

Edited Oct. 30, 1993

CHAPTER 5

Back to Britain and into the R.A.F. (1941-42)

To New York by Way of Pearl Harbour

My engagement to Isabel was the prelude to almost a year's separation. She was to return to her rural survey of a village near Chongqing until we could meet and marry in London. A seemingly strange arrangement for a young couple in love. But I was determined to go home and join the forces in England. Though I had broken with philandering (I thought) and was committed to marriage, first and foremost I was committed to politics. Not even Isabel, I pledged to myself, would upset that priority. Not that she ever wanted to. As it happened, she had to stay in China to look after her mother, who had broken her back climbing a mountain near Chengdu. When the time came that she felt she could leave her mother, she set off on a long and exciting journey over the Hump to India, across the sub-continent and then by ship through submarine-infested waters, round the Cape of Good Hope (one needed hope on such a voyage) to Britain. I was to fly from Chongqing to Hong Kong, then travel by ship to Shanghai, to Manila and across the Pacific (during which time Pearl Harbour was bombed). After that I was to cross the North American continent by bus, sail across the Atlantic (also submarine-infested) and return to blitz-ridden England.

We started our journeys together by the most efficient road transport in war-torn China - the postal truck, lolling affectionately on the stack of mailbags. We said goodbye under the eaves of the tile-roofed temple at Bishan, from where Isabel was to set out at dawn for her village, while I pushed on to China's wartime capital, the hill-city by the Yangzi River, Chongqing.

The flight to Hong Kong was my first time in an aircraft. It was a rickety little plane with un-upholstered metal bucket seats and an un-pressurized cabin, hard on the ear-drums; for we had to fly high for safety's sake over occupied territory, then dive down to land. But we reached Hong Kong safely. There I stayed at

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the Church Guest House as a paying guest of the remarkable Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong, Ronald Hall, who was not only a Christian Socialist, but unlike his "Low Church" North American brethren in Chengdu served sherry before dinner. More than that, he found me a temporary job teaching at the Diocesan Boy's School for the duration of my stay in his see, which was longer than I had foreseen.

I had decided to go home by way of U.S.A. where I had spent seven years of my youth and where I had good friends. In peace-time this would have been plain sailing, for the ships of the President Lines put in regularly to Hong Kong. But in these threatening times, three or four months before Pearl Harbour, war was already looming over the Pacific. The mission in Chengdu had given me my air ticket to Hong Kong and a month's severance pay, U.S.\$25.00. My meagre capital was dwindling as I waited and waited for the scheduled visit of the S.S. President Coolidge. So the D.B.S. teaching job was literally a godsend. The Coolidge never did turn up and at last I sailed up the coast to my old stamping ground of Shanghai. There the American Express sold me a third-class ticket on a French ship due to sail to Manila at the end of November. There I could catch the Coolidge and head for San Francisco.

I described my voyage from Shanghai to Manila in a newspaper article¹:

Our little tub chugged along through the choppy sea. Suddenly she put on a spurt and went full steam ahead, until the rivets rattled. Rumour had it that it was nip and tuck whether we'd get to Manila before the Coolidge sailed. But make it we did, thanks to the presence up in First Class of some tycoons of Standard Oil. I had never before or since thought kindly of that giant corporation, but I must acknowledge that it then saved my life and that of all on board.

We pulled into Manila on November 27 at 11 a.m. and there was the Coolidge... due to sail at 1 p.m. The gods (or at least Standard Oil) were certainly with us.

I scrambled ashore at 12.10 after being passed through the efficient Filipino customs and immigration authorities...

"Sorry", said the man in the shipping company office, "but we don't sell third-class tickets to Westerners. Plenty of room in second, though. Yes, it'll cost \$120 more".

I was on the point of falsely swearing that I was half-Chinese when my Spanish cabin-mate... saved me from perjury. He had just rushed in (and was) talking in rapid Spanish "Sure" (he was told) "I can fix you up with a third-class ticket." Well, if he could, so could I... the shipping clerk grudgingly came across...

At last I staggered up the gang-plank. On going below I discovered that there were nearly a hundred empty third-class berths. I cursed the shipping company's discriminatory policy. Yet they were only reflecting the customary attitude of Westerners out East...

We steamed cautiously out of Manila's well-mined harbour, escorted by a heavy armoured cruiser and two destroyers.

The first ten days were quiet enough...

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The ship swung a long way south of her normal course...

Suddenly the bombshell burst. Pearl Harbour had been bombed. Japan had declared war on Great Britain and U.S.A.. More rumours spread...

On Monday, December 8 the captain made an announcement over the ship's amplifiers. "From now on any violation of the blackout will be most stringently dealt with. We are at war." This apparent afterthought, four words in length, was the first official pronouncement...

The "Marine Cooks and Stewards Union"... passed a unanimous resolution undertaking to co-operate with the captain..." to promote utmost efficiency in the war for democracy".

But among the less politically-minded passengers was one of rather bombastic confidence. "We'll lick the pants off those little yellow bastards," he said. He had yet to grasp the fact that another yellow race had just become allies.

We called at Honolulu ten days after the bombing of Pearl Harbour... There was an ominous notice at the gang-plank:

"The ship is liable to receive orders to sail at any time." We did our sightseeing uncomfortably, looking over our shoulders...

125 wounded men and a number of civilian evacuees were brought on board for repatriation to the American mainland. Fifty young Chinese aviators going to U.S.A. for special training immediately gave up their staterooms and slept on campbeds in one of the public rooms.

The third class berths whose emptiness I had previously so much resented now came in useful. My Cabin-mates and I shifted down to steerage... with 150 bunks in one vast room...

Many of the (wounded) men were pitiable human cinders, burnt in the flaming oil which spread over the water...

Doctors and nurses worked like Trojans night and day. The crew, normally such sticklers for overtime pay... undertook unlimited unpaid overtime work...feeding and tending the wounded ...They spoon-fed the men incapable of feeding themselves...

At last, on Christmas Day, we steamed under the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco. The normal 15-day crossing had stretched into 30... We were the first liner to reach the West coast since the war had begun.

All this is history, not autobiography. As to myself, throughout the voyage I had been breaking bounds, up and down. Up to the second-class (or was it first?) to find a quiet place to type articles with which to earn my daily bread once we got to U.S.A. This aroused the interest of a real journalist, a Time Magazine correspondent. This casual encounter steered me towards a momentous choice. When he heard that I was going home to join up, my journalist acquaintance gave me some advice. "Join the R.A.F.," he said. "That's the most democratic of the three forces. The British army and navy will sling a lot of bullshit at you. I know. I've just come from U.K." When the time came I followed his advice.

Breaking bounds below meant making friends with the crew, especially the members of the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union. They not only plied me with lashings of ice-cream. Many of them were communists, members of the American C.P., and we talked politics, about China and about the nature of the war.

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They were strongly pro-Soviet, pro-Stalin, anti-Trotsky and set my mind in a turmoil. I had already taken sides in the war, now that the Nazis had invaded the Soviet Union. Yet somewhere in the depths of my mind there still lurked doubts: Was Trotsky the villain I had for years been taught to believe him? Wasn't Frank Glass an honest and intelligent person? And yet, with these pro-Stalin seamen I felt comfortable. I spent several sleepless nights of mental strife. Finally I opted for Uncle Joe and one dark night threw overboard into the Pacific the books that Frank Glass had urged me to read: revelations by Soviet renegades who had worked for the K.G.B., as I had, others by disillusioned intellectuals such as André Gide and Arthur Koestler, by reporters such as Louis Fischer. I had cast Blood Alley to the bottom of the ocean.

Or had I? I found it surfacing again in the coming months.

Once ashore at San Francisco I checked into the tiny Spanish hotel recommended by one of the seamen and went to the American Express to pick up my mail. There was a pile of letters and one telegram, informing me of my mother's death. She was 56. It was Christmas Day, her birthday. This daughter of poor Jewish immigrants, who had left school at 14 and made it as a society dressmaker in fashionable Bond Street, was no communist. But I was her favourite child and if I was a communist then communism, she thought, must be a noble cause. I had spent little time with her since I was 18, twelve years ago, and now just when I was looking forward to making amends for years of filial neglect...

I went to the Greyhound Bus Company and bought a cut-rate ticket across the continent, which the ticket seller advised me I was entitled to as a missionary teacher! First down to Los Angeles, where I had friends. Friends? A confusing word. One of them was Herbert Kline, the pro-Stalin film-maker and journalist I had known and liked in Madrid; the other was Phil, Glass's Trotskyite follower in Shanghai. I saw them both. I was still not free from my mixed feelings and double life. I stayed with Herb and his charming Czech wife - and went to see Phil. He was working as chauffeur for a Hollywood star and showed me round the studios. There I was given a demonstration of what it meant to be double-faced. Three glamorous starlets were chatting, waiting to be photographed for publicity posters. The photographer composed the group and fiddled with his camera as the girls talked, looking their normal selves. Then came the word for the take and they switched on the most seductive

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smiles and switched them off again once the photo was taken. It was frightening at first to see what they could do. Then I thought that in a way, for other ends, that was the sort of thing I had done from the time I started work in Barcelona. I did a bit more of it when Phil invited me to meet his comrades in Los Angeles. Then I settled into the mental repose of a tourist trip across U.S.A.

First the southwestern states, still Spanish in some ways - or at least Mexican (they had belonged to Mexico 100 years before). I recall a brief side trip to the rim of the Grand Canyon after driving through pine trees decked with snow sparkling in the sun. And a meal in a Chinese restaurant for which the owner refused payment when he learnt I had just come from his homeland. Then the Wild West "Zane Grey" country of the cowboy thrillers and the middle-west of Abe Lincoln and after that his magnificent Memorial in Washington, whose pseudo-classical architecture impressed me. And finally New York - after six years absence.

I hurried down to Lower Manhattan to the British Consulate to find out how I could get home in these troublous times of submarine warfare in the Atlantic. "Sorry old chap. Afraid we can't help you. Got our hands full as it is." Then, as an afterthought, "I suppose you're not a plumber by any chance? There's a terrible shortage of plumbers at home. And..." No, I was not a plumber, so I walked out and wrote a letter to the British Embassy, explaining that I'd just come from China, knew a bit of the language and the country, including the interior towards Tibet etc. "Thanks very much," came the reply. "But you'd better go home and join up there." How could I have written that letter when I was going home to England where I was to marry Isabel? Political commitment still came first.

How was I to get home? And what was I to live on meanwhile? A friend from my early fur business days gave me the name of a literary agent to whom I hopefully presented the articles I'd written on board the Coolidge. He was an important man with a big cigar and an office on Madison Avenue. "Look, young feller," he said after flipping over a page or two, "we run an agency, not a school of journalism. It's not our job to teach you how to write."

Somehow I got in touch with Ted Allan whom I'd known in Madrid as a left-wing journalist covering the Canadian battalion, the Mac-Paps.² Ted was on the way up but he was warm, friendly and helpful. He

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introduced me to his literary agent, Flo who, he said, would not treat an International Brigade veteran as just another client. He was right. Flo read my stuff carefully, went over it with me, showed me how to tighten it up, gave me technical tips such as starting each piece with a snappy, eye-catching lead. Finally I got a few pieces accepted by publications ranging from Mademoiselle, a magazine aimed at elegant young ladies, to the academic Virginia Quarterly. My photos also came to the rescue. Those of the Shanghai dock area were sold to U.S. military intelligence for the planning of bombing raids. Pictures of air-raids and campus scenes in Chengdu were made into a story for the progressive tabloid PM, staffed largely by former classmates at Columbia University.

This kept the wolf from the door but there was still no way of getting home to England. I needed a steady job and found one through friends of America's new ally, China. In New York there was an office of "Chinese Industrial Co-operatives" - C.I.C., an organization founded by patriotic Chinese and Western friends of China such as Edgar Snow and the New Zealander Rewi Alley, to organize work-relief for craftsmen-refugees in the interior of China. The New York office, bent on raising money for this cause, considered the American trade unions a logical source. The American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) and the newly founded Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.) were at this time contributing large sums every month to the trade unions of Guomindang China. These were "yellow unions", crooked and corrupt, said supporters of C.I.C. It was aiding reaction to help them. American workers' money should help Chinese workers, not line the pockets of corrupt Chinese trade union officials. The A.F.L. and C.I.O. contributions should go to C.I.C. It was my job to convince them. This was a tricky task for which I was quite unqualified. But I was given expert instruction by Edgar Snow and others who knew the history of the Chinese labour movement and with their coaching I managed to present a case convincing enough to secure some contributions. This job not only provided a frugal living, it soothed my conscience, for though I had thrown anti-Soviet, anti-Stalinist books into the Pacific ocean, doubts still lingered in my head.

My mental conflicts were shown in my social contacts. I got in touch with American veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the International Brigade. They were denouncing Ernest Hemingway's novel For Whom the Bell Tolls, saying it makes the hero of the Spanish Republic an American, denounces the Communist

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Andre Marty, describes Republican not fascist atrocities and subordinates the whole story to an unlikely love affair. This prompted the vets to review the book under the title "Three Nights in a Sleeping Bag". I acknowledged they had a point, while confessing that I had found the book moving. Then I drew aside an old friend, a former staff officer of the Lincoln's, to whom I confided my political confusion. He listened sympathetically and gave me a copy of The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) - "history" according to Stalin. My attitude towards that book had its ups and downs over the years. At that time I read it - and left it, not by accident, in my furnished room when I left New York.

Meanwhile I fulfilled a promise made to Phil in Los Angeles to look up some of his Trotskyist friends. All I remember of that encounter in a small, smoke-filled room in a downtown New York Hotel is: it was my last meeting with Trotskyites.

These contradictory contacts reflected my confused state of mind. But that was not my most pressing problem. How was I to get to Britain?

To U.K. by Oil-tanker

One day I was on a crowded New York bus when a stocky man with a weather-beaten face tapped me on the shoulder and asked: "Would you mind telling me when we get to Times Square?" "O.K. I'm going there myself," I said and we got off the bus together. "Come and have a drink," he invited. We went to a saloon and there I was introduced to that potent concoction, the "boilermaker" - whisky with beer chasers. After a couple of these it came out that he was a British merchant-ship captain and I was trying to get home to join the R.A.F. Unfortunately he and his ship were not going my way, he said. But he gave me a tip. Go up to Halifax Nova Scotia, go down to the Harbour Master's office, get a job and work your way across. I did just that.

First to Montreal, where I had a reunion with Jean, now a driver in the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Corps (CWAC). It wasn't quite the same as Madrid. Jean was home in Canada, where her husband was in gaol as a Communist. I was engaged to Isabel and on my way home, among other things, to marry her. But still the

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reunion went well and Jean gave me introductions to friends in Halifax. There I did as my boilermaker pal had advised.

Queuing up outside the Harbour Master's office I got talking to the seamen. "Don't sign on a British ship," one of them said. "Worst grub in the world. Lousy quarters, too. Panamanians are best. They're really Yanks flying a neutral flag." Others opted for the Scandinavians and that was where I landed. The Harbour Master examined my passport, looked me over and sent me along to the Norwegian consulate. There I signed on as a Steward's Assistant, a high-sounding title which boiled down to dish-washing and brass polishing. Leaving the office after signing on I thought to ask: "What sort of ship is she?" "The Polartank? A tanker of course." I thought of the human cinders we had picked up at Pearl Harbor, but there was nothing for it now.

I described the Atlantic crossing in another newspaper article.³

I Came Home By Tanker

"What's she loaded with?" I asked the messboy, who was helping me on board with my kit. "Hot stuff, lad. Aeroplane petrol. One hit on her and you can say good-bye. If you've got time. Fried to a crisp in nice boiling oil you'd be, with salt water to give yer a flavour."...

The well-decks, I noticed, were painted with bright red lead which colour they remained throughout the trip. Make a good target from the air, I thought. But, then it is the cheapest kind of paint..

There were a couple of days' wait for organising the convoy of 30 ships, then we sailed.

I shared a cabin with three others. Not one of them was more than 19 years old... These lads knew plenty about life and death (to say nothing of wine and women) at an age when most of us are still not dry behind the ears. Yet much of their toughness was only skin-deep and beneath the hard-shell surface they were soft and sentimental.

We talked of ships and shipping losses. Most sinkings of late had been along the American coast, often in sight of shore. (433 Allied ships have been sunk in the west Atlantic since January, according to the American Press of the first week of August.)

"Beats me why they don't build a pipeline from Texas to Halifax," said the pumpman. "That's what the Russians would have done."...

Our own defence, in addition to that afforded by the naval escort, consisted of very small calibre guns. "Trouble is," said the gunners, "their range is too bloody short. The Jerry subs can come up to the surface, large as life, stay out of our range, and knock hell out of us."

"Anyway," broke in Shorty, a 17-year-old Canadian deck-hand, "Jerry subs, on the surface are faster than we are. They can do 14 and 15 knots easy. These old tubs'd rattle their guts to pieces if they did more'n 12. Why the hell do they keep on building 'em?"

On this trip, fortunately, none of their statements were put to the test. Several times, however, our escorts dropped depth charges and put up smoke screens. A comforting sight it was, after hearing the ominous detonations to see the speedy little corvettes whizz round the entire convoy, belching smoke from their rear-ends like enormous wads of cotton-wool...

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Then, at eleven o'clock one night we were standing around the stern gun, talking and smoking in the still broad daylight. It was the eleventh day of the trip. "Do you want to bet on it?" said Stavanger - nicknamed after his home town in Norway - a picturesque, piratical figure, six feet four in his sea-boots. "To-morrow we'll see land."

It sounded almost impossible. I was beginning to feel I'd been a seaman all my life.

But Stavanger was right. Next morning at six, as I took the mate's coffee up to the bridge, there it was. Only a string of islands, it is true, way off on the horizon. But there was land to see. And in another 36 hours there was land to feel beneath one's feet...

That was my experience as a member of the Norwegian merchant navy. I was paid off and went ashore at Ellesmere Port on the Manchester Ship Canal on June 20, 1942. The first sight to catch my eye was a sign painted on a public lavatory wall: One side read "Europeans", the other "Asiatics". We were at war with racist Nazi Germany but had not yet rid ourselves of racism.

Back home I gave Dad the half bottle of whisky I'd bought for him in Canada. He liked a drop of schnapps once in a while and it was hard to come by in Britain those days. We talked a bit of mother, who had died six months before. But it was too painful to dwell on. I told the family - Dad, my mother's mother and her two unmarried sisters - about Isabel. Mother, it emerged, had feared, yes feared, that Isabel was a Chinese. She herself was not so religious as Dad but still would have liked me to marry "a nice Yiddisher girl". But a "yellow-skinned Chinese"! Even the racially and religiously oppressed can be infected by the disease of their oppressors.

After a few sweet, sad days in Yorkshire I headed south to see my sister in the Midlands. Her husband, a respected professional man and a pillar of local society, took one look at me and said: "David, you need a haircut". He drove me to the barber he had patronised for years. The barber, true to his trade, was a talker and fancied himself as a bit of an amateur detective. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "are you by any chance a surgeon? I notice that your hands have been in liquid a good deal." I hadn't the heart to tell him that the soggiess of my hands was due not to surgery but to dishwashing.

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Wartime Wedding and into the R.A.F.

The joy of my returning to Britain was marred by the absence of Isabel. At last she sent word of her arrival date, which was to be 10 days after mine. I hurried to London to meet her and at St. Pancras railway station we had an embarrassingly public reunion before her fellow passengers of the long and hazardous voyage home. Then off to a hotel in Bloomsbury, near the British Museum for, we thought, one night of "living in sin" before marrying the next day. But our happy sinfulness was unhappily prolonged. For on arriving at the Bloomsbury Registry Office we were told we must both establish one month's residence in the area before our marriage could be registered. So we relapsed into sin. At last the day came round, July 30, and we returned to the Registry Office.

"Where are your witnesses,?" we were asked. "You must have two." We had none. But as we entered the office building I had noticed a couple of house painters on the job.

"All right, guv'nor," they said, when I asked them to be witnesses. "It'd be a pleasure." All the world loves a lover. So they dusted off their overalls, put their paint brushes in the pots, came in and signed: W.J. Pritchard and A.W. Gill. The marriage certificate bears other names than theirs and ours, including those of our fathers. Isabel's father, Homer Brown, missionary and mine Hyman Crook, furrier. Afterwards I cursed myself for not using Dad's Anglicized name of Henry, which he himself occasionally used. That would have concealed the fact I was Jewish. After a sumptuous wedding breakfast in a pub, consisting of brown ale, bread and cheese and pickled onions, Isabel rushed off to an appointment at an employment agency. "Are you married?" asked the lady taking her particulars. "Oh, yes," answered Isabel enthusiastically. "An hour ago". That night we celebrated, sitting in the gallery of a West-end theatre at a performance of "The Merchant of Venice". I found it hard to refuse some sympathy for Shylock as he declaimed:

You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine...
You that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold: money is your suit.

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What should I say to you?...
Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;
You spurned me such a day; another time
You called me dog, and for such courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys!

A series of events were to remind Isabel, daughter of Christian missionaries, that she had married a misbeliever - a fact which had never worried her, though it had briefly worried her parents. Back in Yorkshire Dad and Grandma greeted Isabel warmly - but they had laid their plans. Isabel was to be converted to Judaism! "You have a talk with her," they said. Of course I, a long time atheist, had no intention of trying to persuade Isabel to convert to Judaism or any other religion. But I did not want to hurt the old folk, whom I loved; so we had our talk, during which I tried to explain how Dad and Grandma felt. The talk finished, I went downstairs, where Grandma was waiting for the verdict. "Did she gib in?" she asked. "Well," I hedged. Finally we accepted Dad's suggestion of consulting the Chief Rabbi in London. There I explained the situation: I had been brought up in an orthodox household, my father was a religious Jew, Isabel had been brought up in a Christian family, the old folk wanted her to convert to Judaism. "But," I concluded, "I personally am an atheist." The rabbinical gentleman stroked his beard for a while in silence then looked at me over the top of his glasses without batting an eyelid: "Under the circumstances," he said, "perhaps conversion would not be the best solution." He then gave us, not exactly his blessing, but a few friendly words of parental advice and we went back to Yorkshire by way of Petticoat Lane and a kosher salt beef sandwich. The outcome of the visit was entirely satisfactory to my father. In accordance with the Catholic words which Karl Marx liked to quote, "Dixi et salvavi animam meam". (I have spoken and saved my soul.) Dad had done his duty. He liked Isabel and scraped together a few pounds for a wedding present. As to Grandma, she and Isabel who towered over her age-bent figure, nattered cheerfully over the washing up, carefully keeping the meat and milk dishes and dish-cloths separate. Isabel and I discussed the Jewish dietary laws and other taboos from a materialist point of view, enlightened by her study of anthropology, and ascribed them all, perhaps a bit mechanically, to economics and the hygienic needs of the Red Sea climate, near which Moses had heard the word of god. Then there was the setting of the tombstone on my mother's grave, a ceremony which Isabel found anthropologically intriguing. All in all, my being Jewish seemed to worry her less

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than it worried me. Thus began a long and happy mixed marriage.

From the time of my arrival in England on June 10 three matters weighed on my mind: earning a living (we had all of fifty pounds in the bank when we got married), straightening out my political position and then joining up. For the first task I scribbled furiously and managed to get a few articles published. The content ranged from travel, life and drama in wartime China to my journey across the Pacific and the Atlantic. The publications ranged from the Tory Daily Express to the left-wing Reynolds News and the Liberal John O'London's Weekly.

Keeping frugally afloat financially was a simpler matter than settling accounts politically. First I phoned my cousin Charlie, an old-time Communist. Charlie had been born in the East End and dedicated his life to teaching slum children, compiling lively text-books for backward readers. In our family Charlie and his wife were considered a bit crazy, not merely because they were Communists and not interested in making money. They preferred salads to the tasty but oily Jewish cuisine, and they went camping. But despite his unorthodox habits in daily life Charlie was extremely orthodox in his communist politics. Without going into the details of my intelligence work I simply said that I had fallen in with some Trotskyists and for a time had wavered in my allegiance to the C.P. Now I wished to return to the fold. Charlie was cautious and simply advised me to "go to the Centre", meaning C.P. headquarters in Covent Garden, which I had last visited six years before when volunteering for the International Brigade. Now, for some reason, I found it hard to return to number 16 King Street. I went instead to the offices of the Party publication The Daily Worker, whose editor I had known slightly in Spain. Bill Rust was furious at my contacting him on such a matter as the political standing of a Party member. He was a journalist, editor of a daily newspaper trying to build a mass circulation. He sent me off with a flea in my ear to see Bob Stewart, of the Party's Control Commission. Despite his forbidding position Bob proved to be a fatherly old soul. He listened to me so sympathetically that I felt at ease in telling him everything, holding nothing back. Finally he advised me, since I was set on joining the R.A.F., not to bother about formally re-joining the Party but to follow the Party line through reading The Daily Worker and studying Marxism and the Party's analysis of Trotskyism. Now that Britain and the Soviet Union were allies in the war against fascism the

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task of Communists in the forces was: to be good soldiers and go all out for victory, setting an example to others in doing one's military duty and refuting slanders against the Soviet Union and the heroic Red Army, which was bearing the brunt of the war. Re-registration could be considered later. Was this really the line for all Party members in the forces, or was it tailor-made for me, to allow the Party leadership time to look into my case? I did not worry. I had told the truth and Bob had listened sympathetically and apparently believed it. This was a weight off my mind. I was home again. The prodigal had returned. Whether there was rejoicing in King Street or not there certainly was joy in my heart.

So I was back in the arms of Uncle Joe and Harry Pollitt, happily married and solvent, since Isabel, after turning down a job which called for lecturing on China, was working in a West End bookshop. The time had come to desert my newly wed wife and volunteer to join the forces. I prepared to do so with no thought for any difficulty it might bring her. Politics first.

I had heard that the R.A.F. had formed a unit for rescuing air-crew shot down by the Japanese over occupied China. This seemed to be the right outfit for me. I mentioned it to Professor Eve Edwards, head of the Chinese Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University, to whom Isabel had a letter of introduction. The Professor in turn gave me a letter to a Wing Commander G. at Air Ministry, who gave me an appointment. I sat in the cellar-waiting-room down on Kingsway for nearly an hour, all the time talking to myself in Chinese. The wing commander saw me at last and tested my French, Spanish and German. Chinese, apparently, was one of the languages he did not know. But he sent me along to a former official of Shanghai Customs who tested my rudimentary knowledge and gave me some forms to fill out. One of the questions surprised me: "Are you of pure European descent?" Whom was it aimed at? Jews who might be suspected of sympathising with Hitler? Or Eurasians from the colonies? My mind flashed back to the sign on the lavatory wall at Ellesmere Port where the Norwegian tanker had docked. Still, with my tongue in my cheek I attested to the purity of the blood in my veins and a few days later was informed that I was earmarked for "Clerk S.D.", the S.D. for Special Duties meaning Intelligence.

But first I was to enlist at the St. Pancras recruiting station and go through the usual basic training

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known as "square bashing", the force's name for drill. Moving round the vast recruiting hall from table to table, providing required personal details and receiving items of kit I came to the identity disc desk. "Religion?" asked the cockney clerk. This had to be shown on the disc so that, if the need for burial arose you would be placed in the ground with co-religionists and not with lesser breeds. I had been warned by comrades that if I said "atheist" I would be suspected of being a communist and that would not go down well in Intelligence. So I played safe and answered: "Agnostic". "What's that?", said the clerk. "How do you spell it?" I spelt it. "Oh," she said, "we don't get many o' them." When my disc was issued some time later I found it inscribed with the letters "C of E", Church of England. I protested against this arbitrary conversion and was grudgingly classified as O.D. - Other Denominations, known in the ranks, as "Odds and Sods". This unflattering appellation was not to be looked down on, however; it excused one from church parade.

The only other incident in my induction was the colour-vision test, especially important in the air-force. The sergeant in charge flipped over a page or two of coloured dots and told me to call out the figures patterned on them. By the fourth or fifth page I could distinguish no figure at all. "What are you trying to do" barked the sergeant, "swing the lead?" I denied that I was malingering; I just couldn't make out any figures among those myriad dots. The examiner looked at my documents, found that I was a volunteer not a conscript and put me down grudgingly as "colour-defective, safe". A distinction was still made at this stage of the war between volunteers and conscripts; volunteer officers even had a brass badge with the letters VR - Volunteer Reserve - on their lapels. This was soon done away with as divisive and harmful to unity.

Soon I was off to Great Yarmouth, the home of the Peggotys and bloaters, for six weeks square bashing; and Canadian Isabel, bride of less than a month, was left in alien London. She quit the bookshop and came to join me, only to be told that it was against the law for her to establish residence and draw her rations in the coastal town of Yarmouth, there being a six-mile safety zone round the whole coast of Britain, closed to non-residents. The local police came to her rescue, behaving like the legendary goodhearted bobbies of tourist guidebooks. They advised her to establish residence in a village just inside the six-mile limit and draw her rations there once a week. Then she could live in digs in Yarmouth near my billet, to which I sneaked out every night.

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The six weeks square-bashing inducted me not only into the R.A.F. but also, in a sense, into the ranks of the British working class, with which I had had little contact. It took me some time to adjust to the ironical anti-heroics of the airmen. They were of the same stock of the heroes of the Battle of Britain, but marched back from the sea-front parade-ground singing such songs as "We'd be far better off in a home" (home meaning an orphanage or lunatic asylum); whereas I recalled the songs we sang in Spain: "Whirlwinds of danger are raging around us", "We are the youthful guardsmen of the proletariat" and of course the Internationale. My six weeks square bashing were a return to my British roots. But they did not get me into the British working class, to which I had never belonged. In fact I had to take pains not to be identified too closely with a fellow recruit, a left-wing intellectual whom the others soon nicknamed "Professor", which was not intended as a compliment. Still, the Professor and I had things in common, including our opposition to the Education Officer (until recently a biscuit salesman) who made snide anti-Soviet remarks during his lectures. The Professor and I heckled him with quotations from Churchill about "our great Soviet ally". This was, after all, the year of the Battle of Stalingrad during which Britain was full of praise of the Soviet Red Army. I identified with this and suppressed the memory of my Shanghai flirtation with Trotsky in a surge of love from Stalin.

On the whole those weeks at Yarmouth were a pleasant introduction to the forces, what with hot baths offered by the local householders to our "boys in blue", fish and chips in the market place in the evening followed by nuptial nights. Then fell the blow. I was to be sent for further training to the north of Ireland, of all places. This was a mistake soon discovered when I questioned it, for Air Ministry had told me otherwise. Someone had misread my "trade" of Clerk S.D. as Clerk G.D. - General Duties. So Isabel and I, after an anxious interval, were not after all to be separated by the sea - at least not yet awhile.

My next abode turned out to be one of the stately homes of England, or rather a Nissen hut in the grounds surrounding it. The house itself was an elegant Georgian structure probably built with the ill-gotten gains of some East India Company tax collector. It was set in broad acres at the very centre of England near the crossing of two Roman roads, Fosse Way and Watling Street. The twenty-odd inhabitants of our hut included a handful of grounded air-crew types who livened the atmosphere with their hilarious talk of a fantasy world populated by

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gremlins. These are a species of aerial imp, now, I believe, extinct, but in those days held responsible for the malfunctioning of aircraft with mechanical troubles. I think of gremlins with gratitude for sending those delightfully dotty jokers into the midst of us sanely serious intelligence types, whom they called "Wingless wonders".

We were soon hard at work in one of the upstairs bedrooms of the house, now transformed into a classroom. There we were initiated into the mysteries of the whole range of intelligence, from cloak-and-dagger operations (dismissed with a contemptuous wave of the hand into the limbo of spy thrillers) to disinformation, cryptography, code-cracking and finally our own future line: the X service. I long refrained from mentioning this magic phrase for fear of breaching the Official Secrets Act, which we solemnly signed. But in recent years it has been spoken and written of so extensively that I feel safe in saying that it embraces the monitoring and deciphering of enemy radio communications. The students were a mixed bag of mathematicians, archaeologists, historians, linguists (this was probably how I was classified) and other more or less educated characters, as well as one peer of the realm who occasionally cut classes to attend sittings of the House of Lords. I happened to be seated beside his Lordship but did not find him as communicative or congenial as other classmates, with some of whom I soon became friends. I remember a Manchester school teacher who after the war rose to fame in radio, and a tough Scottish left-winger who had seen service in combined operations on the dangerous Murmansk run. The old sweats in our Nissen hut showed me how to fold my blankets into an airtight sleeping bag and told me what to say when the officer on his tour of inspection asked when you had last shaken out and aired your bedding. The answer was always to be a smart: "Yesterday morning, Sir", no matter what the day of the week. The food was good and plentiful and there were second helpings for the asking. But you had to finish it or you were put on a charge. A reasonable arrangement.

There were no church parades for us "odds and sods", so I saw Isabel, now working in an Islington munitions factory, every weekend. Sometimes I would get a 36 hours leave to London, 80 miles away. There I would sit beside Isabel as she reamed bullets on the night shift of the little North London munitions factory, and get back on the milk train in time to report early if not bright on Monday morning. More often and more

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delightful, Isabel would take accumulated time-off to come up for the weekend. It was fun combing the villages around for farmhouses offering bed and breakfast - a real English breakfast of porridge, ham and eggs with lashings of butter and milk. Not the ascetic snack of wartime London hotels which robbed you of your rations. One nearby village was Monks Kirby, with a fine old English perpendicular church, a small village store in a cottage with a low, raftered ceiling, a thatched roof and a timbered front, a few cottages. It was peaceful. More so, I would guess, than in medieval times, when the church was built. Failing to find a room there we moved on to the adjoining hamlet of Brockhurst. There the lady with a room to rent tried to clinch the deal with the assurance that it was "much quieter than Monks Kirby", which she evidently abhorred as a noisy metropolis. On these all too short weekends we cycled around the rolling green countryside eating in the pubs, generally repeating our wedding breakfast menu of bread and cheese and pickled onions washed down with good brown ale. We'd have entered that repast in any gastronomic contest with the gods for all their nectar and ambrosia.

At last the months long intelligence course came to an end and we filed into the classroom, one by one, for the passing-out test. A massive, middle-aged gentleman who in peace time, I imagined, must have been a professor of Assyrian or Aramaic, had come over from the intelligence centre at Bletchley Park. He riffled the papers in the file before him, then asked me: "Where did you learn Czech?" I protested that I did not know a word of that language. "It's distinctly written here: CH," insisted the Assyrologist or whatever he was. "Oh, that stands for Chinese." So I was sent for a course in Japanese phonetics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

The course was designed to make us twenty or so students able to write down fast and accurately the sound of words we were to hear over Japanese radio-telecommunications. The sounds - without knowing the meaning; for it was a crash course lasting only nine weeks during which only linguistic geniuses could have learned the Japanese language. Linguists of longstanding would eventually translate what we heard and wrote down. The course was designed by that remarkable phonetician, B.J. Firth, a good-natured version of Professor Higgins in Shaw's play Pygmalion. He knew a number of Indian languages and could analyze and imitate the differences between north and south Yorkshire dialect. One day he took Isabel and me out to lunch in nearby

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Soho and after the first course he switched from his native English to a perfect imitation of Isabel's West China campus Canadian. He was a serious man, for all that, and worried about whether we students would crack under the strain of mastering the Japanese sound system in a few short weeks. One or two did crack up, especially after long sessions of "nonsense dictation". This consisted of genuinely Japanese sounds, but without any meaning, - rather like subjecting a non-English speaker to a passage of Lewis Carroll's "brillig slithy toves and borogroves." Firth was on tenterhooks towards the end of our nine weeks of linguistic torture over the earphones and would usher us off the Malet Street premises with warnings to look both ways before we crossed the street. He didn't want any premature casualties brought about by London traffic.

Actually nearly all of us survived and did pretty well at the job of transforming ourselves into human tape-recorders. Those contraptions had not yet been invented, but they soon were - with the result that all our efforts were in vain. We had become obsolete by the time we got into the field.

On completing the course we were sent back to our stately home. We were still "jumped up sergeants", to which rank we had been promoted from that of Aircraftsman Second Class (AC2) before going to SOAS. Now four of us were sent before a board to see if we were of commissioned officer material. These interviews have, often deservedly, been ridiculed. But by now, early 1943, all officers had to have served for a time in the ranks. I approved of this step in the democratic direction, away from the tradition that gentlemen, and even mere university graduates, automatically qualified for a commission. Not that all vestiges of that tradition were dead. I remembered on being asked by a member of the board what games we had played at school, to include rugby, squash and cricket, carefully avoiding anything so vulgar as soccer.

This precaution meant that unlike some members of the rank and file, especially some Communists, I wanted to be an officer, or at least had no objection to being one. I certainly wanted, both as a communist and a Jew, the defeat of Hitler and all he stood for. And I calculated that I might be of more use in this anti-fascist war as an officer than in the ranks.

So I cheerfully obeyed the order, when it came, to proceed to OCTU (Officer Cadets Training Unit) with three other "graduates" of our intelligence course: one was a clever but cherubic-looking young blond, whose

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peace-time ambition was to be a dental mechanic. His bunk was adorned with his pin-up girl, his pretty newly-wedded wife in a scanty bathing suit. Then there was Alec, a trifle dour and withdrawn, but whose gift of perfect pitch had made him a star student on our Japanese phonetics course at SOAS; and Carlton, a humorous, cynical, articulate intellectual with the makings of an Oxford don. The four of us got on well.

My most vivid recollection of OCTU is entirely unmilitaristic. It is of a thick carpet of bluebells in a wood at the foot of the Wrekin, which with a height of 1300 feet qualifies as a mountain in Britain. From the top, which the four of us scaled one Sunday we had a glorious view of the landscape, dotted with orchards, of England's green and pleasant midlands. I remember this with more joy and clarity than our training. For that we wore white bands round our hats to show that we were not mere airmen but officer cadets. So the sergeant major and other N.C.O.s addressed us incongruously as "Sir" while bellowing orders at us. "Pick yer feet up there - Sir". And we in turn had to bellow orders while manoeuvring companies and battalions of our fellows back and forth across the parade ground. We managed this without too much stage-fright, in fact considering it rather a game or a joke. None of our quartet, at least, suffered from weak nerves. We also passed the still more exacting test of selecting the right weapon from the array of knives, forks and spoons ranged by our plates at meals in the dining-hall and generally showing that we would be able to pass muster in an officer's mess. Finally, after just one week we were issued railway warrants to return to our stately home near Rugby. From force of habit we entered a third-class compartment and were embarrassed when the conductor came to examine our tickets. We should have been travelling first. We were officers in spite of our plebian instincts!

Back at our unit near Rugby the C.O. called us in. He was a regular Wing Commander who had risen from the ranks and I think of him fondly. He gave the four of us a fatherly talk before packing us off to London for our officers uniforms. "And don't waste your time and money on some fashionable Bond Street tailors," he advised. "Go to Monty Burton's. This is a war, not a tea-party." Montague Burton's in those days, by using mechanised mass production methods of tailoring, with a multiplicity of measurements, made presentable suits for fifty shillings and was known as "the fifty bob tailor". (You can hardly buy a tie for fifty bob now.) We willingly did as the C.O said, getting the rest of our clothing from Moss Brothers across the road from C.P.

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headquarters on King street, Covent Garden, which I looked at out of the corner of my eye. Though the C.O. himself commanded respect his adjutant was a bootlicker who, to my disgust, led the officers' mess in a sycophantic song, a parody of "And Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all", ending with "and our wing-commander and all". I found it even more embarrassing than singing "God Save the King".

During the first few days back at the station we lived the life of Riley. No more Nissen huts, but officers quarters with tea served in bed before breakfast by a snappy-looking WAAF (member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force). Then suddenly things changed. We were put under canvas in the spacious green pastures surrounding the house. We were going overseas.

First, embarkation leave. Isabel and I spent the two weeks in the Lake District which I had last visited eight years before, in 1934. We hiked in the rain and mist following in Wordsworth's footsteps, marvelling at the distances he claimed to have covered before breakfast, and stayed in the charming old inn in Hawkeshead, the village where he went to school. We did and said what young lovers do before the sweet sorrow of parting. At last we left the spring rain and mist of the Lakes, Isabel for her factory in London, I for the seaside resort of Blackpool on the nearby Lancashire coast, from which we were to set sail. The town was packed with men and women in uniform and walking along the front in the wind and the spray ("Blackpool is so bracing" the travel ads say), "Other ranks" pestered the life out of us sprog P.O.s with their devilish salutes, which we had to return. More disconcerting was another prelude to embarkation. We were advised to make our wills and send them to our next of kin. Mine was short. "I leave all my possessions to my wife, Isabel Joy Crook," and posted it to her with my apologies. It was not the most cheering way of saying goodbye. But I didn't take the will seriously. I had not yet outgrown the sense of invulnerability of the time I went to Spain 5 years before. There was no question in my mind: I'd come back.

In the political sense I had already come back - back to the Good Old Cause of the Communist Party of Great Britain. On learning from the RAF that I was to be sent overseas I contacted "Robbie" Robson, the Central Committee member in charge of Party members in the armed forces. He came to our attic room in the modest hotel opposite the British Museum. I asked Robbie for instructions as to how I should act as a communist officer

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in His Majesty's Armed Forces. He answered: "You have one job. Be a good soldier. Do your best to help win this war against fascism." I nodded. There was no question in my mind. I was comfortable once more in the arms of Uncle Joe. Trotsky was once more the embodiment of evil.

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NOTES

1. Reynolds News, Aug. 30, 1942
2. Abbr. for Machenzie-Popineau, 19th century Canadian revolutionaries
3. Reynolds News, Sept. 6, 1942