

Prologue

Morning off the Normandy coast. Finally: they have been waiting years for this.

An ashen dawn is trickling into the sky as the flotilla of British warships moves in closer. On deck, peering out over the grey-green sea, Private Jack Poolton of the Royal Regiment of Canada is waiting his turn to go ashore. The Channel is calm, the crossing has been easy.

Jack's letter home, to be sent if he does not return, is written and stored away. He tells his mother what is about to take place – a major attack against the northern coastline of Nazi-occupied France. Jack hopes that his generation will fight as bravely as their fathers did in the Great War. Much depends on what will happen that morning. To the east, the Russians are clamouring for this, a 'second front', to be opened in the west.

He remembers the past months' training in England: the manoeuvres and marches, and the children killed when a German Focke-Wulf bombed a cinema in Littlehampton before they embarked. To be here this morning Jack has lied about being able to swim, and has hidden the fact that he has trench mouth, caught from washing his mess tin in dirty water. But he is keen to see action. Perhaps, when he gets back, he will talk about today's events with Irene, the WAAF girl from Lancashire he met while sheltering from an air raid in the cellars of Birmingham railway station. She gave him a hat badge to remember

her by; her mother ran a pub – the beer would be on the house whenever he could make it.

None of the men are interested in the tea and sandwiches laid on. Nor are there any rum rations or prayers: no one feels the need. The signal comes and they climb down into the landing craft. Jack is a mortar man, and sits near the back.

The first sign that things are going wrong comes when a German convoy intercepts British commandos on the Canadians' left. The gunfire alerts the defence forces on the coast, who fire star shells and chandelier flares to light up the sky. The attackers become visible, the element of surprise gone. Attempting to avoid detection, the Canadians turn in circles, slowing down their progress to the shore. Now, instead of a landing at dawn, it will be full daylight by the time their boots touch the beach.

A giant firework display begins, 'like a thousand guns firing': they are entering hell itself, Jack thinks. He is part of the second wave. Five hundred yards from the shore, his vessel is hit by heavy fire. A bullet passes through his tunic, near his shoulder, but mercifully draws no blood.

The landing craft is already reversing before all the men manage to get out. Jack jumps into 8 feet of water carrying the mortar, twelve high-explosive bombs, his grenades, and 250 rounds for a .303 rifle. Wading ashore, he realises that they are in the direct line of fire of a machine gun, bullets kicking up stones around his feet. Many of his comrades are already dead. The beach is littered with the shattered remains of the first wave.

Jack seeks cover behind a shallow abutment as the Germans accurately drop shells on their positions. It is, he thinks, as if the whole thing has been rehearsed. He sees Canadian soldiers trying to throw grenades at the enemy, only to be shot as they pull the pin, the weapon then exploding among their own men.

High explosives are useless in these conditions. Jack dumps his equipment and stretches out for the nearest rifle as men around him are cut down by enemy fire. He tries to join a group scaling cliffs nearby, but the man ahead of him is killed as he reaches the top, falling back on to Jack and dragging him to the bottom again.

The tide is coming in and wounded men on the beach are drowning. A landing craft comes ashore to take them away, only for the Germans

to place a mortar shell in the middle of it. More men are shot dead as they cling to the sinking wreckage.

A white flag appears – someone has stuck an undershirt to a bayonet. Most in his regiment are surrendering. Jack and his company commander, Captain Houssar, decide to fight on. Alone, they charge down the beach armed only with rifles, but are pushed back by machine-gun fire.

There is no hope: they are trapped. Jack and Captain Houssar are the last Royals to put down their weapons. They are alive, but with surrender comes a deep feeling of humiliation. You can train a soldier to fight and accept death, Jack realises, but there is no way you can prepare him for being taken prisoner.

The attack has failed in only a few hours. Thousands have been killed. Thoughts of opening up a ‘second front’ are now almost as dead as the men on the shore, staining the seawater red. Pieces of body lie everywhere – feet with boots still on them; men stuck to barbed wire, burning where the bombs in their packs have exploded. The Germans are giving the seriously wounded *coups de grâce* to the back of the head.

As Jack climbs a ladder away from the beach and into captivity, an English-speaking German officer smirks and asks, ‘What took you so long? We have been waiting for you for ten days.’

They knew they were coming all the time.

The Royals walk away from the battle, their hands held above their heads, while German photographers take snaps of the defeated enemy. This is great propaganda. The Germans can relax in the west now. Europe is theirs; they can concentrate on fighting the Russians.

Shattered yet defiant, the Allied soldiers start singing *La Marseillaise* as they march along. Their captors are furious. French civilians at the roadside start to weep and show the V for Victory sign.

For Jack there is nothing now except life in a prisoner-of-war camp. His role in the war – his Normandy – has come to an end. It will be years before he is free again.

Today, on 19 August 1942, almost 4,000 Canadian and British soldiers out of a total force of 6,000 have been killed, wounded or captured. The Dieppe Raid, as it is called, is a military disaster, an attack which the Germans themselves, with just over 300 dead, consider mediocre at best. Yet the lessons for the Allies are invaluable. Jack

does not know this, but already the seeds have been sown for a second Normandy, two years later in 1944. Not here, not in and around the port of Dieppe, but over 80 miles to the south-west, towards the Cherbourg peninsula – an assault which will draw heavily on what has happened to him and his comrades this morning, attempting to avoid the same mistakes.

Firstly, never attack a port – they are heavily defended, and the cost in human lives is too high.

Secondly, any assault must be carried out on a much more massive scale and with greater cooperation between air, land and sea forces.

And thirdly, unlike at Dieppe, the enemy must not know where or when you are going to attack. Surprise, that most crucial of weapons, must be protected and used.

Even then, there remains the doubt: would surprise alone be enough?

One last scene catches Jack's attention as the defeated Allied soldiers are leaving the town. On the outskirts a woman approaches the column, walking alongside them for a few yards.

'Insult me in French!' she whispers to one of the men.

The soldier looks baffled, but something in the woman's expression makes him wonder. At her bidding, he starts to cuss and swear aggressively, shaking his fist and shouting obscenities.

On cue, the French woman responds and starts pelting him and the other soldiers with tomatoes, launching them with a look of rage on her face.

It seems odd: the tomatoes are not hitting the soldiers hard; despite her shouting and harsh words, the woman is actually tossing them rather gently. The defeated men are at their lowest ebb, their spirits crushed, yet are quick to catch on. Scooping up the tomatoes, they hide them in their tunics for eating later, grateful for this act of camouflaged charity. It will be a long time before the Germans offer them anything to eat or drink.

The Germans, however, think the woman is genuinely upset, and find the scene immensely funny. They even pat her on the back, praising her for her spontaneous act against the *Englische Schweine*.

They never realise they have been deceived.

PART ONE

picaresque, adj. of or relating to an episodic style of fiction dealing with the adventures of a rough and dishonest but appealing hero.

ORIGIN from Sp. *picaresco*, from *pícaro* 'rogue'.

pícaro *adj.*(a) crafty, cunning, sly, wily (b) mischievous, naughty, crooked.

I

England, 1941–2

Allied disasters in the Second World War were not limited to the Dieppe Raid. After the collapse at Dunkirk in 1940 and defeat in the Balkans in 1941, many doubted whether the British Army could prevail in a straight fight against the Wehrmacht. Even with the help of the United States, with its greater industrial strength and manpower committed from late 1941, it would be difficult to defeat a highly trained and fearsome opponent.

Other means – ‘special means’ – had to be developed to overcome the enemy. The Germans could pluck a seemingly endless supply of fighting men from a culture that valued discipline and glorified war. But the British applauded characteristics that would become effective weapons against them: wit and eccentricity. Intelligence, counter-intelligence and deception were to become vital for the Allied war effort. There was a need for thinking in extraordinary and different ways, for talented men and women to set their minds on how to surprise and fool the enemy. Something like Dieppe could never be allowed to happen again.

In this atmosphere, the craziest schemes could tip the balance in the Allies’ favour. And often such a scheme was the brainchild of a tiny group of people or an odd individual.

This is the story of one of those men and the decisive part that he played in the success of D-Day and the Normandy campaign. The tale has been told before, even by the man himself, but only partially:

gaps were left unfilled, veils drawn over uncomfortable facts. The character at the centre remained an enigma, his true personality rarely emerging.

He was a Spaniard, from Barcelona – a dreamer, a cheat and a liar, and yet the noblest and kindest of men; a compulsive storyteller who could barely tell a story, so purple was his prose. If he were not real, he might appear like a character from a picaresque novel – a saintly rogue and compelling fantasist with unorthodox ideas about truth, someone who defies simple labels of ‘good’ and ‘bad’: at once innocent, like Don Quixote, and wily, like Sancho Panza.

He became the greatest double agent in history, creating a new truth by telling untruths. This is the story of who he was and what he did, and of some of the many lives that were changed by his achievements. The details and quoted conversations are taken from records, letters and memoirs of those who knew him.

At home, in Spain, he was known as Juan.

In the secret worlds in which he moved, he went under many different names . . .

Bletchley Park, December 1941

The ‘Cottages’ were a line of three small adjacent buildings near the main house. They had served as the head coachman’s quarters before the war, but now housed Dillwyn Knox’s team of code-breakers – mostly pretty young women like Mavis Lever. People called them ‘Dilly’s Girls’.

Knox was one of Bletchley’s ‘characters’, eccentric intellectuals working at the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS), trying to crack encrypted German wireless messages. They were the lifeblood of the place.

A classicist from Cambridge, Knox was often likened to a character from a Lewis Carroll novel, long and lean and, as one friend put it, with a ‘face like a pang of hunger’. Now in his late fifties, he would sometimes wander around Bletchley in his dressing gown, not realising that he had not put his clothes on that morning, frequently losing his glasses or his tobacco tin under piles of decrypted messages. In one absent-minded moment he mistakenly stuffed bread from a sandwich into his pipe.

Mavis, still only nineteen at the time, felt a strong connection to Knox, seeing in him echoes of Alice's White Knight: 'endearingly eccentric and concerned about my welfare'.

'We're breaking machines,' he had said to her the day she first arrived in the Cottages, in 1940. 'Have you got a pencil?'

The respect and affection were mutual and the young recruit soon became the elder code-breaker's protégée. Mavis had broken off her German studies at London University to get the job, and if Knox started quoting Milton's *Lycidas* to her she would respond with something appropriate, perhaps from Heinrich Heine's poetry. There was an affinity between them; years later she would write his biography.

Bletchley Park was like a small town by this point in the war, with thousands of people working intensely on the enemy's codes, many of them in the huts that had been quickly assembled in the grounds. It got cold in winter. The Cottages were sturdier structures, better for keeping the heat in. Mavis was lucky.

The work was hard and there were rolling shifts throughout the day and night. A canteen was provided in the main house, but sometimes there was little more to eat at three in the morning than a handful of overcooked Brussels sprouts. There was a community spirit, however: when not code-breaking, Mavis enjoyed the concerts, the amateur dramatics group, and the Scottish country dancing.

Knox spent little time with them in the Cottage that December, he was seriously ill and was busy fighting a battle with Bletchley's operational head Alistair Denniston over how their decoded material was handled within the intelligence services. Mavis's work was built around Knox's methods, however, and the thinking required for solving the puzzles created by the enemy's Enigma machines.

'Which way do the hands on a clock go round?' he would ask.

'Clockwise.'

'That depends on whether you're the clock or the observer.'

They had already enjoyed one great success together, breaking the Italian naval codes earlier in the year. This had played a vital role in the Battle of Matapan in the spring, when the Italian Navy suffered a major defeat at the hands of the British. Churchill described it as the greatest sea triumph since Trafalgar.

'Tell Dilly we have had a great victory in the Mediterranean,'

Admiral Godfrey rang through to Bletchley. 'And it's entirely due to him and his girls.'

As a reward, Knox had taken Mavis out to dinner, driving in his Baby Austin to the Fountain Inn at nearby Stony Stratford, and arranged for her to get a raise on the 35 shillings a week she was then earning.

That was in April 1941. Now it was December, yet as Mavis and her colleague Margaret Rock worked to piece together a new puzzle, it was clear that something just as important – more so, even – was happening.

After months of effort, carrying on from Knox's first hammer blow against the cipher in October, on 8 December Mavis and Margaret finally cracked the code used by German intelligence and were able to look at their first deciphered Abwehr message. If the Allies could listen in on what Germany's spies were saying to each other, then the enemy would have few secrets left indeed.

Knox was delighted.

'Give me a Lever and Rock,' he said, 'and I can move the universe'.

It was a great achievement, one which vindicated his unusual methods – using linguists and even a speech therapist to help him break 'mathematical' codes. Yet despite insisting that the credit be given to his 'girls', the 'rodding' system that they were using to break the German encryption was his making, and henceforth the decrypted messages would bear his name – even after, just over a year on, he died of lymph cancer.

Around them, the war carried on. The morning after her breakthrough, Mavis heard of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It seemed clear that the Americans would be joining them soon. Meanwhile, to the east, the Red Army was finally starting to push the Germans back from the outskirts of Moscow. It was not obvious at the time, but these events, taken in conjunction with her own success of the day before, meant that those few days in early December would prove to be a pivotal moment in the conflict.

After reading the first coded message, they had much more work to do. Mavis and Margaret were 'in', but it would take weeks before a proper stream of Abwehr messages could be produced. Out of a team of seventeen 'girls' they were the only ones with any German: more linguists would be needed. It was Christmas Day 1941 before this new, important source of information could be passed on to the

rest of British intelligence, a service which, at the beginning at least, involved decoding anything between fifty and a hundred Abwehr telegrams a day. Later that figure would be multiplied several times over and a total number of 140,000 messages were read by the end of the war.

Mavis was on her own that day – Knox was ill and had to stay at home, where Margaret was taking him material to carry on their work. There were no celebrations. All the same, it was a significant moment. ‘On Christmas Day 1941 the geniuses at Bletchley broke the Abwehr Enigma . . .’ Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote. ‘When that was done we really were in a new age.’

British intelligence officers could now read what their German opponents were saying to each other almost as easily as they read the morning newspapers. It was not Mavis’s job to analyse the messages that she and her colleagues cracked, however. That was the work of the intelligence officers at MI6 – of which GC&CS was a part – busy absorbing the material with which Mavis and Knox were now providing them.

In the German texts that they were reading, however, one curious name appeared, mentioned in the disturbing traffic between Abwehr headquarters at 76/78 Tirpitzufer in Berlin and its Madrid spy station. These were references to the ‘Arabal* undertaking’, a mysterious Nazi spy ring operating from inside Britain itself, headed by an agent called ‘Alaric’.

The thought caused a shudder. A phobia about enemy spies was gripping the country. There were rumours of jackbooted nuns parachuting into Warwickshire, signals ploughed into remote fields for German spotter planes, and chalk symbols on telegraph poles. One elderly lady had even concluded that her neighbour was sending messages to the enemy through a form of Morse code based on the long and short garments on her washing line. It was hard to know who to trust.

They were less excitable at Bletchley. Nonetheless, over the following weeks and months Mavis and her colleagues were to come across many more references to the sinister ‘Alaric’.

The question was, who was he?

* Also sometimes spelled ‘Arabel’.

St Albans, January 1942

Desmond Bristow spent most of his day checking hotel registers sent over by agents in Madrid and Lisbon. His job was to look for anyone suspicious – a name that did not tally, or that had cropped up somewhere before. Still, he told himself, it beat being an infantryman. Back in May 1940, while waiting for a train at Oxford station, he had caught sight of badly wounded soldiers returning from Dunkirk: that had rid him of any ideas about fighting on the front line.

He had not imagined that being a spy would be quite so dull, though. Betty was pregnant, and he missed her. Worcester was a long way from St Albans. At least he had his beloved Matchless motorbike and could use spare petrol coupons to drive over to see her occasionally. But apart from the odd pint at the King Harry pub with his boss, there was little to break the tedium.

After two and a half years of war there were plenty of reasons to be spying abroad, which was what MI6 – the Secret Intelligence Service – concentrated on. But there were no foreign postings for Bristow. Not even in Spain, where he had been brought up. Yes, they valued his knowledge of the language and the culture and that was why he had been taken on. But he had been placed in Section V of MI6, the branch that dealt with counter-espionage, and Section V had moved out of London to Glenalmond, an Edwardian red-brick town house in the sleepy town of St Albans.

He was still only twenty-six, too young to enjoy drinking pink gins with the others after work in the conservatory. The ‘snakepit’, they called it.

At least there was Philby.

His boss had a bit of a stutter, but knew and loved Spain as Desmond did, having been *The Times*’s correspondent there during the Civil War. Older than Bristow by about five years, he was easy to talk to. Before long they became friends and Bristow would take him around St Albans on the back of the motorbike, heading out to the pub after work. Kim Philby made life in Glenalmond that bit more bearable.

Colonel Felix Cowgill was part of the problem. Formerly of the Indian Police, the head of Section V treated Glenalmond like a medieval castle. He was a suspicious man and had fallen out with most of the other chiefs in the intelligence services. His department’s role was

to work through counter-intelligence reports from foreign countries – information about attempts to spy on Britain – and, where necessary, pass them on, not least to the other major counter-intelligence organisation, MI5, the Security Service. Where Section V of MI6 dealt with ‘abroad’, MI5 handled Britain and the Empire, with a large degree of overlap between the two. This should, in many people’s minds, have led to high levels of cooperation. But Cowgill thought otherwise: he suspected MI5 wanted to take over his territory. Citing a need to protect MI6 sources, he only allowed a portion of his material to be passed on.

Philby hated him.

‘Lack of imagination, inattention to detail and sheer ignorance of the world we were fighting in . . .’ he wrote. ‘Glenalmond . . . felt like a hedgehog position; Cowgill revelled in his isolation.’ What was the point of receiving so much intelligence if they were not going to share it? Now that the Abwehr codes had been properly cracked, Cowgill was becoming more difficult than ever. Philby had to resort to passing information on to friends in MI5 verbally, informally, ‘to avoid needless trouble’.

Decrypted German messages were referred to as ISOS, standing for ‘Illicit Services Oliver Strachey’, after the GC&CS man in charge of breaking Abwehr messages that had been enciphered by hand. ISOS had been online since April 1940, before Bristow had joined. More importantly, though, the new German messages coming through had been enciphered not by hand, but using Enigma machines. These messages were far more complex and useful than previous ones, and had only recently been broken by the GC&CS team headed by Dilly Knox. They had started arriving properly on Christmas Day 1941, and were officially referred to as ISK – ‘Illicit Services Knox’. Like many people, however, Bristow did not differentiate between the two, and ended up referring to all the deciphered Abwehr material as ISOS.

The messages were biked over by special courier to Glenalmond in the morning, arriving at 10.30. It was foggy and icy the day that they first heard of ‘Arabal’. Bristow had just lit the fire and Philby was sitting by the bay window wearing a scarred leather jacket he had picked up during the Civil War in Spain. Tim Milne, one of their colleagues, read through the intercepts dealing with the Iberian Peninsula.

'This sounds very odd,' he said, staring at one of them.

Bristow looked up from his hotel registers. From the window, Philby glanced over.

'What does it say?'

Milne handed it to him. Bristow walked across and looked over his shoulder. He saw a typed message written in capital letters, and there, in front of them, was the text from the Abwehr's station in Madrid to headquarters, telling their Berlin masters about a new *Vertrauensmann* – a 'trusted man', or spy – reporting from London. This agent, this *V-mann* code-named 'Alaric' by the Germans, was being run by the Abwehr station in Madrid. What was worse, as Bristow and Philby read on it appeared that this new enemy spy was not alone. Alaric claimed to have recruited three sub-agents to work with him: 'Senhor Carvalho', a Portuguese travelling salesman based in Newport, south Wales, where he spied on shipping movements in the Channel; 'Herr Gerbers', a German-Swiss businessman based in Bootle, near Liverpool, spying on the Mersey; and a wealthy Venezuelan student based in Glasgow.

The Germans were referring to this spy network as 'the Arabal undertaking'.

'Alaric'? 'Arabal'? None of them had seen the names before. Yet here, on the decrypted Abwehr message in front of them, this new Nazi spy was reporting the formation of a shipping convoy in the bay of Caernarfon, clearly with a view to alerting German U-boats for an attack. What should Section V do?

Philby wasted no time. He picked up the green scrambler phone to warn their colleagues at MI5: the spy was on home turf and the Security Service needed to be informed.

Bristow, like everyone else in the office, stopped what he was doing and listened in on the conversation. This was by far the most interesting thing that had happened since his arrival at Glenalmond. Philby got through to Herbert Hart, the head of MI5's research department. Bristow noticed how Philby clicked his fingers while he spoke, trying to control his stammering.

'Have you seen his message from M-M-Madrid on the Caernarfon convoy, Hart?'

It appeared that MI5 had also seen the Arabal message, and were equally worried and perplexed.

'Get Scotland Yard on to it,' Philby said.

The spies had a lead, but the police were the best people to start a physical search for any German agents. Meanwhile, MI5 would talk to their liaison officer at the Admiralty about the Caernarfon convoy.

'We'll go on watching and see what comes of it. Bye for now.'

Philby put down the phone, and the office became a buzz of conjecture.

Who was this new enemy agent?

'Surely he must be a Spanish sailor off one of those merchant ships tied up in Liverpool?' Jack Ivens, another member of the team said.

'Why should he or she be a Spaniard?' Bristow replied, playing with a cigarette. 'He could be a Dutchman or woman, Swedish national or whatever.'

They all looked at each other. None of them had any idea.

'I wonder what means of communication our mysterious Arabal used?' Bristow asked.

Philby shook his head.

'We must not get c-c-carried away on a guessing game,' he said. 'It wastes time, and if this character is important there will be another reference from ISOS soon enough.'

Bristow and the others took the hint: they went back to their work, wondering in silence.

The following communications only deepened the mystery.

First was a written report sent through from Commander Ewen Montagu, MI5's liaison officer with the Admiralty, who had been asked about the reported Caernarfon convoy. To their surprise, Montagu told them categorically that no such convoy existed.

A few days later, Scotland Yard's Special Branch also reported back. After a thorough search, no trace of an enemy agent had been found.

There was, it seemed, no German spy, and no Caernarfon convoy, yet the following week Alaric and the Arabal network were mentioned once again by the Abwehr in the Bletchley intercepts, the Madrid station telling Berlin that according to their man, 'CONVOY SAILED FOUR DAYS AGO IN SOUTHERLY DIRECTION.'

Philby became exasperated when he saw it.

'What's going on? We know there is no bloody convoy.'

He looked at Bristow.

'Who is Arabal? Why is he so obviously lying?'