

# A B O Y ' S W A R



A L A S T A I R F O W L E R

Sometime before the war began, peace had already gone: the talk was of wars abroad and a coming war at home. In newsreels the Italians bombed Abyssinia and the Japanese in Manchuria fired machine guns on wheels and with shields to protect the gunners. The fighting at home was about the League of Nations and other politics. My mother was a Shavian socialist, but Aunt Nannie, more of a goer, distrusted theory and voted Tory. Air-raid shelters were being dug in gardens, and at school we were given gas masks with windows that steamed up and made our faces hot. Our shops carried new toy trucks and artillery, but when I asked for extra pocket money my mother made me feel bad.

My father still limped from the Great War, and he died in July 1939, just before the Second World War. His death left my mother frightened and unsure where to turn. To escape our house of death, we all went to Largs for a last seaside holiday. There, Nardini's café had a mural of the Battle of Largs between Vikings and locals. Both sides had poor equipment, though: just axes, bows and arrows, and spears.

After the holiday, war was almost upon us. We split up: my sister June and Aunt Nannie went home to Glasgow for the school term,

but my mother and I went to South Ayrshire in a hired car to be evacuees. I had only once been in a car before, when a visiting uncle drove us round the block in his Austin Seven and let me steer when the road was empty. Now, we were traveling fifty miles, past what the driver explained were cooling towers making clouds. Before we left Largs I got extra pocket money for Dinky toys – but only peaceful ones. No dark-green army trucks, only brightly colored tractors, harrowers, and vans.

We were to live with Granny Shaw and Aunt Jean at Carrick Cottage in Maybole, a small town with a castle right on the main street. It was only a tower house, without portcullis or battlements. Carrick Cottage had an upstairs, and on the landing stood a big chest with many old things that I was told I could explore. I found a Victorian ship's telescope, but no swords or pistols.

Soon, on Sunday, 3 September 1939, war was declared. I was busy at the time deploying infantry with pith helmets from an earlier war that had somehow got into our luggage. Their orders were to defend the tree stump just outside the kitchen as a forlorn hope. As I moved them about I could hear the dreaded announcement on the radio.

Real fighting began in December, when a British fleet cornered the battleship *Graf Spee* off Uruguay. We had no television, of course, but we followed the Battle of the River Plate on the radio and in the *Ayr Advertiser* and *Reynolds News*. We all admired the men on the British cruiser *Exeter*. The battleship's heavier guns devastated the smaller ship, holing its superstructure all over. Yet our fleet drove the *Graf Spee* into the neutral waters of Montevideo harbor, where its crew scuttled it on Hitler's orders.

I did my bit for the navy by saving up for a fleet from Stevenson's, the stationers. The gray Dinky toy destroyers in their window had no lower hulls, so they floated well either on linoleum or on stormy carpet. My weekly allowance stretched to a destroyer, but the battleship (HMS *Nelson*) had to be saved up for.

Supporting the RAF was more difficult: military aircraft were not to be had in Maybole. Studying aircraft identification counted for something, but few planes of any kind flew over Ayrshire. The only time I ever saw a German plane during the war was when we were on holiday in Carnoustie, on the east coast. It came in very low, strafing the town and making a terrifying noise. It went so

fast that I barely saw the decals: identification was out of the question.

In the end I bought a prewar biplane construction kit, “easy to assemble” from pre-painted scarlet metal parts. It proved anything but easy, my Meccano spanners and screwdrivers being still in Glasgow. To tighten the nuts I had to cover my fingers with a hanky.

In Maybole I had two friends, John Mundell and Angus Douglas. John’s father had been in the Great War and lost part of his jaw. He had brought back a German pistol, but John wasn’t allowed to touch it. In secret he showed me a box of the ammunition for it. His father was a carpenter and kept pigeons: I was taken to visit them in their hut a few yards up from the washhouse, behind the tenement block.

John soon enlisted me in a clod war. We defended the northern escarpment of the drying green, under bombardment from the enemy’s armor-piercing stones and clods. They also boasted a few air guns: John himself had a pellet from a previous attack lodged behind his ear between skin and skull. At his invitation I moved it about a little.

John’s younger brother Billy often wrestled with him, and once when he felt he was losing he crossed the line and pulled out a clasp knife. That was the only time I ever heard John swear. “By here!” (his dire swear word) “When I catch you . . . !” He chased Billy out of sight and came back alone with the knife.

Angus Douglas was a minister’s son: he lived in the upper town in a big manse with a long garden. Despite the manse, the Douglas family were poorer than the Mundells. The United Free Church was not the parish church. Mr. Douglas’s stipend must have been tiny: certainly too small for him to keep a servant, let alone a gardener. Angus and his brother did the work; they were hardly ever free to play. I hung about, curious to know how a big house was run.

The Douglasses kept hens, and one of Angus’s chores was to shoot starlings before they ate up the hens’ feed. We lay prone, keeping a low profile like snipers. Angus shot first and picked off one of the starlings without much disturbing the rest. Then he handed me the air gun, whispering “Don’t shoot the hens.” I had

never shot before, except at fairs: I missed. Angus took the gun back at once; pellets cost money.

Some days we went into the hills for Angus to check his rabbit traps. These were wire nooses fastened to pegs in the grass next to a sheep path. If he had caught nothing he used the time making casts of unusual paw prints for his Scout badge. He'd build a caisson of twigs, pour in plaster of paris, and wait for it to harden.

One Sunday afternoon Angus and his big brother Ronnie and I walked out Culzean Road into the hills west of Maybole. We were tramping through a plantation of young trees minding our own business when a gang of boys in Ronnie's class joined us and started horsing around. They took us to their bonfire, which they pretended was for cooking Ronnie on. He shouted and kicked, but they far outnumbered us. They held him over the fire until they decided he was well done. By that time his trousers were blackened and smoking. When they put him down, he must have been in real pain, but I noticed his first thought was to check how badly his trousers were burned.

The bonfire business was scary, but school was worse. No one played in the playground. Everyone fought – boys against boys, girls against boys – with teachers never in sight. My usual torturer was an Irish farmer's son, Mick. He had brown clothes and green teeth and boots without laces. He must have noticed that when he lashed me behind the knees with knotted bootlaces, I said "oah," Anyway, he trained me to say "oh oh!" instead. And then "ouch." He taught me many new sounds, for the leather laces hurt more than the Chinese sunburn he was expert at.

If Mr. Douglas wanted to preach about hell, he might have found sermon material in our playgrounds. They were both hell. The girls' railed-off playground behind the main building had a gate. From time to time it opened and a platoon of big girls ran out to seize any boy who had carelessly strayed too near. We could only guess at the tortures awaiting him. No one who came back out would say what had been done to him, whether rape or something else. But from how each one looked, staggering out of the gate – pale-faced, fly undone, beyond speech or tears – we could imagine.

The boys' playground hell threatened more familiar tortures. Every few days the fiends carried off some damned soul. He might struggle; it made little difference. Six or so of the bigger devils

would hold him shoulder high and roar their ceremonial chant. They'd march with him to the stinking toilets, which hadn't been cleaned since the war began. The seats were gone, but the bowls still held fluid of sorts. A wall hid what happened next, but everyone knew. The devils would upend their victim and insert his head into the dirtiest bowl. At first, screams could be heard: later, not.

In the war between locals and evacuees I had one great ally: a jolly, pig-faced half-Irish Glasgow keelie (rough) called Tom. Thanks to Tom I was never carried off to hell. He was a power in the playground, being a match for even the biggest devils. Once I saw him fight Mick. Spectators quickly gathered round, as they usually did for a fight. But it didn't last long. A few blows were given; then Tom landed a terrific hook that lifted Mick off his feet. This was the only time a boy was knocked down in all the many playground fights I watched.

Apart from the terrors, Maybole bored me. No toys or books, no *Wizard* or *Hotspur* magazines. Apparently Robert Burns said, "Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses, for honest men and bonny lasses." Well, others added, "And Maybole's a dirty hole, full of clypes and clashes" (tell-tales and gossips). "Dirty hole" was right. Maybole bored me so much I was ready to do anything for a change. Make a big noise, say. Caps for pistols came in strips coiled in round cardboard boxes. You tore off several lengths and crammed them into a lead bomb, then dropped it on concrete. It made a good bang. Better still, Bertie Elder (a neighbor) got hold of a .22 round, put it in a vice in his father's garage, and hit it with a hammer. Nothing. Then again. Nothing again. The next time it exploded loudly enough to scare us. Surprise: we were not seriously wounded.

We got back to Glasgow in time for the 1941 Clydebank blitz. It was good to be home. But our evacuation ended with a death: Barney our Irish terrier had no one to look after him during the day, when we were all at school. He was put down.

I found our house changed in several ways. The two round-topped windows in the sitting room were fitted with plywood shutters for the blackout. They had simple handles so they could be taken down during the day. Perfect shields for playing at knights in armor.

In the kitchen a trapdoor now led down to a ship's cabin, which

the grownups called an air-raid shelter. I used to sit with the trapdoor open, on the companionway, reading *The Swiss Family Robinson* or *Coral Island*. In the hold or cellar, a builder had put in girders resting on brick piers, and had built a “baffle wall” against blast. When the sirens sounded, we opened the trapdoor, filed down the companion ladder into the shelter, and sat on bed frames, wrapped in blankets. After shivering for ages listening to nothing, the All Clear would sound and we went back to bed. On 13 March 1941, though, we did hear something. Far away, but where? At Clydebank, or farther away, at Greenock? Then a more sinister sound: the drone of a German bomber, probably lost and looking to jettison its bombs. But this died away too, and even the ack-ack guns went quiet.

In the morning, I woke relaxed. After such a night of broken sleep I couldn't be expected to do well at anything. When I left for school on a sunny morning I found shrapnel from the ack-ack guns scattered all over the road. Humming “Bread of Heaven,” I picked up some of the largest bits (still warm) and examined them for numbers or other markings: the best pieces could be swapped for foreign stamps. But I found nothing really special, like a brass nose cap. That might be worth a penny black with a Maltese cross postmark.

My Glasgow school playground was less scary than the Maybole one. Admittedly, a boy sneaked up and punched me in the solar plexus for no reason at all; but another total stranger taught me how to bend over and start to breathe again. And I could sometimes talk about books with Gerald Gordon (now Sir Gerald, author of *The Criminal Law of Scotland*). I had discovered ancient history – not on the syllabus – and was crossing the Alps with Hannibal or fighting by his side at several different battles of Cannae. In class there were interesting political contentions with Winnie Ewing, the prettiest girl (subsequently president of the Scottish National Party).

During the war, most of our teachers taught us little. Some of them had been brought back out of retirement, like old McKelvie, our Latin master, and had lost all their enthusiasm for their subject. Others had been invalidated out of the forces. One of them was called Pansy because a head wound had left him with a grim face blackened by cordite. He liked to take us by the ears and shake us

like German puppies, explaining that the outer ear was “quite unnecessary for hearing.” A few teachers had escaped being called up and tried to escape teaching, too. Our elementary physics master had a habit of locking himself in the science lab with a young gym mistress during our lunch break. Eager to continue our own experiments, we once tried knocking on the door: he hurried out with his shirt poking through his fly. The good teachers taught as they had always done – as if war made no difference to their subject. Mr. Blakie, for one, breathed mathematics and awoke a lasting love of it in some of us, too.

All the same, the threat of incendiary bombs made a big difference to the daily routine. My Aunt Nannie, like many teachers, had fire-watching duties, and often had to stay at school to guard it after dark. She was away all night several times a month, whenever the rota required. When on duty, her team of three took turns, two on watch and one asleep, to be always ready to tackle incendiaries with a sand tray and long-handled shovel.

After the Battle of El Alamein the Germans and Italians retreated throughout October 1942. I followed the Allies’ advance day by day, hurrying home from school to grab the evening paper and trace our progress on the map. Each day Rommel withdrew his tanks (Corgi Catal. No. 900, Pzkwf, VI Tiger Ausf. E Tank, 2 Kompanie Schwere Panzer). We were at Gazala on 14 November, Benghazi on 20 November. Dazzling victories. Nothing in the newspapers, of course, about Allied intelligence being superior, or about the Enigma code. The tide of war simply turned. But it wasn’t really that simple, even for us, twelve-year-old patriots.

Now that I was back home in Glasgow, one of my best friends was Raymond Silverman. The playground team order for picking sides threw us together, and we shared an obsession with drawing. We drew tanks, uniforms, and airplanes, mostly airplanes. Spitfires? Hurricanes? No, always the Messerschmitt. We thought the Messerschmitt 109e the finest plane in the air, and borrowed books from the public library with cutaway drawings of it. We pored over these, copied them, traced them, and talked about them endlessly. If we’d had the money, we’d have bought an ME 109e with retractable undercarriage (Dinky Catal. 726 Messerschmitt B.f.109e in desert colors). Better still, one each.

Raymond lived with his mother on Victoria Road, where I

sometimes went after school to play. We laboriously modeled an ME 109 in plasticine, argued over the details, corrected them carefully – and then took turns dropping darts on it, aiming to hit a vital part like the fuel tank.

This obsession wasn't just a matter of getting to know our enemy. What had happened to our patriotism? After all, Raymond was a Jew. Maybe we were beginning to have ambiguous, nuanced emotions. Or maybe we had learned to relish successful aggression – to admire it, even. After all, in a few years we had to be ready to take our turn in one of the fighting forces.

Then, abruptly, the European war ended on VE day. In Glasgow everyone went wild: celebrations filled the city center. Perfect strangers hugged and kissed each other. A girl in my class at school – not Winifred – picked up a soldier and climbed with him onto the flat concrete roof of an air-raid shelter. The police brought them down, though. She got into serious trouble and had to go to the headmaster's office about it. It was quite a scandal.

In our suburb the celebrations were quieter, except for the car horns. But music sounded from the waste ground a mile or so from our house. A huge bonfire, prepared for days, was finally alight. My sister and I wanted to go, of course, but my mother wouldn't hear of it. Probably she feared we'd be led astray, into dissipation and worse.

I had to be content with going upstairs to a bedroom window and watching the orgy through a spyglass. On the hill a big fire burned, illuminating the dancers. The bonfire filled most of the field of vision, showing up the dancers beyond it and silhouetting the nearer ones. They threw themselves about wildly, almost like savages. I tried to share in the sheer abandonment, but the strain of holding up the heavy telescope while striving for the best focus became at last too tiring. My eyes began to hurt.

It was a slightly disappointing end to all our efforts and aspirations. A bit of an anticlimax. But perhaps VJ would be more of a bang.