

## **The Theatre of War**

I have in front of me an item I clipped from a newspaper a long time ago - the date scribbled on the corner is December, 1969. It describes a curious piece of theatre.

'The guard was changed last night at Spandau prison. In the searchlight towers, the watchers of one nation handed over their vigil to the watchers of another with the same grim little formalities that have occurred every month for a quarter of a century. One detail only has changed: there is nobody to watch - except each other. Their boots rang on the cobbles and the sound echoed through a thousand empty cells. Rudolph Hess, one-time deputy of Adolf Hitler, the last and only prisoner of Spandau is sick. They're forwarding his mail to the British Military Hospital. The star of the show - in fact, ladies and gentlemen, the only member of the cast - is indisposed. But the show will carry on without him.'

Beside it, because I keep it in the same manila envelope in my makeshift filing system, is a handwritten copy of a memorandum that I wrote in 1945 on the first night of peace in Europe. It was addressed to the Prime Minister with copies to nobody.

Straight away, let me tell you that I did nothing brave or bold in the war and not too much, I hope, that was bloody. My circle of friends, on the other hand, was quite bowed down under the weight of medals and bars. It was lucky for me that modesty and self-deprecation were the fashion among heroes, because that was all I was entitled to wear. Now that such a lot of time has passed, and so many heroes are laid to rest, I'll make a small boast. My little corner of the war was the one part of the field where we - I mean we British - outplayed the opposition from start to finish. There was some reason for thinking, in my little department, that we'd done a rather good job, but on VE night I went to bed early and alone.

I did not get a night's sleep. There was unfinished business on my mind and, anyway, the noise of a party - somebody rolling out the barrel - made it hard to sleep. At three o'clock, I got up, made a mug of tea with rum in it, and settled down to write my memorandum.

To: Prime Minister.

From: Capt. V. James.

However eager the Russians are to have the Prisoner known as Rudolph Hess stand trial with the other German leaders, it would be better to deal with him in some other way. Our line of argument might well be that he effectively ceased to be a member of the German government when he flew to this country in 1941. At that time his country was not at war with the Soviet Union. Treaty relations existed between the two nations. There can, then, be no case for submitting the prisoner known as Hess to the interests of Soviet Justice, or to any judicial process in which the Soviet Union may play a part.

Should the Soviets insist, despite this embarrassment, then a valid plea may be entered that the prisoner is unfit to stand trial. His mental state has deteriorated during his time in captivity. He has bouts of depressive illness attended by episodes of amnesia and confusion. Dr. Delaney is sure that these are genuinely pathological and my own observations lead me to agree. The

prisoner's symptoms may have been made worse by the efforts of mind required by the training and educational aspects of his treatment while in our custody. If a clinical term must be coined for his condition, we may call it Uhlsdorf's Amnesia. A plea of unfitness along these lines should be prepared in terms that the court may accept. The prisoner may thus be dealt with more conveniently without embarrassing the Soviets."

I scribbled in the margin afterwards, in pencil: "Patients suffering from Uhlsdorf's Amnesia are inclined to think they are someone else, and blot out certain contradictory parts of their own memories."

When the time came, a submission setting forth the plea that I suggested was prepared and advanced on behalf of the prisoner at the Nuremberg court on the thirtieth of November, 1945. I could not have foreseen that the prisoner would then dismiss his counsel and beg leave to address the court in his own behalf. He admitted that he had certain small mental difficulties, but claimed that his previous assertions of amnesia had been lies and that he was, in fact, perfectly fit to stand trial alongside the chiefs of the Nazis still living.

I had better fill you in. In nineteen forty, Alastair McLaren said something vague about finding war work for me to do, but it did not seem to be the most pressing item on his agenda. My detectable asthmatic wheeze had led all three services to decline my offer. As it happens, the wheeze was caused by an allergy to something in carpets. Had anybody known at the time, I could have been sent off in a Spitfire, a submarine or a Sherman tank with as much impunity as the next man. The office in which I sat each day, on the other hand, was laid with an especially insanitary patch of ancient Axminster. The fact that what I did there was to write leading articles and other expressions of the national resolve for a daily newspaper only added to the anguish. Pacing the carpet can only have added to the wheezing. I pestered Alastair. I pestered other people. The best anybody ever seemed to come up with was the name of some new person I could pester.

It was not easy to come to terms with the idea that I might, after all, be quite useless when it came to fighting a war. The morning that I walked into St. George's to attend the memorial service for Alwyn Spenser, the idea was especially oppressive, as it seemed that almost everyone in Hanover Square was in khaki or blue. I felt so useless, in fact, that I stayed in my pew as the church emptied afterwards, so that I could wait for everybody else to go. I didn't want to hear the questions, 'what are you up to?' or 'who are you with?' So I stayed in my pew under the pretence of lingering prayer, listening to the murmur of greetings and conversation outside the church. When I could hear only the traffic, I got up to leave. I found that I was still not quite alone in the church. One other straggler remained. I passed him on the way out but he caught up with me just outside the door.

"You're James, aren't you? My name's Ross."

We shook hands. I had the impression of having seen him before and said so, apologising for my forgetfulness.

"Friend of Alastair's. Colleague in a way. Are you doing anything for lunch?"

As it happened I was engaged for lunch.

"Can you telephone and put the thing off?"

I looked at him with some surprise. When a stranger suggests with quite that confidence that you break an engagement, he's either a lunatic or he has something serious to say. Ross didn't seem to be a lunatic.

"Can I take a short cut?" I asked him.

"To where?" he asked, slightly surprised.

"To the point in the conversation where you may be about to suggest there is something I might be able to do for you or you for me."

"At this rate we can probably skip lunch. You've been looking for a job. I might be able to find you something. What do you suppose your answer would be by the time we'd had lunch and I'd told you as much as I was going to tell you?"

"I have a feeling that wouldn't be very much anyway."

"As it happens, no, it wouldn't be."

"Doesn't make much difference. The answer would be yes. I want a job to do."

"There could be an outside chance. We'll have lunch another time." He put a calling card in my hand. "Come and see me, ten o'clock tomorrow."

He turned and strode off across the Square, holding his hat against a little flurry of wind.

At ten o'clock the following morning I walked the short distance from my rooms to Vincent Square and rang the bell at the address on Ross's card. Not being sure that the bell was really working, I also thumped with the tarnished brass knocker. The house seemed to be a private dwelling with nothing to distinguish it from the rest of the terrace. White shutters were drawn across inside the windows on the ground floor and the glass was taped against blast. There was a basement with a railed area in which someone had dumped a tangle of barbed wire. The door was opened by a woman in a tweed suit. She had glasses and nicotine stained fingers and didn't pause to listen as I introduced myself.

"Up the stairs to the room straight ahead of you."

There was no name on the door and it was not a very cheerful room. It was waiting to become somebody's office. There was a brown desk with a linoleum top standing not quite in the middle of the floor. A chair to match it for utilitarian ugliness was lying on top of it. A green filing cabinet stood obscuring part of the window. A telephone sat on the floor at the end of a skein of black cable. The walls were covered in a dispiriting greenish wallpaper, extremely grubby around the light switch. There were no pictures or decorative touches of any sort.

I waited for ten minutes or so but nobody came. I went back out onto the staircase and listened. A certain amount of muttering came from behind the next door along the landing, but I could make nothing of it because a typewriter was chattering away on the floor below. I went back down the staircase and opened the first door I came to and found the tweed-suited woman typing in *maestoso* style at a black machine not much smaller than a grand piano. She had a cigarette pushed to one corner of her mouth, with her face screwed up to keep the smoke out of her eye. She showed no interest in my arrival.

"I believe Mr. Ross is expecting me," I said.

"Colonel Ross," she said and kept on typing.

"I wonder where I might find him?"

"Up the stairs to the room straight ahead of you."

"You are quite sure of that? There is nobody there at the moment."

"No," she said, "that's because you're down here."

I went back to the room on the first landing. There was still no sign of Ross. The chair still lay on the desk.

I took it down and moved the desk to a more convenient position where it enjoyed what light came through the heavily taped window. The filing cabinet was more awkward to move and had to be waddled on alternate corners to a better resting place. Out on the landing I had noticed a coat and hat stand. It looked more purposeful when I had put it in the corner by the door. Once I had hung my hat and coat on it and hooked my umbrella on the thing, it lent a pleasant air of occupation to the room. I wiped the dust from the seat of the chair and sat at the desk. The drawers were all empty, but for one, which contained several sheets of ruled paper and an incomplete maintenance manual for a motorcycle of some kind. The ruled paper I squared up and put on a corner of the desk. The motorcycle manual I passed up as the first offering to the waste paper bin. If the telephone had only been connected to an exchange, I'd have been ready to set myself up in any business that took my fancy.

The woman in the tweed suit, still wreathed in smoke, had reached a very animated passage of typing when I opened her door again.

"Why does the telephone not work in that room?"

She stopped typing and took the cigarette out of her mouth, which allowed her face much needed relief from contortion.

"They're supposed to have done the telephones last week. You can't say when they'll come. They say there's a war on."

"See if you can't chivvy them up. And if there's any gas..." I glanced at the far corner of the room where a kettle stood on a gas ring, next to a tea pot, "I should be extremely glad of a cup of tea."

I looked at my watch, which, by reflex, made her look at her own, confirming that it was time for a cup of tea. "If you could send one up. No sugar. Milk if there's any. You seem to have rather a lot of chairs."

A row of bentwood chairs scraped the walls on two sides of her office."

"We need them," she said. "From time to time."

"Then call on me if you should run out," I said, lifting the least rickety looking chair and taking it with me.

I now had an office, a desk, a hatstand, two chairs, a wastepaper bin and the prospect of a telephone line. By retrieving the too hastily discarded manual from the litter bin, I was equipped to offer advice on certain aspects of motorcycle maintenance. It was beginning to look as if I might, at last, be able to make a contribution to the war effort. I knew from many conversations I'd had that London was stuffed with people in similar offices making just about the same contribution. The difference was that they had more paperwork to show for it.

The woman in the tweed suit brought me a cup of tea accompanied by two biscuits in the saucer.

"Colonel Ross telephoned. His apologies, but he's tied up. He'll try to see you this afternoon, if you can wait."

"If there's still a war on this afternoon, I'll wait."

"About the tea. We have a little fund. To buy the sugar and biscuits and so on. Everybody puts in sixpence a week."

I gave her sixpence. The tea was disgusting but I drank it on principle. Once you're in the tea fund, you're part of the establishment. At lunchtime I walked

up to the Army and Navy stores and bought a calendar, an inkwell and a blotter. In a bric a brac shop near the station I found several pictures. One was a portrait of Admiral Beatty in a quite respectable frame. Another was a stirring depiction of the battle cruiser Lion steaming full ahead at Jutland that must have come from the same house clearance. There was also a large water colour of Tintern Abbey. One of the odd advantages of the blitz was that it was easy to bargain down a price with a man who couldn't entirely dismiss the idea that his stock might be blown to oblivion in the night. I got the lot very cheaply, together with a few nails and some wire to hang them.

H.M.S. Lion I put up behind my desk, the Admiral on the wall opposite. I used my shoe for a hammer. Tintern Abbey took a little thinking about. I tried several places and eventually settled for the piece of wall that first met your eye on entering. It wasn't the best light for the picture but the effect was the most congenial and welcoming. When I'd finished, I thought of McLaren's beautiful Tabriz rug and wished I could throw down one to match it. I couldn't, of course. Some of us have to settle for linoleum.

I was writing a letter when Ross came in. Naturally, he came in without knocking but in an instant he stopped.

"Sorry old man," he said and immediately left, closing the door behind him even before I looked up. I heard his footsteps out on the landing; heard the door to the next office open and a brief exchange of voices.

His footsteps returned and passed down the stairs. The sound of typing was arrested for a few moments and then Ross's footsteps came back up the stairs. The door was opened and it stayed open. Ross stared at me.

"Whose is this bloody office?"

"This morning it didn't seem to be anybody's. This afternoon it seems to be mine. Do come in."

"Yours, is it? And what do you do in it?"

"I'm waiting for somebody to tell me. Just like half the chaps in London from what I can make out."

Ross sat on the bentwood chair, threw his feet up on the desk and carried on staring at me while he took a cigarette case from his pocket.

"Smoke?"

I declined.

"Do you mind?" There was a certain sarcasm in his tone.

"Not at all, I said. "Use the bin for an ashtray. They don't seem to have supplied me with one yet."