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## About the Book

6 June, 1944

*'Sometime before 4 a.m., we were woken by the ship's crew. It was still dark but the first signs of day were creeping into the sky. The sight I saw I will never forget to my dying day.'*

Aged nineteen, Basil Avery Tarrant said goodbye to his family and his hometown of Reading and set off for the frontlines of World War II. Fighting side-by-side with other young men, he witnessed the blood and the brutality of hand-to-hand combat. After the war he came home, he started a family and he remembered, but he never talked.

For nearly sixty years, Basil's war was remained a mystery to his only son. Chris knew nothing of the things Basil saw or the friends he lost. He left it all there, at the harbour of Dunkirk, on the beaches of Normandy and the battlefield of Arnhem.

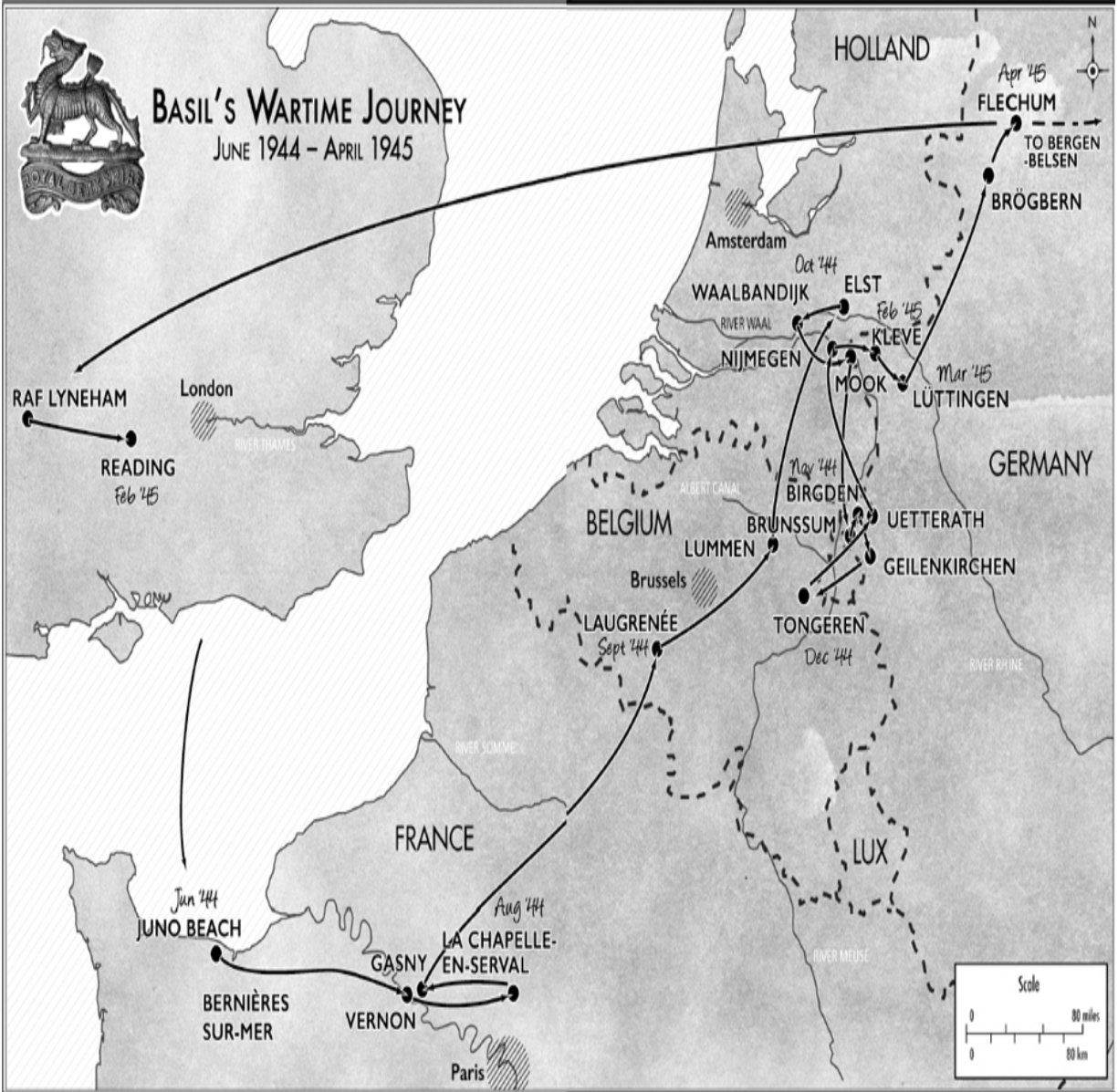
In this touching, deeply personal memoir about fathers and sons, forgiveness and acceptance, and the courage of ordinary men, Chris Tarrant retraces his father's footsteps to answer the question: 'What did Dad do in The War?'

## About the Author

CHRIS TARRANT is an award-winning TV and radio broadcaster. He first came to our TV screens in the 1970s with the Saturday morning children's show *TISWAS*. He also presented London's number-one breakfast show on Capital FM for seventeen years. Today, he is best known as the host of the award-winning quiz show phenomenon, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, which ended after fifteen years in 2014.

In 2004, Chris was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award at the National Television Awards; and in 2005, he was presented with an OBE by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for his services to charity and broadcasting.

In his spare time, when he's not fishing, playing cricket or watching cricket, Chris loves to write.



# Dad's War

Father, Soldier, Hero

CHRIS TARRANT



This book is dedicated to my beautiful kids in memory of  
the Grandpa you all loved: Helen, Jennifer, Sammy, Toby,  
Dexter and Fia.

To all the Hackney Gurkhas - no one must ever forget what  
you did for all of us.

To all young men and women still risking their lives today  
for us and our freedoms in some godforsaken foreign land.

And, above all, to the memory of a wonderful Mum and the  
very best Dad.



# Introduction

MY DAD WAS my closest friend. We had the same strong sense of humour, we played sport together, we watched sport together, I loved him and admired him for nearly sixty years – but, after he died, I realised I hardly knew him at all.

I grew up just after the Second World War and as a little boy our house was always full of former soldiers. Obviously the war was the common bond for all of them, but as I got a little older I realised that the ones who talked about it a lot – the ones who made loud boasts like, ‘the Hun were all around us’ or ‘we gave Hitler the thrashing he deserved’ – had never actually so much as crossed the English Channel. The ones who’d been in the thick of the fighting, including my own dear dad, hardly ever said a word about it. It was a generational thing; you buried your memories somewhere deep inside you and just enjoyed still being alive.

Dad became a very successful businessman and showed no obvious signs of trauma from his war years: he didn’t wake up screaming in the night or suffer flashbacks. In fact he always seemed very balanced and stable. Yet the things he saw, endured and survived as an infantry officer must have been horrific. As a lieutenant, then a captain, then a major in the Royal Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiments he came back battered but otherwise unscathed from Dunkirk, then went back into France in 1944, landing on Juno Beach on D-Day and fighting the retreating but still bloodthirsty Germans right through France, Holland, Belgium and into the Rhineland.

The mortality rate among infantrymen was high. Among officers it was a virtual wipe-out – yet somehow he survived it all. God only knows what he saw, what friends he lost. It

was only when Toby, my son, was old enough to ask, 'Grandad, what did you do in the war?' that he began to release the odd detail. But still so much died with him.

Five years after his death I was approached by Channel 5 about a documentary series they were making, which was called, rather vaguely, *Hero in the Family*. Did I have a hero in my own family who I didn't know much detail about and would I like to try and find out more about him or her? Well yes, my father fitted the bill perfectly, of course, but I was very wary about getting involved. I know rather a lot about television production companies and over the years I've seen some of them being very invasive, inaccurate and callous, so initially I wasn't very keen. As it was not long after his death, anything on the subject of Dad was still too raw, too sensitive, and Mum and all the kids would have been deeply upset by anything that wasn't done with accuracy and respect.

After several phone conversations and a lot of cajoling, however, I did agree to meet up with the production company, but I was very wary and unhelpful. In fact, I was a pain in the arse. I wanted total control of input, scripting, editing - the lot ... because it mattered so much to me. It wasn't just another job of work. This was about my dad. It had to be spot on.

Then I met Mike Wadding, the director, and Paul Reed, the military historian, and I warmed to them both at once. They absolutely understood my reservations and totally reassured me about everything. I was also encouraged to learn that the other names in the series included Ann Widdecombe and Paddy Ashdown, and I knew those two would certainly never accept half measures. Mike promised me every programme would be done with great care and sensitivity, and I trusted him instinctively.

My intuition was correct. As we travelled together through Normandy and on up towards the Rhine, I became very close to Mike and Paul. Although they'd never met my

father it was obvious that they respected and rated him for what he and so many others endured. They saw the infantrymen as the bravest of them all. So it was that for the first time I started to piece together just what hell my father must have gone through in the war years.

I saw the beach where he landed on D-Day. I saw where half a regiment was wiped out in minutes trying to cross the River Seine. I saw the place in Holland where they took out two German strongholds in a single mad night. I saw the spot where he crossed the Rhine into Germany. I saw the town of Kleve where he experienced the most savage house-to-house, hand-to-hand, fixed-bayonet fighting. Every morning as we got up to start filming it was for me an extraordinary voyage of discovery.

What seemed particularly extraordinary was that the discoveries about my dear dad's experiences were being made in places that were now lush green meadows smelling of cut grass and wild flowers, with birds singing in the woodlands all around us. It was surreal to think that just sixty years earlier this same peaceful countryside had just been a sea of thick mud and minefields, with the only sounds the rattle and roar of the guns and the only smell the sickly-sweet stench of death.

The final film was beautifully put together and is a real tribute to the man. We had a family viewing where I and all of my own kids - his grandchildren - came together to watch it. It was very teary but we all agreed it had been well made and it had been worth doing. One sadness was that Mum never lived to see it - she had been ill for a long time but had hung on bravely, hoping to at least listen to the film on television because her old eyes could no longer see. I'd been able to tell her so much that I'd learned while I was away filming and I was amazed how little of it Dad had shared, even with his own wife of sixty years. She was thrilled with each new detail I'd bring her back from filming in France and Germany. Mum hung on and hung on,

in and out of hospital with an army of carers around her twenty-four hours a day, but in the end she quietly gave in, leaving us on 10 April 2012. *Hero in the Family* aired just ten days later.

By the time the film had gone out I'd already resolved to try to write this book. I had learned so much new information about my father's war from my experiences with Channel 5 but it had only made me hungry for more. It had opened things up just enough but there were so many huge gaps that I wanted to fill in. I went to the Royal Berkshire and Wiltshire Museum at Salisbury and they were wonderfully helpful as I ploughed through mountains of regimental paperwork. I have read every note, every order and every payslip issued during the Second World War that they hold there. I spent hours at the National Archives at Kew and waded through even more mountains of paperwork and computer disks at the Imperial War Museum. In addition, I've read countless war books, including biographies, autobiographies and regimental histories.

But above all, I needed to speak to people who'd been there, in France - people who'd served with Dad - and this was always going to be my biggest problem. I'd known so many as a kid growing up but now they were nearly all gone. To have fought on D-Day as a young man now you have to be around ninety years old, so clearly there were not going to be many veterans still alive. In nearly two years of research I've found just five, but they are five wonderful survivors from an amazing breed of men and without their help I could never have completed this book. Robert Purver, Doug Botting, Mike Pardoe, Bill Pyke and Donald May's memories are interspersed throughout this book; I am enormously grateful for their assistance.

And then in the sad period after Mum's death, as I prepared for the funeral, a sickening thing happened: Mum's house was burgled. She was so house-proud, so

obsessive about tidiness all her life, that it broke my heart to see the windows smashed in and footmarks all over her immaculate worktops. I assume they'd heard on the grapevine that Chris Tarrant's mum had died and seen there were no longer any cars in the drive, so realised they had an opportunity. Fortunately, they took nothing of consequence - cash, a few bottles of booze, a radio, some ornaments, a few medals (though missing all the important ones) - they just caused a lot of damage and left, spilling drink as they went.

When I went into the house and saw what had happened I fell into a blind rage. I felt that everything in my parents' world had been defiled. I went storming out of their old front door, wanting to lay into someone, but perhaps luckily there was just the dark empty street and behind me a house full of memories smashed up forever. I deliberately didn't tell the kids till after the funeral as it would have been just too much for them to bear.

But one positive thing came out of it. The burglars had ripped open Dad's beautiful old desk where he'd sat clunking away on his ancient typewriter for more than forty years. Many of the drawers had stayed locked for as long as I can remember but, as I squatted there sorting out the mess of papers strewn around the floor, something in one of the newly opened drawers caught my eye. It was a diary - an old one, dating back to 1944. It was hard to read and much of it was incomplete. But for the first time I had in my hands my dad's own record of his experiences of the war.

I have included some extracts from Dad's diary in this book, along with quotes from the only in-depth interview about his war experiences that he ever gave before his death, for a project with Martin McIntyre from the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regimental Museum at Salisbury, as well as a shorter interview he gave for the *Reading Evening Post*. Both of these were

conducted in May 1994, just before the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day.

The book is about Dad and the wonderful times I had with him and what I've learned about him since he left us. The research has been a real labour of love but hard because so many of his contemporaries have died. I have learned a great deal about the extraordinary men and women who fought and gave their lives for us to be free. To have sat and talked to five exceptional men who landed with Dad in Normandy on 6 June 1944 has been an enormous privilege. I have learned so much I am almost ashamed of how little I knew. It is an extraordinary story about an amazing man, written by someone who thought they knew him best.

# Boyhood

# Part One



# CHAPTER ONE

## Biscuits and Beer

BASIL AVERY TARRANT was born in Reading on 22 July 1919 – the firstborn son of Stanley Charles Tarrant and his wife, Edith. My grandad Stan was a wonderful man, my childhood hero, and he was a proud and loving father to Basil when he was growing up. Dad's mum, my granny Edith, was a Scouser born towards the end of the nineteenth century somewhere in Liverpool, although her birth was shrouded in mysterious circumstances that were never really mentioned by the family or resolved. On the headstone on her grave it gives the year of her death, but there is no reference to the year she was born. The family theory is that she was illegitimate in the days when such things were a real stigma, and was given up for adoption.

Stan and Edith fought like cat and dog all their lives, but apparently they were kind enough parents and Basil grew up as a happy little boy. His brother John arrived six years later and, although Dad felt that in later years the younger son seemed to get preferential treatment in many things, including a private education, the two boys remained very close all their lives and shared a terrific sense of humour. I always absolutely loved my Uncle John; he was as daft as my dad and had a wonderful laugh.

As a little boy I remember looking at my grandfather, my father and my Uncle John and thinking, 'I've been born into a madhouse!' And, looking back, I think my early instincts

were spot on. Each of them was very loud and very, very silly. I loved it when we all got together at Christmas: the house (usually Grandad's because it was the biggest) would ring with laughter and manic party games, in which cheating seemed to be obligatory.

They were very tall too, these Tarrant men - Stanley and John were both six foot three and Basil almost stunted at five foot eleven and a half inches. Little wonder then that I ended up at six foot two and my son Toby - Igor to us - is six foot five. Now he is twenty-one, I just pray that he has stopped growing, as I'm getting an increasingly stiff neck talking to him.

So Basil Avery came into existence, a sweet little boy with an easy temperament as a baby and the thickest, blackest hair - which does nothing at all to explain my own blond locks, or Toby's, although in many other ways the three of us are horribly similar. Being called Basil was perhaps not the best start in life, though I'm told it was a fashionable-enough name at the time. As for where the middle name Avery came from, nobody ever seems to know. I thought it was a thing that you kept birds in. Anyway, little Basil Avery grew up happily in Reading between the wars, with the smell of biscuits and beer in his nostrils. Large numbers of locals, up to as many as 10,000 men and women at one point, were employed by Huntley and Palmers, one of the biggest biscuit manufacturers in Britain. So the town always smelled of baking, a lovely warm aroma that enveloped the rows of houses like a comforting blanket. One of Basil and John's greatest pleasures was to be in the Kings Road area of Reading, close to the factory, when they were baking ginger nuts. Pure heaven. The sweet smell was unique and unmistakable.

The other smell that was always in the Reading air came from Simonds Brewery, right in the centre of the town. Years later, Courage's joined them, and beer and biscuits became a major part of the busy town's economy. For two

little boys growing up there, though, they were just nice smells. When Simonds were at maximum output, brewing beer in Bridge Street, you could smell the hops ten miles away. Many hundreds were employed in the brewery, either working amongst the barrels or with the horses. In those days, delivery by horse and cart for most things – milk, bread, coal, in fact just about everything – was the norm, and little Basil and John were regularly sent out by Stanley with a bucket and shovel to collect up horse dung for his roses. Piles of manure were a regular sight in the streets and the council were forced to maintain a number of barrows, manually pushed around the town, to clean up after the horses, unless the likes of Stanley and his little helpers had got there first with their shovels. Basil had a strange little ditty that in later years he was to inflict on his son and then all of his grandchildren – all together now: ‘Horsey lift your tail up ... and let’s see you poo!’ This rendition was always followed by squeals of delight from the children and mock horror from Granny, while Basil protested his innocence, saying that it had been handed down to him by his own father. I’m still pretty sure that Dad made it up himself.

Basil was always very bright at school and used to like working hard. He was also a talented all-rounder at sport, good at cricket and running, and regularly appearing as goalkeeper in the school’s soccer team. However, in spite of these accomplishments, he was also clearly a bit of a handful. In fact, he must have been a lot of a handful as he was always getting caned, usually four or six of the best on the backside. It hurt! As I, too, was to learn years later – God it hurt, especially when the master doing the caning was a real marksman. If the master had been deadly accurate it meant that, although he’d received six strokes, on inspection by Dad’s mates afterwards, there would be just the one (often bleeding) line across little Basil’s botty.

It sounds brutal – it probably was – but the boys were never resentful. Dad just accepted that he'd been out of order and took the punishment. However much it hurt, it was absolutely unforgiveable to cry. Some years after he left school, Dad said he really could not remember his housemaster's face, but could still describe in detail his shoes and socks and the motif on his carpet.

Most of Dad's problems with authority were for what he described as 'fooling around'. He was naturally very funny, a great mimic, and so predictably he was often disruptive in class. He had similar problems with his Cub master, then his Scout master and later his poor, exhausted choirmaster.

Even when the young Basil was trying to be good, things had a habit of going wrong. For example, when he was learning the rudiments of wood cutting at school, a boy called Eric was foolish enough to get too close to little Basil, who had an axe in his hand. Imagine the horror his mum, Edith, must have felt when she opened the door to find an irate mother standing there with the headmaster, furiously accusing Basil of cutting Eric's head open. I think she may have been rather overdramatic but Dad did admit that Eric was taken to hospital with what seemed like an enormous amount of blood pouring from his skull. Of course it wasn't malicious: Basil was looking the other way, as you really should never do while chopping wood, and Eric just somehow got too close to the blade. Funnily enough, Eric later became one of my father's best friends for years. Dad must have been very likeable, or Eric extraordinarily stupid, because I cannot think of a single one of my childhood friends who I'd have kept in touch with if they'd sliced my skull open with an axe.

In fact, by all accounts, Basil was a popular boy and a natural leader. He loved the Cubs, joining the Reading YMCA Cub pack and enjoying every aspect of it. He adored camping and the great outdoors, although in later life, by early 1945, I suspect that camping was his idea of hell.

At the age of twelve, Dad moved on to the Scouts. He was always very keen and ambitious, and soon became a patrol leader with both arms covered in badges. It was a source of great amusement to the whole family, particularly my mum in later years, when we discovered he'd been awarded a Scout badge of excellence in cooking. None of us ever saw him so much as boil an egg.

Dad was a very strong swimmer and exceptional diver. Mum once showed me the high board that Dad used to dive off into the Thames at Reading Bridge - it seemed miles up in the sky, much, much higher than anything that even the most hardy Olympian would be allowed to dive from now. Health and safety considerations just didn't exist in the 1930s. She told me proudly that Dad and only one other boy had the nerve to dive off the very top.

He also loved to fish, something he'd been taught at an early age by his father. Most of his mates fished a lot, and they would collect birds' eggs and roam around the countryside, cycling everywhere with fishing rods tied on to their crossbars, and tackle and worms in their saddlebags. Dad became the proud owner of a racy Hercules bicycle with a viciously narrow saddle. A Hercules was quite a flash thing to own in the late 1920s, costing him several months' pocket money, but the great (or perhaps not so great) thing about this particular type of bike was that it had a fixed wheel. This made it very fast, but meant you couldn't stop pedalling. Once you got up to a certain speed the wheels just kept on racing round and braking was very hard to do. For a growing teenage boy it was *the* thing to have but, in reality, the saddle was extremely painful and fixed wheels on any bike are a nightmare. Once, when riding fast down a particularly steep hill, into High Wycombe, Dad was rather more than mildly surprised to be overtaken by his own back wheel. Seconds later he crashed into a hedge.

In these days of obsessive health and safety, it's amazing that Dad, or any of his friends, grew up at all – but they did. Perhaps it sowed in them the seeds of what it took for them to survive after 1939. For example, although they could all swim well they loved to push it to the limit. There was a fast back stream of the River Kennet near Burghfield that in the summer months became completely overgrown with stringy weed and water lilies. So that became a challenge. Any fool could swim in clear water but their biggest thrill was to race towards the river at full speed, dive headfirst so that they could go right down beneath the thick underwater growth, then force their way up through the solid weeds and out on to the far bank. The clogging, entangling weeds made the whole thing very dangerous – but of course that was the fun of it.

There was another pool they called the Monk. In the hot, summer evenings, one of the riverkeepers would come along and open the two sluice gates by hand to allow an unrestricted flow of water for a couple of hours or so. That was the signal for Basil and his mates to dive right into the rushing water, push their bodies under the gate and literally race under water through the sluice into the pool on the other side. To us today it sounds terrifying, but when he told his own father about this game much later in life, Stanley just grinned and said it wasn't peculiar to Basil's generation: my grandfather's own gang were doing it before the First World War! It was all part of growing up in those innocent days, with kids making their own enjoyment and fun. Their amusement cost very little and that was essential because in those days they had very little spending money.

One source of a little cash for Basil was the small sum he received each week from joining the church choir. He loved to sing so it suited him, and it had the additional benefit that every summer they had the annual choir trip to the seaside, usually travelling by train. After trying to smoke,

which usually degenerated into much gasping and coughing in the train loo, the boys would spend the rest of the journey fighting off an urge to throw up. Strong-stomached Basil never did, which meant he got to eat about eight of the packed lunches around him. Dad always had a voracious appetite and for several years looked on this day out as a chance for a really good feed.

The choirmaster probably only tolerated Basil because he was an excellent young singer. He had a good treble voice until he was at least sixteen. His much more developed schoolmates used to tease him unmercifully, telling him he was going to be a eunuch for the rest of his life. It was apparently good-natured but the squeaky soprano must have been starting to worry. However, as all teenage boys know, these things have a habit of changing dramatically and almost without warning. Suddenly the late-developing Basil could no longer hit the high notes; in fact he became positively deep voiced, rather growly and very hairy. His days as All Saints Church's top chorister were sadly over, but it had been a good run. He'd been paid the handsome sum of two shillings a month (that's slightly less than 10 pence in modern money) and an extra sixpence if he sang solo, which he usually did. In the early 1930s, half a crown a month (that's 12½ pence) was untold wealth for a young boy.

Dad could never seem to sit still - he always had to be doing something. In the summer it was fishing, swimming and camping, with cricket and athletics at weekends. Reading had a strong tradition of producing good athletes and Dad ran for the town's athletics club. A proud fact that, a few years later, he was to bitterly regret telling someone in his regiment! The town also had a good cricket club - they produced Peter May, a great England captain who Dad told me proudly he'd once met ('A very nice man. Very posh!'), and Ken Barrington, another England cricketing legend. Reading Football Club, the town's professional

team, known of course as 'The Biscuit Men', played their matches in a small ground near my grandad's house, called Elm Park, and if Dad wasn't actually playing football he was at Elm Park watching it with his father. The town also had a tradition of bull baiting, which was apparently very popular in Reading and Wokingham in the nineteenth century. Mercifully it had been outlawed by the time Basil arrived, otherwise I'm sure he'd have had a go at that as well - he seemed to have been into everything else.

In the winter months it was football, football, football. He formed his own team called Spartan Sports, which were quite successful in the local minor leagues. They were self-financing, mainly achieved through a whip-round every Saturday morning, a few donations from the parents and the automatic selection every week of one boy who wasn't a particularly good footballer but whose dad was a wealthy local bookie. With this income they managed to buy eleven shirts and one ball, pay for a referee and hire a pitch each week. They just about ran to goalposts but couldn't manage the extra for nets, and they couldn't afford the use of a changing room or transport for away games, so they all travelled to matches in a cycle convoy. One of his most vivid memories was all eleven of them pushing their bikes, in the pouring February rain, up the long steep hill into Henley to play Remenham on a pitch where the cows had been grazing and had left steaming cowpats only hours before. They were certainly Spartan. They changed under leafless trees in driving February sleet and changed back again afterwards ready to cycle home with all the mud still intact. No early bath in those days - it was a late one, much, much later, when you'd got back to your mum and dad's house.

Saturday nights were often spent at the Palace, Reading's one and only variety theatre on Cheapside. For teenage boys it wasn't particularly cheap. A seat in the stalls cost about two shillings, but if times were hard, which they usually were, they all trooped up to the gallery for sixpence



(that's about 2½ pence). There was a hard wooden bench, nothing more, to sit on and you were a long way from the stage, but you did get two hours of top-class entertainment. Basil was just beginning to appreciate jazz and when a young up-and-coming trumpeter called Louis Armstrong was booked for a week at the Palace, he somehow got the money together and went there every single night. Being so close to London, Reading was on the touring circuit of a lot of stars. Gracie Fields, George Formby, Ted Ray and Billy Cotton and his band all came to the Palace - top entertainment in their day.

But the boys' absolute favourite, and most of the girls too if they were honest, was the comedian Max Miller. By today's standards he wouldn't even qualify as slightly risqué but in the mid-thirties he was forever in trouble with the Establishment. 'Do you want the blue book or the red book?' he would ask his adoring fans. Of course it was the blue book that they all wanted, which was the slightly ruder one, although it was all pretty tame. He would always make local references to the women from Whitley Wood or to staying at the George Hotel in Broad Street, which would go down well with the Reading audience. 'Very strict at the George,' he would say. 'Each night at eleven o'clock the manager checks if you've got a girl in your room. If you haven't, he sends one in.' Or: 'There's an old fellow of eighty from Tilehurst. He is spending his honeymoon at the George. His bride is only twenty-five and very, very pretty. In the bar the other evening my curiosity got the better of me and I went up to him and I asked him discreetly how he fared in bed. How often had he been able to make love to his beautiful young bride? To my utter amazement he told me, "Nearly every night." "Really?" I said. "Yes," he replied. "Nearly on Monday, nearly on Tuesday ..." ' Needless to say the young Basil had Max Miller's act down to a T.

Of course every Saturday night ended lavishly with fish and chips, liberally covered in salt and vinegar and wrapped in newspaper, from any one of the dozens of corner shops that existed all over town. There you would see the proud banner displayed: 'A super supper every Saturday for sixpence.'

If they had the money, most of Dad's contemporaries used to get into town on the tram. The great majority of people travelled by bus or tram in town and by train out of town, or simply cycled or walked. For years Dad kept an old train ticket, a Reading to Paddington return on what they called the Theatre Special: after 5 p.m. for two shillings and sixpence (that would be 12½ pence in today's money). The steam train from Reading to Paddington usually took thirty minutes, which is pretty much exactly the same time as it takes now, seventy years later.

Basil and his teenage mates were of course beginning to take an interest in girls, although to be honest they tended to get in the way of football and Basil's latest obsession - drumming in a dance band. It was something he'd taken up pretty much as soon as he left the choir and it monopolised a lot of his time. Although he was quite a good-looking, dark-haired, charismatic young man, for most girls of his age he was a hopeless case. One girl called Joan Cox, who'd been with him at Wilson School and who was a year older than him, seemed very taken with the manic young Basil, but in the end it was clear that she found it impossible trying to keep up with his whereabouts. She was a naturally very pretty blonde girl, quite tall, with lovely green eyes, and unsurprisingly never short of boys who would take her out. So, after a few weeks of a pretty hopeless courtship with Basil, she moved on. At the time Basil barely noticed that she'd gone.

In any case it was about time that Basil did a day's work. The depression of the thirties seemed to bypass Reading - there must have been some unemployment but all of Dad's

contemporaries found some sort of work on leaving school. Basil left school in 1936, aged just seventeen, and his father Stanley got him a job with a local accountant. He started as a trainee because of course he knew virtually nothing about money movement, book balancing or accountancy and, if the truth be told, he didn't care very much about it either. He was paid the princely sum of ten shillings per week and initially went to the office every day by tram. However, the money he was spending on fares quickly exhausted his funds and he decided instead to walk the 1½ miles to the office, always arriving there punctually just after eight o'clock in the morning, and then walk home again every evening. This meant he could fill up on his mum's breakfast, do a day's work, skip lunch, have his dinner at home and still have enough money to go to the Palace most nights of the week. Unfortunately, though, during the brief period he worked there, this was the only useful bit of accounting that he ever did. To his father's disappointment, Basil was bored stiff with accountancy and wanted out. But what could he do, with so little business experience and no contacts?

His father for a long time had been the buyer at a company called Huntley, Boorne and Stevens, known everywhere as HB&S, a tin-producing firm famous chiefly for making the tins that Huntley and Palmers put their biscuits in. The young Basil heard his father one Saturday talking in hushed tones to Edith about a young administrator from the company who had been summarily dismissed the previous day for sexual indiscretions with a married employee. Dad listened, fascinated, through the door, and then did the most extraordinary thing. That same evening he put on his one and only suit and cycled to Woodley, to the home of the HB&S managing director, knocked on his door and politely asked if he could fill the vacancy. The startled senior executive must have been

rather taken with this earnest young man, as he arranged for an interview at the beginning of the next week.

He must have been impressive because the interview for this lowly position was graced by the attendance of the managing director, the company secretary and the chairman. Quite extraordinary for a seventeen-year-old, and his father knew nothing about it until the first day that his son Basil came into work, having flown through the interview and got the job. He started on thirty shillings a week for forty-five hours, including Saturday mornings, plus free parking in the bike shed. He was there, war intervening, for the next forty years and eventually rose to boardroom level - the first man from outside the founding families to be made a director.

By now war clouds were looming over Europe and young men began to talk about what might happen and whether they would be called to serve their country. Huntley, Boorne and Stevens, like many companies, were keen to help the military build-up of trained young men just in case war did break out, and encouraged young men like Basil to volunteer for part-time military service. Dad joined the Territorial Army (TA), the Terriers as they were known early in 1937, aged just seventeen, and was thrilled to discover that the annual two-week camp, which of course he absolutely loved, counted as extra to his company holiday allowance. This meant that in all he had six weeks' paid holiday a year and an extra bonus allowance of five pounds for joining up. He attended those camps, in Cosham, near Portsmouth, for the next three consecutive years.

The Terriers was a new experience for him. Basil had joined the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) as a clerk (rank: Private), with his role classified as 'Clerk and Mustered', as part of the British 48th (South Midland) Division. This meant that clerical work was his official first duty, but it meant he was to be trained to be mustered for

fighting if it became necessary. In general, he enjoyed the TA, although he said the training was pretty pointless. There was a lot of marching up and down and turning left and right, which he hated, and lots of running in full battledress with a heavy pack and weapons, which he also wasn't very keen on.

In addition there was a great deal of bayonet practice, which consisted of screaming at the top of one's voice and then racing, bayonet waving, towards a swinging straw dummy, forcing the blade deep into the dummy's guts and twisting it over and over, still screaming all the while. This was one bit of the training that the young Terriers all rather enjoyed, and they couldn't help thinking it had rather an absurd air about it. It seemed almost impossible to believe that one day soon they might be doing such a horrific thing to any other human, or worse still that it could be their own guts and entrails that were to be ripped out.

Basil stayed with the TA until 25 August 1939, when he was called up, with war against Germany now seeming imminent. In later years he recalled, 'I loved being in the Terriers. I don't think I learned much about the army, but we had a terrific time ... so much fun.' Things for Basil and the rest of his generation had perhaps been too good, too much fun for too long. It was now going to get horribly serious.

## CHAPTER TWO

### All a Bit of a Shambles

WHILE BASIL WAS busy playing soldiers in the TA and filing paperwork at HB&S, in the wider world events were taking a serious turn. Throughout the 1930s the rise of fascist dictatorships in Europe was starting to threaten the political landscape. In Germany, Adolf Hitler had begun a massive campaign of remilitarisation, flouting the punitive Versailles Treaty that had been agreed in the wake of the First World War. Everyone knew this meant trouble. But with the horrors of the previous 'war to end all wars' still fresh in everyone's minds, British prime minister Neville Chamberlain tried to appease Hitler and agree to his 'reasonable' demands in an effort to avoid giving him an excuse to declare hostilities. The crumbling League of Nations similarly did nothing to prevent German troops marching into Austria in 1938.

However, the policy of appeasement quickly backfired. An emboldened Hitler attempted to reclaim the Sudetenland, an area in Czechoslovakia in which many German speakers lived. The resulting crisis led Chamberlain to meet Hitler three times, culminating in the Munich Conference in September 1938, which was attended by Germany, France, Britain and Italy (Czechoslovakia was not represented). There, Chamberlain decided that the Nazi leader was 'a man who can be relied upon', and along with the French he persuaded the Czechs to agree to hand over the