

Travelling North



Peter Holdroyd

What finished the war for Britain were two flat tyres.

One would not have been enough.

I suppose we have our friends in the Resistance to thank for it, but you can't blame them: they were doing their bit, as they thought, trying to kill Generalfeldmarschall von Rundstedt on the run-up to the Normandy landings. Operation Overlord, of course, was simple in concept: Allied troops to land on five beaches, establish themselves and proceed to drive the German army out of France, and ultimately end the war.

Well, the war ended all right, but not the way Churchill had planned.

The maquis didn't shoot von Rundstedt – only his staff car. Shot out two tyres. There was only one spare, so von Rundstedt was on hand to redeploy his troops when the Allies reached the beaches, instead of miles away and out of contact.

With the result that the invasion force was driven back into the sea.

My little group of Resistance fighters and I had to fight our way onto the Sword beach, where those who made it were picked up by small boat and taken to Dover amid scenes reminiscent of the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940.

The BBC announced that Mr Churchill had ordered the evacuation of the civilian population of south and east England, ahead of a retaliatory invasion by Germany. We had to get to London as quickly as possible and get the first northbound train out of Kings Cross or Euston.

I guided my group all the way to Kings Cross station, where the smell of fear filled the air, and spoke to a porter.

'I have to collect my wife and child,' I said, 'how long have I got?'

He glanced up at the station clock and twisted his mouth grimly. 'About ten minutes, mate. When that goes' – he pointed at the train my group had boarded – 'that's it. The Gerries have landed at Shoeburyness, and are coming this way.'

'Flippin' heck!' I cried.

'Take my advice, mate, get on the train. Chances are your wife and family will already be on their way north.'

'I don't know that. I can't go without knowing they're safe.'

He shook his head and sucked air through his teeth. 'Are they far away?'

'Romford.'

He shook his head again. 'Too close to Shoebury, mate. The Gerries'll be there in no time, if they ain't already.'

There was an ear-splitting whistle from the big locomotive and moments later, my decision was made for me, as the driver, deciding not to wait, urged his load into motion. Steam billowed and the air filled with the smell of smoke and steam and hot oil. The coaches rolled out of the station, clanking and hissing steam from their heating pipes.

Air-raid sirens began their mournful ululation, and people began to move towards the shelters in the Underground. I went out in the street. I needed to get the seventeen or so miles home, and I began to walk. The sirens had at least cleared the street of many people and most traffic. Ack-ack guns started up near the docks.

Someone had abandoned a motorcycle. It was hauled up on its stand, a BSA with a big single cylinder, that looked good for a fairly long journey over uncertain terrain. I glanced around and saw no obvious owner, so kicked at the starter. The engine caught at once, a beautiful, deep throb. I put it in gear and opened up the throttle.

The first part of the journey was slow and tricky. Planes were beginning to drop bombs in a deadly black drizzle. Smoke drifted through the streets. Twice I was blown off the bike, but was able to go on.

I worked my way through the East End. This was clearer. What traffic there was was heading towards London. A copper flagged me down.

'Where are you heading, Sonny?'

I hated being called Sonny. I was short for my age, and probably five or ten years older than he thought I was.

I answered his question without complaining, since arguing would only have slowed me down.

'Romford's one of their targets, Sonny. The Gerries could be there already.'

'I've got to go: my family...'

I figured if I mentioned I had a wife, he wouldn't have believed me and that would have led to another argument, so I let him think I meant my parents, who'd actually been killed in an air raid in 1943.

He shook his head. 'Sorry, Son, but I can't let you go. More than my job's worth.'

'What you going to do? Arrest me?'

He reached out. 'If I have to, Son. Failing to 'bey a lawful order by a police officer in wartime.'

I calculated my chances of getting past this uniformed nuisance, and figured I had none. I reached into my jacket pocket, pulled out my service revolver and told him to get out of the way.

'Now don't be stupid, lad,' he said, staring at the muzzle. 'Now, that's a proper gun, that is. You could 'urt someone with it.'

I grinned tightly. 'I already shot quite a few Germans. Killing people is nothing new. Now get out of the way.'

He raised his eyes to mine, and I could tell he was trying to decide whether I was bluffing. I leaned slightly towards him.

'If you have a family you want to see tonight, get out of the way. I won't ask again.'

He gritted his teeth and looked as if he'd like to crush me beneath his hob-nailed police boots, but he stood aside.

I put the bike in gear and left him staring after me.

The streets of Romford were quiet except for the sound of shelling. I guessed there were tanks not far away, ours or theirs I didn't know. Hoped the former, feared the latter. As I drove past one of the east-west roads, I glanced to my right, in the direction of the coast, and saw grey uniforms and coal-scuttle helmets. Home wasn't far. If they were the advance troops, I had a chance to get Liliás and Charlie out of the house and away. But I didn't know.

Trouble struck in the street before mine. There was a man in his late teens in Home Guard uniform, and three younger teenage boys. Three Germans lay on the ground, apparently dead. As I drove past them, the man waved his rifle at me, indicating that I should stop.

'Who're you then, mate?' he asked.

'Ken Shilton,' I told him. It was the first time I'd used my birth name in months.

The three boys were looting the bodies of the soldiers.

'Oh no you're not,' said the man.

'I was last time I looked.'

'You're a liar, mate!' he said, moving close to me and pushing the muzzle of his rifle into my chest.

'You know Ken Shilton so well?' I asked him.

'I know his wife, and I know *he's* up in Scotland, keeping his head down.'

I'd told Liliias I was being posted to Scotland when SOE actually sent me to France. So maybe he did know her. She never thought it odd, at a time when nobody was telling anybody *anything*, that I'd tell her I was off to Scotland.

'I know she lives in the next street,' I said.

He smirked. 'Not any more, mate. She lives 'ere wiv me.' He nodded towards the house we were standing outside.

I turned, and as I did so, the door opened. Liliias stood there. It was unmistakably her, with our three year old son pushing past her legs to see. Then I recognised that the bundle she was holding in her arms was a baby.

'What's up, Colin?' she called to the man in front of me.

'Bloke claims he's your husband,' Colin replied.

She frowned and came down onto the pavement. She stared at me, recognition dawning in suddenly frightened eyes.

'Ken!' she breathed.

Colin stared at me, then at her. 'You mean, 'e *is* your 'usband?'

She was biting her lip. The baby was beginning to grizzle. I have to say, it had Colin's eyes and pug nose, but then I'm not good at babies.

'Yes,' she said, and suddenly burst into tears. 'It's been so long...'

My poor, sad, little wife, who'd believed, perhaps, she'd never see me again and had turned to another man to provide for her and our baby; who didn't know what to do now I'd returned.

'I came for you and Charlie,' I said. 'The Germans are here.' I indicated the three bodies on the ground, noting that the lads had found a Luger pistol. 'We need to go.'

Colin scowled and swung his rifle again. 'Well, I look after her now,' he said.

'And how are you planning on doing that?' I asked.

He glanced at her. 'That's for me to know and you to wonder about.'

He was wasting time. I could hear the approaching sound of tank engines, and even small-arms fire. Colin hadn't a clue.

I took out the service revolver and shot him, grabbed Liliias and took Charlie's hand, leading them to the motorbike.

'I don't know how to do this for the best,' I said to her, as if Colin had never been. 'I didn't know about the baby. Thought you could sit on the pillion with Charlie on your knee. You'll have to take the baby as well now.'

She got on the back of the pillion, weeping, with the baby in her arms, and Charlie wedged between us.

I kicked the engine into life. The three lads finally seemed aware that there was danger.

'Oy!' said the one with the Luger. 'Where do you fink you're going?'

'North,' I replied, and gunned the engine.

As I drove away, I heard a shot. Liliias fell backwards off the bike. I glanced back and saw her and the baby covered in blood. German soldiers were in the street. I couldn't go back for her, or the baby. Charlie hung on to me.

I sped away. For the moment my son and I were safe.