

'Gripping ... painstaking ... sympathetic ... Glass reveals just how inglorious war really is' *The Times*

# DESERTER

A HIDDEN HISTORY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

'Compelling'  
*Sunday Times*

'Remarkable'  
*Sunday Telegraph*



CHARLES GLASS

Charles Glass

**Deserter: The Last Untold  
Story of the Second World War**

«HarperCollins»

## **Glass C.**

Deserter: The Last Untold Story of the Second World War /  
C. Glass — «HarperCollins»,

The extraordinary story of the deserters of the Second World War. Who were they? What made them run? And what happened once they made the decision to flee? During the Second World War, the British lost 100,000 troops to desertion, and the Americans 40,000. Commonwealth forces from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Britain's colonial empire also left the ranks in their thousands. The overwhelming majority of deserters from all armies were front-line infantry troops; without them, the war was harder to win. Many of these men were captured and court martialled, while others were never apprehended. Some remain wanted to this day. Why did these men decide to flee their ranks? In 'Deserter', veteran reporter and historian Charles Glass follows a group of British and American deserters into the heat of battle and explores what motivated them to take their fateful decision to run away. The result is a highly emotional and engaging study of an under-explored area of World War II history.

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# DESERTER

**A HIDDEN HISTORY OF  
THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

CHARLES GLASS



WILLIAM  
COLLINS

### Dedication

To two friends, brave American soldiers,  
Private First Class Stephen J. Weiss  
and the late Colonel Alfred E. Baker

During the Second World War, the United States awarded Private Weiss the Bronze Star, three US battle stars, the Second World War Victory Medal, Southern France D-Day Landing Citation, Combat Infantry Badge and Good Conduct Medal. France named him Officier of the Légion d'honneur and gave him two Croix de Guerre, the Médaille de la Résistance, the Croix du Combatant, the Vosges Department Citizen of Honour Diploma and French citizenship.

During the Vietnam War, the United States awarded Colonel Baker, as the Pennsylvania House of Representatives noted in his honour, 'the Silver Star for gallantry in action, multiple awards of the Defense Superior Service Medal, multiple awards of the Legion of Merit, three awards of the Bronze Star, three awards of the Meritorious Service Medal, four awards of the Purple Heart medal (for wounds received in battle) and many other service and achievement medals'. At one time, he was the most highly decorated veteran of the Vietnam War era.

Epigraph

I lack the guts to take being thought a coward.

Audie Murphy, *To Hell and Back* (Henry Holt, 1949)

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## INTRODUCTION

BY HIS OWN ADMISSION, Eddie Slovik was the unluckiest man alive. Nearly 50,000 American and 100,000 British soldiers deserted from the armed forces during the Second World War, but the twenty-five-year-old ex-convict from Detroit, Michigan, was the only one executed for it. Slovik's desertion in northern France on 9 October 1944 was atypical in that, while 80 per cent of deserters were frontline infantrymen escaping after long periods of continuous combat, he never fought a battle. Nor did he go on the run as most other deserters did. His mistake was to make clear that he preferred prison to battle. Rather than grant his wish, a court martial condemned him, in accordance with the Articles of War that then prescribed the forms of military justice, to 'death by musketry'.

Of the forty-nine Americans sentenced to death for desertion during the Second World War, Slovik was the only one whose appeal for commutation was rejected. The timing of his court martial, amid the November fighting in the Hürtgen Forest that caused 6,184 casualties among the 15,000 troops in Slovik's 28th Infantry Division, militated against clemency. So too did the coincidence in January 1945 of his appeal against the death sentence and the German counter-offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge, when the US Army in northern Europe was fighting for its own survival. It was not the moment for the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower, to be seen to condone desertion.

Correspondence among senior commanders documents their belief that Slovik's death was necessary to prevent others from following his example. They nonetheless decreed that his execution in the remote French village of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines be conducted in secrecy. (Slovik, the condemned 'coward', died without pleading for his life or showing anything other than courage before the firing squad.) Even if soldiers at the front had known that the young private was shot for desertion on the morning of 31 January 1945, the Battle of the Bulge had by then ended in an Allied victory. The urgency for lethal deterrence had disappeared, as the Allied armies resumed the offensive that would topple the Third Reich four months later. Concealing the truth about Slovik's execution extended to informing his wife Antoinette only that he had died in the European Theater of Operations.

Journalist and novelist William Bradford Huie uncovered the cause of Slovik's death in 1948, but the issue remained so sensitive that he concealed the condemned man's identity in *Liberty* magazine as 'a twenty-five year old American white man – call him Lewis Simpson – a replacement in the 28th Division'. Huie's article raised fundamental questions about why only one deserter among thousands was put to death. It also cast doubt on the willingness of Americans to fight. Huie, who served in the United States Navy during the war, noted that psychiatrists had permitted 1,750,000 men, one out of every eight they examined, to avoid military service for 'reasons other than physical'. Despite the rigorous screening, soldiers suffered nervous breakdowns, mental trauma and 'battle fatigue' (also called 'battle exhaustion') that rendered them unfit for combat. Huie observed, 'During the Second World War approximately 38,000 officers and men – about 10 per cent were officers – were tried by army general courts-martial for seeking to evade hazardous duty by some dishonorable means.' Their sentences, apart from Slovik's, were less onerous than the hardships suffered by their comrades who fought on. Huie considered this an outrage: 'If a sound-bodied, sound-minded American soldier who deserts his comrades on the eve of battle deserves only comfortable detention, subsequent pardon, and a college education under the G.I. Bill of Rights, then why should any man ever again risk death in combat for this country?'

He added that 'by "abolishing cowardice" the psychiatrists had tended to relieve all Americans of the individual responsibility to fight.' Yet most soldiers did fight. Desertions were almost non-existent in the Pacific, where a man seeking to avoid danger had nowhere to hide. In Europe, the total that fled from the front rarely exceeded 1 per cent of manpower. However, it reached

alarming proportions among the 10 per cent of the men in uniform who actually saw combat. Allied commanders debated means to staunch the flow. General George Patton wanted to shoot the 'cowards', and in Sicily he famously slapped a shell-shocked soldier whom he accused of malingering. Senior British commanders in North Africa and Italy pleaded with their government to restore the death penalty for desertion as in the First World War. Other commanders, whose views prevailed, favoured providing psychiatric as well as traditional medical care in forward aid stations. They recognized that the mind – subject to the daily threat of death, the concussion of aerial bombardment and high-velocity artillery, the fear of landmines and booby traps, malnutrition, appalling hygiene and lack of sleep – suffered wounds as real as the body's. Providing shattered men with counselling, hot food, clean clothes and rest was more likely to restore them to duty than threatening them with a firing squad.

Few deserters were cowards. Many broke under the strain of constant battle, having faced the Axis enemy without let-up for months at a time. Owing to the Allies' flawed system of replacing troops at the front, men were pushed beyond their limit. Poor leadership by undertrained junior officers, many of whom stayed back from combat, left young soldiers without inspiration to endure daily artillery barrages along often-static frontlines. High desertion rates in any company, battalion or division pointed to failures of command and logistics for which blame pointed to leaders as much as to the men who deserted. Unit cohesion was poor, as post-war studies demonstrated, because replacement soldiers were distributed individually to assorted companies and divisions rather than as bodies of men who knew and trusted one another. Some soldiers deserted when all the other members of their units had been killed and their own deaths appeared inevitable.

Those who showed the greatest sympathy to deserters were other frontline soldiers. They had, at one time or another, felt the temptation to opt out of the war through desertion, shooting themselves in the foot or lagging behind when ordered forward. It was a rare infantryman who attempted to prevent his comrades from leaving the line. The astounding fact is not that so many men deserted but that the deserters were so few.

Eddie Slovik's identity became public knowledge in 1954, when Huie published his well-researched *The Execution of Private Slovik*. Twenty years later, the actor Martin Sheen played Slovik in a television film of the same title. Sheen recited the actual words that Slovik himself uttered before his execution: 'They're not shooting me for deserting the United States Army, thousands of guys have done that. They just need to make an example out of somebody and I'm it because I'm an ex-con. I used to steal things when I was a kid, and that's what they are shooting me for. They're shooting me for the bread and chewing gum I stole when I was 12 years old.'

Eddie Slovik was the first American soldier executed for desertion since a Union Army firing squad shot one William Smitz of Company F, 90th Pennsylvania Volunteers, in 1865. (More than 300,000 troops deserted from the Union and Confederate Armies in the Civil War. Mark Twain famously deserted from both sides.) Slovik was not the only soldier to desert from the American armed forces between 1865 and 1945. Desertion was common in the post-Civil War Army, when many frontier troops had a cavalier attitude towards military service. Badly paid, miserably fed and maltreated by their officers, they had few qualms about drifting away to the gold fields, silver mines and cattle drives where conditions and pay were better. No one was shot for desertion during the wars against North America's indigenous population or the Spanish-American War. During the First World War, of the twenty-four death sentences imposed for desertion by courts martial, President Woodrow Wilson commuted them all.

If Slovik was the unluckiest deserter in the US Army, Wayne Powers was probably the most fortunate. Private First Class Wayne Powers was a twenty-three-year-old army truck driver when he landed in France three days after D-Day. In November 1944, he met a dark-haired French girl named Yvette Beleuse in the northern French village of Mont d'Origny near the Belgian border. Powers, born in Chillicothe, Missouri, spoke no French, and Yvette did not know English. As the newspaper

*France Soir* wrote later, ‘She gave him a woman’s smile after months of murderous combat.’ When Powers was ferrying supplies to the Belgian border a few days before the Bulge counter-offensive, his truck was hijacked (probably by deserters). Alone, on foot and unable to find his unit, he went back to Yvette. Unable to marry without revealing his existence to the police, Powers hid in the Beleuse family house while Yvette worked in a textile factory nearby. The couple had five children, who were forbidden to tell anyone who their father was. In the meantime, the Second World War had ended. The Korean War came and went. Powers’s commander, General Eisenhower, became President of the United States. All the while, Powers remained a wanted man. American Military Police and French gendarmes raided the house twice without discovering his hiding place under the stairs.

Four years after Huie’s book made Slovik’s case a *cause célèbre*, Wayne Powers became front-page news. In March 1958, a car crashed outside the Beleuse house and Powers made the mistake of looking through the curtains. Policemen taking details saw him and turned him over to American MPs. When the story of young lovers Wayne and Yvette hit the newspapers, the American Embassy in Paris received 60,000 letters in three days – all demanding clemency for a young American who had fallen in love with a French girl. A court martial found Powers guilty of desertion and sentenced him to ten years at hard labour, but this was quickly reduced to six months. The Judge Advocate General’s office in Washington reviewed his case and released him. Two years later, Powers and Yvette married in Mont d’Origny. By then, their sixth child had been born.

Those who told the stories of Slovik and Powers did not connect them to the wider phenomenon of mass desertion. The vast majority of the 150,000 American and British soldiers who deserted the ranks during the war were unlike both Slovik and Powers. Slovik was the only one shot for his crime, and Powers was one of the few convicted deserters to get off almost scot-free. The real story of Second World War deserters lay elsewhere, and this writer’s most important task was to find soldiers whose fates were more emblematic and less publicized.

A serendipitous encounter in London led me in the right direction. It happened in March 2009, when I was promoting my previous book, *Americans in Paris: Life and Death under Nazi Occupation*, at the Frontline Club for war correspondents in London. A courtly and well-dressed American gentleman in the audience asked some pertinent questions. He was that person any speaker fears: someone who knows what he’s talking about. It became obvious that his knowledge of the French Resistance was more intimate than mine. A red rosette, discreetly pinned to his lapel, marked him as a member of France’s Legion of Honour. It turned out he had been one of the few American regular soldiers to fight with the Resistance in 1944.

We met for coffee later near his house in South Kensington, where he regaled me with tales of life among the *résistants*. Eventually, he asked what I was working on next. I told him it was a book on American and British deserters in the Second World War and asked if he knew anything about it. He answered, ‘I was a deserter.’

We ordered more coffee, and my friendship with Steve Weiss – decorated combat veteran of the US 36th Infantry Division, former *résistant* and deserter – was born.

Until then, my research had led me from archives to libraries, from court martial records to old V-mail letters, from fading documents to myriad academic studies. Steve Weiss infused the war and the dilemmas facing deserters with fresh vitality. His generosity extended to many hours of interviews, as well as access to his cache of memorabilia that included an unpublished memoir, letters, newspaper articles, photographs and books. We went together to the battlefields where he fought in eastern France and found the moss-grown foxholes that he and others like him had dug in the forests. I pestered him often with questions to which he unfailingly and candidly responded. Although born in 1925, he retained the robust health and enthusiasm of the teenager who volunteered in 1942 to take part in Eisenhower’s crusade.

As I came to know Weiss better, my respect and admiration increased. His life after the war became a long exploration of the effects on him and others of combat, military conformity and prison.

Years in therapy led him to become a psychologist, a profession in which his experience provided the empathy to treat those with traumas similar to and often more disabling than his own. Confronting the anguish that other veteran soldiers preferred to leave dormant, Weiss conducted battlefield tours, revisited the scenes of his triumphs and his shame and sought out old comrades-in-arms. Late in life, he moved from California to London to lecture at King's College's famed Department of War Studies.

'It is always an enriching experience to write about the American soldier in adversity no less than in glittering triumph,' wrote Charles B. MacDonald, an infantry captain in northern Europe in 1944 and 1945, in *The Siegfried Line Campaign*. The Second World War imposed more than enough adversity on the infantry riflemen who did most of the fighting. The majority of those who landed in the first waves on the Italian and French coastlines to fight long campaigns did not survive to see their triumph, and some who lived were in prison for desertion when they heard the news of Germany's surrender. Knowing that they would not be rotated out of the line or receive respite from danger, they had chosen disgrace over the grave. For others, there was no choice. Their bodies simply led them away from danger, and they remembered walking away as if in a dream. Many were afraid, many broke down and many just could not take any more. 'The mystery to me,' wrote Ernie Pyle, the battlefield correspondent known for his sympathetic reports about ordinary GIs, 'is that anybody at all, no matter how strong, can keep his spirit from breaking down in battle.'

A minority deserted to make money, stealing and selling the military supplies that their comrades at the front needed to survive. From 1944 to 1946, Allied deserters ran the black market economies of Naples, Rome and Paris. Their plundering of Allied supply convoys, often at gunpoint, deprived General George Patton of petrol as his tanks were about to breach Germany's Siegfried Line. Rampant thieving left their comrades at the front short of food, blankets, ammunition and other vital supplies. In Italy, deserters drove trucks of looted Allied equipment for Italian-American Mafioso Vito Genovese (who concealed his fascist past and made himself indispensable to Allied commanders in Naples). Military Police chased the notorious Lane Gang of deserters for most of 1944. The gang's head, who used the pseudonym Robert Lane, was a twenty-three-year-old private from Allentown, Pennsylvania, named Werner Schmeidel. His mob terrorized the military and civilians alike in a crime spree of robbery, extortion and murder. After MPs captured them in November 1944, they made a daring Christmas Eve prison break and hid among the Roman underworld. Recaptured many weeks later, Schmeidel and his top henchman were hanged for murder in June 1945. That did not put an end, however, to other deserter criminal operations that continued well into the post-war era. (Two members of the Lane Gang who remained at large hijacked an army safe with \$133,000 in cash on its way from Rome to Florence one week after their accomplices' hangings.) In France, American deserters collaborated with Corsican hoodlums in the theft and sale of cigarettes, whisky, petrol and other contraband. French civilians compared the German troops' supposedly 'correct' behaviour during their four-year occupation to the terror wrought by rampaging American deserters who raped and robbed at will.

In Paris, especially, the lure of pretty women and unearned wealth beckoned to any American GI or British Tommy willing to desert. One of these was Sergeant Alfred T. Whitehead, a Tennessee farm boy who had earned Silver and Bronze Stars for bravery in Normandy. He became a gangster in post-liberation Paris, living with a café waitress and robbing Allied supply depots as well as restaurants and ordinary citizens. His type of deserter, who operated in what the French press called 'Chicago' gangs, caused more worry to the Allied command than the ordinary deserter who simply went into hiding. *New York Times* correspondent Dana Adams Schmidt wrote that 'American Army deserters hijack trucks on the open highway and fight gun battles with the American military police.' Another of his dispatches from Paris added, 'The French police fear to interfere unless accompanied by M.P.'s.' Hunting down deserters became a full-time job for MPs from most Allied countries.

From the beginning of the war, the military in both Britain and the United States understood that some men would collapse mentally under the strain of combat. They had seen it often in the First

World War, when the term ‘shell shock’ came into common usage. An old school of thought held that ‘shell shock’, later christened ‘battle fatigue’, was a newfangled term for cowardice, but psychological research between the wars found that the human mind suffered stress as did the body and acquired its own wounds. Much study was devoted to discovering which men were likely to break down and which were not. Leading psychologists, led by Harvard’s Professor Edwin Garrigues Boring, cooperated with the military to produce a book called *Psychology for the Fighting Man*. A kind of guidebook to mental survival in battle, it was intended for every soldier going into combat and quickly sold 380,000 copies. Its insights inform much of this book, especially its dictum about the average soldier who broke down under pressure: ‘He is not a coward.’

Just as fear and mental collapse drove Steve Weiss and avarice motivated Al Whitehead, another type of deserter left the armed forces out of pure disgust. *Psychology for the Fighting Man* acknowledged that war and killing were not normal activities for boys raised in peacetime: ‘American men have no particular love of killing. For the most part they hate killing – they think it is wrong, sinful, ordinarily punishable by death.’ This view of life was not unique to Americans. One British soldier, John Vernon Bain, deserted three times. He never ran during a battle, and he fought well in North Africa and northern France. In Normandy, where the British Army court martialled four officers and 7,018 men for desertion in the field, Bain stayed at the front. He eventually left, not the war, but the army. To him, it was a dehumanizing institution that encouraged actions that in any context but war would be regarded as criminal. He deserted to preserve his humanity. His life story should resonate with those who wonder how much they would have endured before collapsing or fleeing. Fortunately for this writer, Bain’s son John provided insights into his father’s character, motives and flaws that fleshed out the many writings and interviews Bain left behind when he died.

John Bain wrote a poem in which a deserter told his son:

But son, my spirit, underneath,  
Survived it all intact;  
They thought they’d crushed me like a bug  
But I had won in fact.

The Second World War was not as wonderful as its depiction in some films and adventure tales. It should not be surprising that young men found the experience of it so debilitating that they escaped. John Keegan, who pioneered the writing of war’s history through the eyes of its participants, wrote, ‘What war can ever be wonderful, least of all one that killed fifty million people, destroyed swathes of Europe’s cultural heritage, depraved its politics, devalued the very moral basis of its civilization?’

## BOOK I

## ONE

From the earliest childhood, American boys are taught that it is wrong – the greatest wrong – to kill.

*Psychology for the Fighting Man, Prepared for the Fighting Man Himself*, Committee of the National Research Council with the Collaboration of Science Service as a Contribution to the War Effort, *The Infantry Journal*, Washington, DC (and Penguin Books, London), 1943, p. 349

AT THE END OF THE GREAT WAR OF 1914–18, Private First Class William Weiss was departing France with a leg scarred by German bullets, lungs choked in poison gas and a plague of memories. While convalescing in a Catholic hospital near Tours, the Jewish-American doughboy fell in love with his French nurse. The romance, which sustained him for four months, ended when his 77th Infantry Division mustered at Brest for the voyage home to New York City. In April 1919, five months after the Armistice, New York held little promise for Weiss. The post-war economic recession was beginning, as weapons factories laid off workers and banks pressed for repayment of war debts. Many 77th Division troops had lost their jobs to civilians when they entered the United States Army. At least 25 per cent of them had no hope of work and expected nothing more at home than a grateful welcome. As they set sail across the Atlantic, even the welcome was cast into doubt.

To the surprise of the 77th Division's commanders, the Department of War declared that it would not accord the men a traditional victory parade. Only one month earlier, the 27th Infantry Division, O'Ryan's Roughnecks, had marched proudly up Fifth Avenue to the acclaim of ecstatic crowds. The 27th and 77th were both New York divisions, about all they had in common. The all-volunteer, mostly Irish 27th were honest-to-God American Christian fighting men. The 77th was comprised of draftees and recent immigrants from Italy, Greece, Russia, Poland, Armenia, Syria and China. Thirty per cent were Jewish. Twelve thousand earned American citizenship while in uniform, making them, to most Washington politicians, not quite Americans.

When New Yorkers insisted on honouring the 77th anyway, the War Department advanced a series of pretexts to block them. It said the doughboys themselves did not want a parade. The men, once asked, were unanimously in favour. War Secretary Newton Baker then cited objections by Fifth Avenue shopkeepers to the erection of grandstands between 97th and 98th Streets. After the courts rejected the shopkeepers' injunction, the department claimed the parade would be too expensive – almost a million dollars, a figure soon lowered to \$80,000. Finally, it said that disembarking 30,000 men at the same time would paralyse the docks.

War Department prevarications infuriated New York City. All of the 77th's boys came from the metropolis, whereas the 27th's National Guardsmen hailed from as far as Schenectady and Albany. Meetings assembled throughout Manhattan to lodge protests. The Welcome Committee for the Jewish Boys Returning from the War sent an urgent telegram to Secretary of War Baker: 'The East Side, which has contributed so large a quota to this division, is stirred at being deprived of the opportunity to pay tribute to this division ... We strongly urge you to do everything within your power to make it possible that the parade shall take place. It will be an act of patriotism.' The next day, the Committee cabled President Woodrow Wilson 'as Commander in Chief of the US Army, to rescind the order prohibiting the parade of the 77th Division. The people of the east side have gladly given their sons to do battle in France for their country, and desire to pay loving tribute to the boys who are returning and to the memory of those who sleep on foreign soil.'

Charles Evans Hughes, a former Supreme Court justice and the Republicans' nominee for president in 1916, chaired a gathering of the Selective Service Boards that had conscripted the men of the 77th two years earlier. 'We want to do for the 77th what we did for the 27th,' Hughes declared. 'There should be no desire to discriminate against any of the boys who went to the front, from New York or any other place.'

No one contested the division's achievements: more than two thousand of its men had been killed, and another nine thousand wounded – more than double the casualties sustained by the 27th. They were one of the first American divisions sent into combat and the only one at the front every day of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. The *New York Times* wrote of the mostly immigrant troops: 'The 77th fought continuously from the time it entered the Lorraine sector in June [1918] until it stood at the gates of Sedan when the armistice was signed. It drove the Germans back from the Vesle to the Aisne River. It rooted them out of the very heart of the Argonne Forest. And it ranked seventh among the [twenty-nine] divisions that led in the number of Distinguished Service Crosses awarded for gallantry in action.' When they launched an assault against the Germans along the River Vesle, called by the troops 'the hellhole of the Vesle', General Erich Ludendorff unleashed the phosgene and mustard gas that blinded and crippled thousands of Allied soldiers. William Weiss was one of them, taken out of the front with eyes bandaged from the stinging pain of the poisons and his leg nearly shot off by German rifle fire.

The heroism of New Yorkers like Private Weiss gave the lie to military orthodoxy, as stated in the US Army's official *Manual of Instruction for Medical Advisory Boards* in 1917, that 'the foreign-born, and especially the Jews, are more apt to malingering than the native-born'. Dr William T. Manning, chairman of the Home Auxiliary Association, told a meeting in New York that soldiers' families felt their sons were victims of racial discrimination. Woodrow Wilson, a Southern gentleman whose administration had introduced segregation by race into the federal civil service in 1913, was impervious to accusations of bias. In his State of the Union Address for 1915, the Democratic president had said, 'There are citizens of the United States, I blush to admit, born under other flags but welcomed under our generous naturalization laws to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life; who have sought to bring the authority and good name of our Government into contempt ... Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out.' Neither the all-black 369th Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, nor the mostly foreign-born 77th Infantry Division won the president's admiration, although both had earned more decorations than most all-white, 'all-American' units.

Public clamour grew so loud that the War Department backed down. The division's troopships docked at the end of April, and on 6 May the men assembled downtown for one of the biggest parades in New York history. Schools closed, and workers came out of their bakeries, laundries and garment shops to lionize the boys who had won the war to end all wars. With rifles on shoulders and tin hats on heads, the men of the 77th marched five miles up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to 110th Street past more than a million well-wishers. Usually called the Liberty Division for their Statue of Liberty shoulder patches, and sometimes the Metropolitan Division, they were now 'New York's Own'. 'Every building had its windows full of spectators, waving flags or thrown out [sic] torn paper, candies, fruit, or smokes,' the *New York Times* reported. 'Most of the store windows were tenanted by wounded veterans or their relatives, while park benches were placed at choice sites for men from the convalescent hospitals.' Some of the 5,000 wounded rode in open cars provided by local charities, while others moved on crutches and in wheelchairs. Lest the 2,356 buried in France be forgotten, the procession included a symbolic cortège of Companies of the Dead.

Only the deserters, a mere 21,282 among the whole American Expeditionary Force of more than a million men, went unacknowledged. Most were in army stockades or on the run from the Military Police in France. Of the twenty-four American soldiers condemned to death for desertion, President Wilson commuted all of their sentences. The Great War had a lower rate of desertion, despite its unpopularity in many quarters, than any previous American conflict. More British and French soldiers had run from battle, but their four years in the trenches outdid the Americans' one. Britain shot 304 soldiers for deserting or cowardice and France more than 600. In the 77th Division, only a few men had left their posts in the face of the enemy. Perhaps out of shame, the division referred to most of them as Missing in Action.

When the parade ended at 110th Street, the 77th's commander, Major General Robert Alexander, declared, 'The time has come to beat the swords into plowshares, and these men will now do as well in civil life as they did for their country in France.'

Not all of the men would do as well in civilian life as they had in France. The division's most decorated hero, Medal of Honor winner Lieutenant Colonel Charles Whittlesey, committed suicide in 1921, a belated casualty of the war. Others died of their wounds after they came home, and some would remain crippled or in mental institutions for the rest of their lives. Many enlisted men, unable to find work, drifted west. Among them was William Weiss, who at the age of twenty-seven left home as much to forget the war as to earn a living. The wounded veteran worked as a farmhand in the Kansas wheat fields, then followed the oil boom to Oklahoma and Texas as a roustabout. This led to a stint with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, which had been subsumed into the Treasury Department's Prohibition Unit in 1920. Among the unit's duties was the interdiction from Mexico of newly illegal drugs like marijuana and alcohol. Something happened in El Paso that compelled Weiss to resign, an episode that he concealed even from his family. He moved back to New York, where he married a young woman named Jean Seidman in 1923. On 3 October 1925, the couple had a son, Stephen James. The family called him Steve, but his mother nicknamed him 'Lucky Jim'. Five years later, the boy was followed by a daughter, Helen Ruth.

Steve and Helen grew up in a redbrick apartment at 275 Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, opposite Prospect Park. 'The neighborhood was calm and leafy,' Steve Weiss remembered years later. 'The inhabitants were hard-working and white middle class. Most of us were Dodger fans.' Many, like the Weisses, had moved from tenements in Manhattan's lower east side. William Weiss was an aloof and undemonstrative father. Every Armistice Day, he would lock himself away from the family and stay alone in his room for an hour or so. 'I didn't know who he was,' Steve Weiss said. William worked at a succession of odd jobs, usually as a watchman. His unreliability created tension between father and son. 'My father would not pay the electricity bill,' he recalled. 'He would gamble with the money.' Yet Steve had good memories of the old man. 'He was very entertaining, a good story teller. He never grew up.' When the Depression hit, William Weiss advised other veterans on ways to obtain pensions and benefits from their years of military service. He even won some money for himself, which the family used to take its first summer vacation away from home, in Poughkeepsie.

In June 1942, six months after the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the Second World War, Steve graduated from Lafayette High School in Brooklyn. He was sixteen, two years younger than most of his classmates. Tall for his generation at five foot eleven inches, he weighed a healthy 160 pounds and had a full head of curly auburn hair. He continued his education at night, taking college-level courses in psychology, pathology and chemistry. During the day, the government's new Office of War Information (OWI) at 221 West 57th Street in Manhattan employed him as a photolithographer. His task was to make plates from photographs to print OWI propaganda periodicals and posters. Steve Weiss wanted to do more by serving overseas in the army's Psychological Warfare Branch, whose objective in Europe was the same as the OWI's at home: to engender public support for the Allied cause.

The only way into Psychological Warfare was to enlist in the United States Army. Aged 17, Steve needed his father's permission. He brought the enlistment papers home, but William Weiss refused to sign. The older man stared at his son 'with a combination of shock and regret,' before telling the boy, 'Real war isn't like the movies.' Steve's Psychological Warfare aspirations were fading. If he waited until his eighteenth birthday in October, the Selective Service Board would draft him. Draftees without college degrees had a good chance of ending up as infantry riflemen, probably the most dangerous and thankless job in the armed forces.

Steve pleaded with his father, who remained impassive. 'Seems like yesterday,' William explained to him for the first time, 'but in the spring of 1918, I was wounded and gassed near Fismes and those experiences still tick over in my head. I've spent most of my life trying to recover, starting

with four months in a French hospital near Tours and at least two years recuperating out West.' William Weiss then revealed the secret he had kept since he left Texas: 'I accidentally shot a man on the streets of El Paso working as a federal narcotics agent. Did you know that? Since then, I've never had any energy left for ambition. Too scared to try.' Seventeen-year-old Steve could only stammer, 'Dad, I ...'

'Forget about the flags, the bands and the parades,' his father said. 'That's seduction! To increase enlistments. War's about killing, terrible suffering and broken spirit.'

'Are you trying to frighten me?' Steve asked.

'No,' his father said. 'I'm just asking you not to make any sudden moves. If the army needs you, it will find you soon enough.' When the youngster wouldn't listen, William appealed to his conscience. 'Look at all your mother and I have done for you. Even during the Depression, you and your sister never went without. I worked at odd jobs, and your mother worked at Macy's day in, day out, as a salesgirl doing everything to keep the family together. On a shoestring! Doesn't that mean something?'

'Dad,' Steve said, 'if you don't sign the papers, I'll forge your name and run away.' Reluctantly, William Weiss signed his teenage son over to the care of the United States Army.

## TWO

But for the foolish and the heroic who ignore all physical limitations, nature may have to provide these peculiar forms of escape from pain or emotion too strong to endure.

*Psychology for the Fighting Man*, p. 320

PRIVATE JOHN VERNON BAIN deserted from the British Army in Scotland long before the British Army sent him into combat. He was no coward. The nineteen-year-old volunteer's record in the boxing ring – finalist at age fourteen in the Schoolboy Championships of Great Britain, Northwest Divisional Junior Champion, Scottish Command Middle Weight Champion in 1941, gold medals and press acclaim – proved as much. Yet, in 1941, he had run away for three weeks from his regimental base at Fort George, which to him was 'that dark and grey promontory that lay in the Moray Firth like a fossilized Leviathan.' At the time, he was a corporal in the 70th Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highland Regiment. Deserting from relatively easy duty in Scotland as PTI, physical training instructor, made little sense, and his rationale was vague even forty-six years later: 'I was supposed to be a corporal, and I was no good at this. I had no idea how to conduct drills and mount guard and all that kind of thing. In a kind of disgust or something, I just sort of cleared off. I wasn't away long, about three weeks.'

Rather than court martial him for desertion, Bain's commanding officer demoted him to private. 'If you did revert to the ranks and had been an NCO,' Bain said, 'you could then claim for a transfer. And I was transferred to the London Scottish, and they were a sister regiment of the Gordons. And that was how I was sent to the Gordon Highlanders.' His new unit was the 5/7th Gordons, a union of the old 5th and 7th Battalions of the distinguished regiment that the Duke of Gordon had established in 1794. Its commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel H. W. B. Saunders.

Bain had first volunteered in early 1940 to become a pilot in the Royal Air Force, despite his admission that he was 'singularly ignorant of the political realities'. He knew nothing about the Nazis, the German annexation of Austria or Hitler's ambition to conquer most of Europe. A physical examination turned up colour-blindness and one punch-damaged eye that disqualified him from flying, so he and his older brother, Kenneth, decided to become merchant mariners. Neither of the Bain brothers, having grown up in the inland Buckinghamshire town of Aylesbury, was an Able Bodied Seaman or had any shipboard experience. Their attempts to sign on before Christmas 1940 at the docks in London, Cardiff and, finally, Glasgow were met with derision. Staying in a rented room that was reducing the meagre hoard of cash they had brought from home, John and Kenneth chanced on a poster: 'Are you over 18 and under 20? If you are you can join a young soldiers' battalion.'

John asked his brother, 'What about that? At least I'd get some shoes without holes.' Kenneth corrected him, 'Boots.' He added the sticking point that, at two years older than John, he was over twenty.

They had a notion that twin brothers could not be separated. 'The recruiting officer did not show the least disbelief when we gave the same date of birth,' John wrote. 'We were medically examined and passed as A1.' The Army sent them to the 70th Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherlands at the Bay Hotel outside Glasgow. 'The Army was one service I had sworn I would never join,' Bain wrote, 'but, I told myself, a Scottish regiment would be different, more glamorous.' The glamour of the regimental kilt, stylish headgear and bagpipes gave way to recruit training that was disappointingly unglamorous. 'The object is to turn one into a kind of automaton,' he said. 'It works in a way.'

He 'disliked the Army very much,' recalling his time in Scotland as 'nearly two years of boredom, discomfort and misery, relieved by occasional booze ups ...' He resented his 'early days in the army when he had first stood guard at Duff House in Banff in the cruel winter of 1941 ... protecting the old mansion against imaginary German parachutists dressed as nuns'. From the ways that Bain revisited his Army service in letters, books and poems, he appeared to have been

pathologically unsuited to soldiering. He wrote, 'By nature I was impractical, unpunctual, and clumsy, attributes that do not endear themselves to military authority.' Thirty years after the war, his thoughts turned

... not so much to memories of battle but to the grinding tedium of service in the United Kingdom, training, manoeuvres, guards, courses, discomfort, humiliation, frustration, boredom and – rarely but unforgettably – moments of bizarre comedy, excitement and the joy of extraordinary physical well-being when food, warmth and the rest were not commonplace elements which we had the automatic right to expect in the pattern of our days but pleasure as real intensity, positive blessings.

In common with other British youngsters of the time, Bain had little experience of people from other classes. His own background was what he described as 'working class but with aspirations of an entirely materialistic kind towards stifling gentility'. His mother read books and kept a piano, and his father worked for himself in a photography studio. Officers, some with no leadership qualifications apart from the right accent, irritated him, but the 'other ranks' seemed almost a foreign species. When one of them asked his name, he answered, 'Vernon,' his middle name that he had been called all his life. Bain recalled the squaddies' mocking question: "Vernon? What's that?" And I'd say, "John", quickly, which they could handle. So, I became "John" in the army.'

'A lot of the chaps in the 70th Argylls were from the Glasgow slums, the Gorbals,' he recalled, 'and had pretty disgusting habits.' In another reflection on his fellow squaddies, he wrote, 'My comrades were mostly sub-literate, embittered children of the general strike, from the slums of Glasgow and Edinburgh.' One of them pilfered Bain's gold boxing medal, indicative of the petty thievery rampant in the ranks. Nevertheless, he wrote, 'They would happily stick by you, and they were generous.' Paid only two shillings a day, the Jocks gave their last pennies to comrades in need or to stand a friend a pint. The only person Bain trusted was his brother Kenneth, who was transferred to the Royal Engineers a year into their enlistment. That was about the time John ran away for three weeks.

To get along, Bain concealed from his squad mates his passion for books, poetry and classical music. In fact, he gave up reading altogether. 'I deliberately suppressed that part of myself that I most valued,' he wrote.

I became ashamed of my interest in literature, ideas and the arts. I consciously adopted a mask with forehead villainous low. I was already, at eighteen, greedily addicted to beer, so no acting ability was needed to play the part of boozier. My interest in boxing was genuine and my skill was respected, so it was not difficult for me to flex my muscles and roar with the roaring boys. But it was not good for me either. It was shameful and brutalizing.

After the transfer to B Company of 5/7th Gordon Highlanders, Bain made one good friend. Private Hughie Black was a working-class Scotsman of roughly his age and with a more profound contempt for officers. Black's cynicism about the military had a hard class edge to it, and he would have stayed out of the war if it had been possible. The six-foot boxer from Buckinghamshire and the five-foot six-inch Glaswegian made an odd if comradely pair. Like most Scotsmen, Black said 'aye' for 'yes' and expressed himself in a rich vocabulary of profanities including 'Fucky Nell.' He called Bain 'china', as in 'china plate', rhyming slang for 'mate'. If Bain had a friend to replace his brother in B Company, it was streetwise Hughie Black.

The tedium of training and guard duty came to an end on 20 June 1942, when the Gordons with the rest of their Highland Division regiments boarded the *Spirit of Angus* and other ships on the Clyde estuary and at Liverpool and Southampton. Their destination, in common with most other troop embarkations during the war, was withheld from the soldiers. The convoy of twenty-two troopships, escorted by eight destroyers, headed south through the Bay of Biscay towards Africa. For most of the youngsters, it was their first time out of Britain.

The 5/7th Gordons were part of the 51st Highland Division, commanded by forty-three-year-old Major General Douglas 'Tartan Tam' Wimberley. Wimberley stood six-foot-three, usually wore

a kilt and waged a futile struggle with the high command to exclude English and Lowland Scots regiments from his division. His predecessor in command of the Highland Division was Major General Victor Morven Fortune. Fortune and the original division were then languishing in German prisoner of war camps, following their surrender to German General Erwin Rommel at Saint-Valéry-en-Caux during the Battle of France in June 1940. The lucky units that managed to escape to Britain formed the core of the reconstituted Highland Division. The glorious histories of the 51st Division and its component regiments, like the Black Watch with its legacy in Egypt dating to the original British conquest of 1882, held no allure for Bain. Then and later, he refused to sentimentalize either war or the army.

Bain and his fellow Gordon Highlanders lived in confined quarters at sea, resenting the privacy and better rations afforded the officers. Bain said later of his comrades, 'They had no respect for their officers.' They amused themselves with cards and boxing. To cheers from his mates in the 5/7th Gordons, Bain defeated a sergeant from the Cameron Highlanders.

On 21 June, the day after the convoy set sail, Britain suffered a major defeat, its fourth of the war after the loss of France, Singapore and Burma. Rommel, who had captured the original 51st Division in France, conquered the Libyan port town of Tobruk and inflicted a casualty toll on British and Commonwealth forces of 35,000. The Australian war correspondent Alan Moorehead, who covered the North African campaign for Britain's *Daily Express*, wrote, 'It was defeat as complete as may be.' Britain's Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Forces, General Claude John Eyre Auchinleck, pulled his troops back well into Egypt to the coastal railhead at El Alamein. The thinly defended Alamein Line, running between the Mediterranean in the north and the impassable Qattara Depression in the south, lay only sixty miles in front of Alexandria. The Royal Navy had meanwhile evacuated Alexandria's harbour to avoid capture by the advancing Axis forces. This news, hardly a boost to morale, reached the Highland Division while it was far out at sea. Some of the men guessed that they were on their way to reinforce Britain's battered desert defences, but officially they were told nothing.

The ships refuelled at Freetown, Sierra Leone, but the men were not permitted ashore lest they contract malaria. As the convoy cruised further south along the African coast, the soldiers on board remained unaware that in Egypt their comrades had succumbed to panic that the British called 'the flap'.

In Cairo, on 1 July, burning documents at Britain's embassy and military headquarters sent up billows of smoke so thick that the day became known as 'Ash Wednesday'. Trains leaving the Cairo station for British Palestine overflowed with passengers and baggage. British subjects queued outside Barclay's Bank to withdraw their money. A mood of defeat prevailed, as Alan Moorehead, whose wife and baby had taken a train to Palestine, observed on the road between Cairo and Alexandria. It was, he wrote 'a full scale retreat. Guns of all sorts, R.A.F. wagons, recovery vehicles, armoured cars and countless lorries crammed with exhausted and sleeping men, were pouring up the desert road into Cairo ... The road on our side – the side that carried vehicles up to the front – was clear ...'

Worst of all for the British, about 20,000 soldiers vanished from the ranks. Many took refuge in the Nile Delta, some living through brigandry and others surviving on the charity of the Egyptian peasantry, the *fellahin*. Many hid with girlfriends in Cairo. British Military Police, known as 'redcaps' for the colour of their headgear, established a checkpoint at El Deir on the road between Alamein and Amariya. 'Every vehicle was checked, and personnel travelling eastwards as passengers had to satisfy the military police as to the authority of their journey,' wrote Major S. F. Crozier of the Royal Military Police (RMP) and Provost Service. 'Written orders had been given to this post to fire on any person failing to halt when called upon to do so.' When some deserters drove off-road to avoid the checkpoint, the MPs placed the desert on both sides of the road under 'continuous observation'.

The Middle East Commander-in-Chief, General Claude Auchinleck, believed the solution was for courts martial to impose exemplary death sentences. As early as April of that year, Auchinleck had written to the War Office requesting 'that His Majesty's Government may be pressed to give

urgent consideration to the immediate introduction of legislation necessary to restore into the Army Act the punishment of death for the offences of Desertion in the Field and of Misbehaving in the face of the Enemy in such manner as to show cowardice'. Unlike the United States, Britain had abolished the death penalty for desertion. During the First World War, when the Americans had not executed any deserters, the British had put to death 304 soldiers for desertion, cowardice, disobedience and quitting their posts. Post-war revulsion at the firing squads had led the Labour Government in 1930 to override objections from military chiefs and prohibit the execution of deserters.

'With the increase of number of troops in Egypt and Palestine, following the entry of Italy into the war [in June 1940], crime increased proportionately,' wrote RMP Major Crozier. 'Conscription had brought into the army a percentage of soldiers with criminal antecedents or tendencies. Many of these were drafted to the Middle East.' Major Crozier, who believed there were too few military policemen to deal with criminal soldiers in Egypt, continued:

On arrival in Egypt they found that a number of soldiers had decided that the delights of Cairo and Alexandria were infinitely preferable to the monotony, discomforts and dangers of the Western Desert and East African campaigns. These deserters combined to form troublesome and dangerous gangs which were to become very familiar to the [Special Investigation] Branch [SIB] under the names of 'The Free British Corps' and 'The Dead End Kids'.

Even before the fall of Tobruk, Major Crozier noted, 'Not a day passed without many arrests being made.' The RMP sent extra officers and men, many of them formerly with Scotland Yard, from Britain and the colonies, to deal with the caseload. It also recruited men locally from regular service battalions. Private Wilf Swales of the Green Howards transferred to the RMP in Egypt on the promise of 'a shilling a day extra'.

Particularly worrying for the MPs were the theft and sale of British arms and ammunition. Zionist settlers in Palestine, planning their own war against the British, were major buyers of the looted Allied weapons. Two leaders in the Jewish Haganah defence force, Abraham Rachlin and Lieb Sirkin, were sentenced to seven and ten years respectively, for purchasing stolen arms. Their accomplices in the Royal Sussex and Royal East Kent Regiments received fifteen years penal servitude. Major Crozier wrote, 'The number of thefts of arms of all types and ammunition was appalling, and the "Dead End Kids" were responsible for many of them.' This deserter band befriended legitimate soldiers to gain access to bases and canteens, where they stole weapons, food, fuel and other supplies. The SIB shot and killed several of them. Another deserter gang calling itself the 'British Free Corps' survived by selling stolen military supplies, until its members too were caught.

Auchinleck argued in his letter of 7 April that nothing less than the death penalty would provide a 'salutary deterrent in a number of cases, in which the worst example was set by men to whom the alternative of prison to the hardships of battle conveyed neither fear nor stigma'. In a memorandum of 14 June to the rest of the War Cabinet, War Secretary Sir Percy James Grigg appeared to support Auchinleck. He wrote:

My military advisers are unanimous in their opinion that the abolition of the death penalty for desertion in the field and cowardice in the face of the enemy was a major mistake from the military point of view. They hold that the penalty was a powerful deterrent against ill-discipline in the face of the enemy, which might so easily mean a lost battle and a lost campaign. In this connection it may be noted that the U.S. Army retain the death penalty for practically the whole range of offences to which it applied in the British Army in 1914–18 ...

Grigg, a career civil servant whom Churchill had appointed Secretary of State for War the previous February, then turned from the purely military to political factors:

It is a subject on which there are strong feelings, and to justify a modification of the present law we should have to produce facts and figures as evidence that the British soldiers' morale in the face of the enemy is so uncertain as to make the most drastic steps necessary to prevent it breaking.

Any such evidence would come as a profound shock to the British public and our Allies and as a corresponding encouragement to our enemies.

He concluded, 'Nevertheless, if military efficiency were the sole consideration, I should be in favour, as are my military advisers, of the reintroduction of the death penalty for the offences in question. But the political aspects are, at any rate, in present circumstances, as important, if not more important, than the military.' Grigg asked Auchinleck for exact figures on the scale of desertions before the Cabinet could reach a decision.

Neither the 51st Division at sea nor the troops in Egypt knew of Auchinleck's request to reintroduce the death penalty for those among them who might desert. It was kept secret from the public for the same reasons that Grigg opposed the death penalty itself: it would harm military morale, make the public more suspicious of the army command (which was held in low esteem by public and press alike at that time, as Cabinet minutes noted) and give the enemy a propaganda tool. Grigg explained in a memo to Churchill, 'If legislation is necessary, the facts and figures must be serious. But if they are serious, we can't afford to tell them either to our friends or our enemies.' Moreover, Commonwealth troops serving alongside the British were not subject to the death penalty. Changing the law would mean that an Australian and a British soldier deserting together would receive very different punishments: the Australian would receive three to five years in prison, while the Briton would be shot.

The Australian and New Zealand commanders demonstrated more concern for the men's morale than their British counterparts, who in correspondence complained of their soldiers' 'softness in education and living and bad training ...' The first units to establish forward clearing stations for psychiatric cases near the front were the 2nd New Zealand and the 9th Australian Divisions. By allowing the men to sleep and talk over their fears with physicians, the Australian and New Zealand medical staffs helped up to 40 per cent of the psychological casualties back into the field. The British followed suit in August, when the Royal Army Medical Corps' 200 Field Ambulance placed an 'Army Rest Centre' near the Alamein Line. Brigadier General G. W. B. James, the psychiatrist who probably originated the term 'battle exhaustion,' wrote that of the men treated for it 'a fairly constant 30% returned fairly satisfactorily to combatant duty'.

On 18 July, the Highland Division's convoy dropped anchor at Cape Town. For the first time in a month, the men set foot on dry land. White South Africans in English-speaking Cape Province gave them an enthusiastic welcome. On 19 July, while division bagpipers paraded through the city, Auchinleck sent a second entreaty from Cairo to the Cabinet for help in countering the mass desertions after Tobruk: 'Recent desertions show alarming increase even amongst troops of highest category. Present punishments that can be awarded insufficient deterrent. Would stress that cases where deserter takes truck containing food water and means of transport of his comrades are far more serious than similar cases during last war.'

A week later, the Highlanders went ashore again at Durban to the airs of the 7th Black Watch's kilted pipers. From Durban, the ships cruised north up the coast of east Africa to Aden. In the waters off Britain's colony on the Yemeni shore, the convoy divided. Some of the ships went east to Iraq and India, the rest north through the Red Sea towards Egypt.

On 14 August, the 51st Highland Division disembarked at Port Tewfik. Bain's subsequent poem, 'Port of Arrival', recorded the impressions of a foreign soldier landing at the southern gateway to the Suez Canal:

The place we see  
Is just as we imagined it would be  
Except its furnishings are somehow less  
Spectacular, more drab, and we confess  
To disappointment, something like a sense  
Of loss, of being cheated.

The Highlanders settled into the desert west of the canal city of Ismailia near a village called Qassassin. Their base comprised fifty camps, each a rectangle a thousand yards long and five hundred wide, with identical dug-in tents, latrines and water towers. Here began a period of desert training and acclimatizing men from the highlands of Scotland to the Egyptian summer. The troops learned to navigate the trackless, barren sands with compasses aided at night by the stars and during the day by the sun. For a short period each day, they marched without helmets, caps or shirts for their skins to absorb sunlight without burning.

In his comrades' interaction with local villagers, Bain observed racial hatreds that he had not until then suspected. Men from Scottish slums, themselves subject to abuse by classes above theirs, humiliated the local population. Bain recalled, 'I do remember being very shocked by the attitude to the Egyptians, when we landed in Egypt. This was general all through the army. They were simply called wogs, and they were fair game. They were kicked around, beaten up, reviled.'

Winston Churchill and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Alan Brooke, had flown to Egypt just ahead of the Highland Division. The day after the Highlanders arrived, Churchill dismissed Major General Auchinleck from his dual posts as Commander-in-Chief Middle East and 8th Army commander. He and Brooke appointed General Sir Harold Alexander C-in-C Mideast and placed General William Gott in command of the 8th Army. General Gott, however, was killed when two German Messerschmitts attacked a transport plane taking him to Cairo. The officer chosen to replace him was a wiry general with a distinctly unmilitary falsetto voice named Bernard Law Montgomery.

'Monty', who assumed command on 13 August, made immediate changes to the 8th Army characterized by his declaration, 'There will be no more belly-aching and no more retreats.' Morale improved thanks to Montgomery's contagious confidence, the delivery of new American tanks and the failure of the Axis to exploit its victory at Tobruk by pushing through Alamein to Alexandria and Cairo.

Many of the post-Tobruk deserters were returning to the army, amid signs that Britain was not losing Egypt after all. There were too many of them to punish at mass court martials, which would attract publicity and undermine the myth of the universally brave British Tommy. Moreover, the 8th Army needed them. Experienced soldiers were more useful at the front than in prison. Privates were taken back without penalty, beyond the abuse their sergeants meted out. Non-commissioned officers were reduced to privates and put back into their units. Some of the more resourceful deserters, who had lived off the land in the Delta, went into the newly created Special Air Service (SAS) and Long Range Desert Group, where their survival skills and ingenuity were put to good use. Some deserters held out, as Major Douglas H. Tobler discovered while gathering intelligence in the desert. In September, he met a band of men 'who for their own reasons had deserted their units or perhaps made no effort to get back to their own lines after getting lost during an engagement with the enemy'. Tobler, who had not come to arrest them, noted that they were 'glad to be out of the fighting, content to live by their wits knowing it was unlikely anyone would check their credentials'.

While Bain was training at the camp near Qassassin, the division received an unexpected visit from Winston Churchill. The prime minister reviewed the troops and wrote afterwards, 'The 51st Highland Division was not yet regarded as "desert worthy", but these magnificent troops were now ordered to the Nile front.'

The 'Nile front' was, for the 5/7th Gordons and the rest of the division's 153rd Brigade, the desert south of the road between Cairo and the pyramids. Bain recalled taking the train there from Alexandria: 'An Arab was selling hard boiled eggs and bread, and they simply took his entire stock and threw him off the train.' Near the Mena House, Egyptian Khedive Ismail's nineteenth-century country lodge that had become a fashionable pyramid-side hotel, the 153rd Brigade dug trenches and constructed other defences to protect Cairo. Their exertions were wasted, because Monty was

no longer planning to defend Cairo. The time had come to commit soldiers like John Bain to an all-out offensive.

## THREE

On the average the men from the northwestern part of the United States get the highest scores [on the Army General Classification Test], the men from the southeast the lowest.

*Psychology for the Fighting Man*, p.189

STEVE WEISS BLACKMAILED HIS FATHER for permission to join the Army, but Alfred T. Whitehead of Tennessee claimed that he deceived his widowed mother to achieve the same end. Whitehead asked her to sign papers for his entry into the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a New Deal programme for the Depression's unemployed to plant forests and establish state parks. For a penniless youngster like Whitehead, the CCC's monthly pay of \$30 (\$25 of which went direct to the parents) made it an attractive option. Or so his mother, who was raising six children in a backwoods cabin, imagined. Whitehead related in his privately printed memoir, *Diary of a Soldier*, that he waited until she had signed the document before telling her the truth: he was becoming a soldier.

Whitehead had left home before, when he was fourteen. Beatings by his 'heavy handed stepfather' forced him to run away. In the town of Lebanon, in Tennessee's Wilson County, a family of moonshiners took him in and put him to work driving a truck. He learned dice and poker at their gambling den. 'Once in a while, they cut a guy's throat,' Whitehead wrote, 'just to keep their reputation for being tough.' Being tough appealed to the young Whitehead, whose upbringing required a thick hide.

His coal miner father, Artie Whitehead, had been crushed to death in an underground accident. Alfred wrote that he shed tears at his father's funeral, which he remembered as taking place when he was four years old. In fact, he was older. His Social Security and service records give his date of birth as 31 January 1922, which made him four in 1926. Artie Whitehead had a daughter in 1927, when Alfred was five. And the US Census reported him as living with his family in Putnam County, Tennessee, in 1930. Alfred T. Whitehead was at least eight, if not older, when his father died. This was the first of many inconsistencies between Whitehead's memory and the historical record.

Artie Whitehead was interred in 'the family cemetery' at Silver Point, Tennessee, 'with generations of relatives: Whitehead, Hatfield, Sadler, and Presley.' Alfred's mother returned by train to Buffalo Valley with her children to live near 'the one room, stone chimney, log house where I was born'. Young Whitehead's rural upbringing was typical for the impoverished Southern hills of the time. His family sent him to school only a few weeks a year, 'just enough to keep the authorities off their backs'. Even by the standards of the Depression-era South, his was a brutal childhood. Alfred's great-grandfather, Wily Whitehead, who was 'as old as the hills and senile', lived in a henhouse with a rope tied around his waist to keep him in. Their stepfather treated the six Whitehead children still living at home so harshly that the county assumed custody of them for a time. Young Alfred enjoyed rare moments of freedom, usually alone fishing or shooting in the woods. For the most part, he wrote, his mother and stepfather robbed him of his youth:

They had me working in the fields from sunup to sundown: plowing, clearing land, and helping to make moonshine whiskey by the time I was nine. Other times, my stepfather would hire me out as a laborer to other farmers for fifty cents a day. Then he'd take all the money I made and drink it up, gamble it away, or spend it whoring around South Carthage, depending on the mood he was in.

The wartime army offered an escape from backwoods poverty and abuse. It was unlikely Whitehead needed his mother's permission, though, to join it. His service records put his enlistment date at 11 April 1942. At that time, he was twenty. Parental consent was required only for volunteers younger than eighteen. Just as he must have been older than four at his father's funeral, he was more than eighteen in 1942. Yet depicting himself as underage stressed his role as victim in the saga he was making of his life. He portrayed his departure from his mother in poignant terms: 'She followed me all the way out to the front gate by the road, crying, and telling me that I had better get a good

insurance policy in the Army. I couldn't help remembering how she and my stepfather had squandered my dead father's insurance money and property.'

For many relatively well-off young Americans, like Steve Weiss, the army was pure hardship. To Alfred T. Whitehead, it was liberation. The training and discipline were light compared to farm labour. The army supplied three meals a day, regular rations of meat, hot showers, clean clothes, medical care, a bed to himself and, above all, travel beyond the hills where he was born. Such luxuries were unobtainable for a poor rural Southerner, white or black, in civilian life.

Whitehead and other young recruits reported early one warm April morning to a restaurant in Carthage, Tennessee. Carthage, originally a trading port where the Cumberland and Caney Fork Rivers met, was known to Whitehead and the other recruits as the town from which the state's most famous First World War veteran had embarked on his military career. Alvin Cullum York, having conquered alcoholism before the war to become a devout Christian and pacifist, was drafted into the Army in 1917 at the age of twenty-nine. Trained at Fort Gordon, Georgia, he served in France with the 82nd Division. On 8 October 1918, York earned the Medal of Honor. His citation, presented to him personally by General John J. Pershing, read:

After his platoon suffered heavy casualties and three other non-commissioned officers had become casualties, Corporal York assumed command. Fearlessly leading seven men, he charged with great daring a machine gun nest which was pouring deadly and incessant fire upon his platoon. In this heroic feat the machine gun nest was taken, together with four officers and 128 men and several guns.

York, about whom a Hollywood movie starring Gary Cooper had been released the year before, set a high standard for the young Tennesseans. Whitehead was proud to set out from the same town York had.

The recruits ate a hot breakfast at the little restaurant and boarded a bus. Driving along the ramshackle road past Whitehead's family's cabin at Sulphur Springs, Alfred wondered if he would ever see it again. It did not matter to him either way. While the driver filled the bus with petrol in Lebanon, he slipped away to buy 'a jug of moonshine'. He and his companions drank the illegal alcohol before nightfall, when the bus entered the gates of Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

After a few weeks of kitchen duty and barracks cleaning at Fort Oglethorpe, Whitehead was shipped to Camp Wolters, Texas, for Basic Training. The Infantry Replacement Training Center, where Texan Audie Murphy trained with Company D of the 59th Training Battalion, was then the country's largest. The nearest town was Mineral Wells, which some of the GIs called 'Venereal Wells' for obvious reasons. Whitehead became a buck private with about sixty other youngsters in the 4th Platoon, Company D, 63rd Infantry Training Battalion. His boyhood proficiency with a rifle qualified him as 'sharpshooter' and then 'expert'. Despite his success and easy adaptation to military life, he hated the Texas heat and burning winds. 'At night,' he recalled, 'I had to sleep with my blanket over my head just to breathe and keep the sand from stinging my face.' Training lasted seventeen weeks. This short time, reduced from the previously standard fifty-two weeks, was necessitated by the urgent need for troops overseas. On completion of the course, Whitehead took a train to Camp Polk, Louisiana.

At Camp Polk, Whitehead was assigned to an 'antitank platoon with Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment of the 2nd Infantry Division'. On his shoulder was the divisional patch with an American Indian's head for which the 2nd was called the Indian Head Division. The assignment gave him many advantages over men who would be sent overseas as replacements for regiments that had lost soldiers in combat. He would train with the men who were going to fight beside him, and his officers would know him.

Both the regiment and the division had honourable records of service. The 38th Regiment was called the 'Rock of the Marne' for its stiff resistance during the German offensive of 1918. The 'Second to None' Division's bravery during the Meuse-Argonne offensive had earned it three Croix de Guerre from the French government. By 1942, the division's main components were the 2nd, 9th

and 38th Regiments, together with the 2nd Engineers Battalion, four field artillery battalions and support units.

The 2nd Infantry Division was at Camp Polk to take part in war games. The Louisiana Maneuvers had begun the year before as the largest ever on American soil, and they would be staged with new units each year of the war. Their objective was as much to find and correct flaws in American battle strategy, tactics, equipment and organization as to train the inexperienced troops. To Private Whitehead, the 1942 summer manoeuvres seemed 'like a great game, much like my childhood games of hide-and-seek, where one would surprise the "enemy"'. Without enough weapons to equip all the troops, Whitehead and some of his comrades carried broomsticks instead of rifles and used empty mortar rounds as anti-tank guns. In some places, wooden signs saying 'foxhole' and 'machine gun' substituted for the real thing. The war games pitted 'Reds' against 'Blues' over 3,400 square miles of rugged swampland, hills and rivers. In the previous year's exercises, General George Patton's 2nd Armored had swept across the River Sabine into Texas to come back into Louisiana and trap the 'Reds' in Shreveport. The exercises included cavalry charges, relics of an earlier era that would not amount to much against the Wehrmacht.

Whitehead and the rest of his platoon lived rough in the Louisiana woods to hone survival skills, like foraging for food, hiding from the enemy and washing in streams. Some of the men paid local families to cook them fried chicken with biscuits and gravy. Whitehead lit out after a Cajun girl, who responded to his advances by pelting him with stones. Louisiana had two types of weather, as far as Whitehead could judge, 'hot and then hotter'. Mosquitoes and snakes proved more menacing than the Blue Army.

On 22 September 1942, the 2nd Division returned to Fort Sam Houston. Whitehead's days revolved around close order drill, twenty-five-mile hikes with fifty-pound packs, kitchen police (KP), training films, field inspections and rifle practice. Despite the resilience his hard-labouring childhood gave him, he came into conflict with authority more than once. Officers told him to use his free time to catch up on sleep, but he left the base as often as he could to drink, gamble and chase women. 'I had numerous girlfriends,' he wrote, 'but figured anyone could have a girlfriend. What I really wanted was to get married.' His attention focused on a girl with red hair, whom he dated and to whom he proposed. The engagement would be prolonged, because the girl's mother 'wanted her to finish school first'.

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