety-four injured.

When Randall got there, the place was a shambles. There was debris everywhere and rumour had it that there were

policemen put on board the double-decker buses passing the airfield who gave orders to passengers to look the other way rather than witness the demoralising sight. Five days later, Fighter Command's airfields all over the south-east were hit in what would become known, nostalgically, as the 'Spitfire Summer'. Churchill delivered his famous speech praising 'the Few' on 20 August and the Battle of Britain roared over the south-east.

By 7 September, with Randall's battery constantly on the alert in Sevenoaks, Goering's Luftwaffe changed tactics and bombed London. The Blitz had begun.

In Sevenoaks, someone, perhaps even Major Cazalet himself, had noticed that John Randall had officer potential. And that meant a posting to the Officer Training School at Llandrindod Wells in central Wales. Travelling in wartime was extraordinarily difficult. Randall's later diaries are full of the crowded trains, the lack of petrol, the hours spent walking when he had missed the last bus home or to the barracks. From Sevenoaks, he would have had to have negotiated disrupted rail services to London, with its bombed docks and shattered East End, before heading west. There would inevitably have been a change at Swindon and the likeliest method of transport from Llandrindod Wells station would have been via a pair of army boots, size 8.

Randall had formally enlisted in the Royal Artillery in January 1940. In that month, there were, according to official figures, 14,202 officers and 312,309 Other Ranks in that branch of the service. The National Service Act had merged the regular army, the Territorial Army, reserves and militia, and choice of branch of the service was left up to the individual with guidance from the Ministry for Labour based on a very superficial assessment.

One of the biggest problems in the first two years of war was the selection of officers, the process through which

John Randall now went. There was almost a subconscious perception that the best officers came from the landed classes (however minor and impoverished by 1940) and those who had been to public or private school, in that most of them, like St Lawrence College itself, had a Combined Cadet Force and had taught their boys at least the rudiments of soldiering. The Duke of Wellington never claimed that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton,[8] but the sentiment was cherished by the Horse Guards and the War Office that replaced it. The notion of colonels and their ladies, officers and their wives, and Other Ranks and their women had not disappeared by the start of the Second World War.

The Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, known to generations as 'The Shop', was closed at the outbreak of war. The Artillery, the Engineers and some signalling units had been trained there since the 1860s. In its place, a number of Officer Cadet Training Units (OCTU) were set up to train potential officers in field artillery work; 124 OCTU Llandrindod Wells was one of these. Officially, John Randall should have undergone a six-month training period here, but a shortage of instructors led to its being reduced to three.

The town of Llandrindod was known as 'the queen of the Welsh watering places' and had been a spa since the 18th century. Tucked away in a rural idyll in what was then Radnorshire, the Pump House Hotel was typical of the large, elegant buildings the army commandeered for war use. It was part of the Lady Honeywood chain of hotels by 1929, and boasted that it could rival any establishment on the French Riviera. It was far enough away from any bombing zone for training to be carried on without interruption.

John Randall did well, passing all the exams with flying colours and emerged as number-one officer cadet at the

end of his three months. It was a proud day when he led the march past at the passing-out parade and he was now second lieutenant in the Royal Artillery, with a single pip on the shoulder tab of his tunic and the famous grenade and ‘Ubique’ badges on his lapels. He was 21 and the war beckoned.