SENTENCES of WAR

An extract adapted from

Chapter 11. June 1944

D DAY and BEYOND

'*The coast of Normandy began to take shape through the haze. And then as the full light began to come one saw the ships and the planes. It was a sight so paralysing that tears came to my eyes. It was as if every ship that had ever been launched was there, and even as if the sea had yielded up her wrecks. It was as if every plane that had been built was there, and so it seemed in fantasy, as if the dead crews were there too. There had never been since time began such a rendezvous for fighting men: there never will be again.'*

Iain Macleod. Army officer in the British Expeditionary Force to Normandy, Operation Overlord on D Day. He wrote this for The Spectator 20 years later.. He was also a Conservative government minister.

This year 2024, Britain has been building up to a major commemoration, that of the 80th Anniversary of D Day, on 6th June 1944. The Allied Invasion of France which changed the course of the war. If you are reading this you may have seen some of the powerful history documentaries taking us to the heart of the incredible bravery of our combined fighting forces on the landing beaches of Normandy. You may be sure to watch the commemorative ceremonies in France, which include a celebration of the veterans of air, land and sea who are still alive and able to bear witness to that day of valour on an enormous scale. At the cost of many thousands of lives, a battle fought for freedom from the tyranny of Hitler. Operation Overlord, the largest amphibious invasion in military history, was the first bold, crucial step in the Allies' strategy to finally defeat Germany and bring the war in Europe to an end.

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Writing about personal, individual experiences of World War 11 is something I have been doing in a small way for a long time, in three previous books in fact. I love the research. Sadly few of those I have written about are still with us; all the more important to have their words from the past in print and online for the future. There is gratitude and satisfaction in having the privilege of being able to record and reflect on all kinds of illuminating accounts.

In this summer of the 80th Anniversary of D day with a choice of commemorative ceremonies, large and small, this is an adapted extract from a long term project 'Sentences of War.' It focuses entirely on the experiences of a small sample of individual women who endure the war and indeed survive it, but not together. They all live through that same war but in different countries and from very varied perspectives. Yet there are values that they hold in common: love, courage, resilience, empathy and humour, in coping with fear, bereavement, all manner of deprivations, emotional vulnerability and exhaustion.

An additional view of the events of war here is provided with insight and wit by writer and journalist, talented Molly Panter Downes, in her regular column in The Spectator: ' London War Notes.'

In this extract, we follow the thoughts and reflections on D Day of three women: young and single, English Cynthia in London, through her diary ; married mother of three small children, Scottish Janet married to a Frenchman in occupied France, through her captivating memoir, 'Divided Loyalties'; German grandmother Mathilde, wife of a Professor of Literature in Hamburg, though her wartime letters, later published as 'On the Other Side : Letters to my Children from Germany, 1940 - 46.'

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Wartime Germany is an occupied country. A nation where the suffering of its citizens is equivalent to that of other European countries now dominated by Hitler and the Nazis. Hitler and his henchmen have run the show in Germany since he was made Chancellor of the Reichstag in January 1933. Although his vision for the future of a powerful new Germany swept many off their feet, a notable number of Germans did not subscribe to the militaristic Nazi regime demanding unquestioning worship of The Fuhrer, demonstrated on every possible occasion. 'Heil Hitler!' In many cases, those who privately rejected Hitler and the Third Reich made the best of things, until they realised too late, far too late, that they were under the control of a government of Fascist bullies, capable of every kind of cruel prejudice against their fellow man.

One kind. cultured, elderly German couple in Hamburg, Professor Wolff Monckburg and his wife Mathilde, a grandmother, loathed Hitler and his Nazis from the outset. Discretely, carefully, they carried on with their lives, hospitable, helpful and loyal to relations, neighbours and friends, including those who were Jewish.

Mathilde had survived World War1, bringing up her young children. When war was declared in 1939, she walked to the central park in Hamburg with her elder daughter. With their arms round each other, they sat on a bench and wept.

From that moment on, there is little choice but to navigate her way through the accumulating privations of war, the pain of hunger and cold, a much lower standard of living overall. Looking after a not infrequently ill husband, going without replacement of any material item you could mention, from shampoo to shoes, accepting the impossibility of any professional repairs from a clock to a bomb damaged building; all resources and materials went to feed the insatiably greedy machine of war. Subjected to the noise of regular propaganda broadcast on public loud speakers, endless power cuts at home.

Most painful of all is what would become a six year separation from most of her children and grandchildren, now living abroad.

Mathilde was an acute observer. She wrote eloquently of the horrific scenes of terror unimaginable that she witnessed in Hamburg, the consequence of increasingly relentless, indiscriminate air raids by British Bomber Command; what was called 'carpet bombing'. Hamburg was one of the worst bombed cities in any country during WW11.

Summer 1944. *'Hamburg has had another couple of heavy terror raids. The remainder of the city has now been destroyed. Again there are hundreds of dead. One keeps wondering how it is possible*

to sustain this crazy existence. No one ever laughs any more, no one is ever light hearted or happy. The inner tension is leaving its mark on every face. We are waiting for the final act'.

The quotes in this extract from Mathilde's story come from her secret letters to her children, which in their prolonged absence gave her both relief and comfort to write. She was determined to tell them the real truth of what was happening. As she wrote, she had feeling that wherever they were, they would somehow sense across the airwaves that she was holding them in her heart and communicating with them.

The letters could never be posted and they were carefully hidden in a folder in their flat in Andreasstrasse. Should the flat ever be searched and the letters found during the war, the consequences would have been severe. They were not in fact discovered until after her Mathilde's death, 12 years after the war.

Mathilde was vivacious and charming, with a passionate love of life, people, music, dance, books, good food, celebrations and fun. She seized on any moments of light and pleasure that were possible.

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England. June 6TH 1944. D Day. The weather is diabolical, the Channel is nearly too turbulent to launch the long awaited Second Front, the United Allied invasion of France. The strategic planning for Operation Overlord, the code name, has been in progress for many months. The planning intensified from December 1943, when U.S. General Eisenhour was appointed Supreme Commander of Allied Forces, primarily from United States, Britain and Canada.

Operation Overlord has already been delayed from the 5th June. Freedom and the future hang on its success. The south coast of England is heaving with troops, vehicles, boats and planes at the ready. The landing by sea and air on the fifty mile stretch of Normandy beaches must be delayed not a single hour further. The desperate stormy start is not auspicious.

The crossing is excessively rough. Soldiers and seamen have been seasick nearly throughout the journey across the channel. Smooth Landing is impossible in the flat bottomed landing craft designed for the purpose, Strong winds and currents make navigation very awkward. The landing craft fill up with water and some soldiers do not even make it on to the beaches ; they drown. Sick and soaked, weighed down by their packs, the first waves of brave men stagger on to the shore where they can, many of them immediately mown down by the awaiting Germans, perfectly positioned with machine guns on the banks and cliffs above the beaches. Allied casualties and deaths escalate at speed. Within minutes the beaches are scenes of utter carnage, Omaha more than any other.

On the land above the beaches, around 2000 paratroopers were dropped over an area of 9 square miles, German machine guns firing all around, their chances of survival were 1 in 4. In all, 11,590 Allied aircraft were employed . With extensive air support and cover but at huge human cost on land, sea and air, the first stage of the Allied Invasion of Northern France has been successfully completed by the evening of the 6th June 1944. .

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London June 6th. 1944. The conditions for landing and combat in Normandy are infinitely tougher

than Cynthia Denison Pender, my 24 year old mother in London, an ambulance driver for the Red Cross, can possibly know. She is energised and excited to record news of this great moment, the Allied Invasion of France, in her little 5 Year wartime Diary. Her neat handwritten entries in pencil are usually confined to four short lines a day, bulletins the length of a Tweet or a Text message. Today, D Day, her account becomes part of a continuous flow from one day into the next.

'June 6th 1944: D-Day. 'The Invasion of Europe has begun by the Allied Forces. The Para troops and gliders have landed from the skies (6th Airborne Division) & commandoes.' June 7th: 'Infantry etc on the beaches. It all seems like some distant dream. Everything here in London is so quiet.' June 8th : 'The opposition on the French coast has not been as great as was expected. Our naval guns silenced most of the shore batteries. We seem to be trying to cut off the Cherbourg Peninsular.' June 9th: 'Bayeux is the first French town that we have captured. The enemy has now brought up more armour & reinforcements & fighting is heavier.' June 10th: 'Worked all day & was glad to, although a Sat, with this terrific fighting going on, the more there is to do the better. I wish we had a bigger part in it.'

Part in it…..? A presence, which is what Prime Minister Churchill himself always longs for. His preferred position is on a ship at the centre of the action. Immediately prior to D Day, King George V1 writes to Churchill from Buckingham Palace: 'I want to make one more appeal to you not to go to sea on D Day. I am a younger man than you, I am a sailor, and as King, I am head of all these Services. There is nothing I would like to do better than to go to sea, but I have agreed to stay at home. Is it fair then that you should do exactly what I should have liked to do myself?' The King reminds the Prime Minister of his proper role at this crucial time 'When vital decisions might have to be taken…..' On the eve of D Day, Churchill has another fearless figure to restrain: General Charles de Gaulle who, as the self-appointed leader of the Free French, for whom Churchill has provided sanctuary in London, is determined to manoeuvre himself into a prominent position at a key location on D Day… in France.

Cynthia continues: June 11th : 'British armour has thrust eleven miles in land. Monty has now established his HQ in France (the 21st Division). The weather is improving.' June 13th: 'It was odd to think that as we all sat listening to war reports that we would soon be a part of it.'

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London War Notes. The Spectator. *'For the English, D Day might well have stood for Dunkirk Day. The tremendous news that British soldiers were back on French soil seemed suddenly to reveal exactly how much it had rankled when they were beaten off it four years ago. As the great fleets of planes roared towards the coast all day long, people glancing up at them said, 'Now they'll know how our boys felt on the beaches of Dunkirk.' There was also a slightly bemused look on most D Day faces, because the event wasn't working out quite the way anybody had expected. What they definitely hadn't expected was that the greatest day of our times would be just the same old London day, with men and women going to the office, queuing up for fish, getting haircuts and scrambling for lunch. D Day sneaked up on people so quietly that half the crowds flocking to business on Tuesday morning didn't know it was anything but Tuesday and then it fooled them by going right on being Tuesday. Even after the King's (evening) broadcast was over, Londoners stayed home. Everybody seemed to feel that this was one night you wanted your own thoughts in your own chair. At midnight, London was utterly quiet, the Civil Defence people were standing by for a half-expected alert which didn't come and D Day passed into history.' * Molly Panter Downes.

D day rolled on into the next stage: the long, arduous, agonizing Battle for Normandy.

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Hamburg. June 6th. Mathilde responds to D Day in her secret letter to her children. 'The invasion of northern France. An unforgettable day. On the French coast massed enemy forces are advancing slowly under heavy harassment. Many of them never reach land, are destroyed before they get there, while we bombard England's south coast with robot missiles, and they in turn obliterate more and more German and Italian towns. But our newspapers are full of large victory proclamations.' Hitler will proclaim triumph in the face of every loss and disaster until the end.

'Hamburg has had another couple of heavy terror raids. The remainder of the city has now been destroyed. Again there are hundreds of dead. One keeps wondering how it is possible to sustain this crazy existence. No one ever laughs any more, no one is ever light-hearted or happy. The inner tension is leaving its mark on every face. We are waiting for the final act.'

Living conditions in Hamburg are appalling. 'After weeks and weeks of icy cold rain the sun has returned, to peer ironically through the innumerable windowless ruins. The overflowing dustbins exude a foul murky smell and muck, paper and rotting vegetation cover the streets. '

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London War notes. The Spectator. 11.6.44. * 'Everything is different now that the second front has opened, and every truck on the road, every piece of gear on the railways, every jeep and truck which is heading toward the front has become a thing of passionate concern. There are the trainloads of the wounded which are already beginning to pass through summer England, festooned with its dog roses and honeysuckle. The Red Cross symbol now shines on the side of trains going past crossings where the waiting women, shopping baskets on their arms, don't know whether to wave or cheer or cry. Sometimes they do all three.'* Mollie Panter Downes.

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London. mid-June 1944. A week after D Day, new missiles launched from France strike the British Isles. The Flying bombs, V1s, Buzzbombs. Come September, there will be more lethal V2 rockets, Doodlebugs, which will add to citizens' terror. Buzzbombs are as noisy as their name, carrying one ton of high explosives, at a maximum of 400 mph. They can at least be decommissioned by anti aircraft fire, and over 50% of those fired at Britain were destroyed. Doodlebugs are eerily silent, infinitely more dangerous. Supersonic liquid fuelled ballistic weapons carrying one ton of explosives at 2,386 mph.

The services of The Red Cross are needed more than ever. June 16th: The Home Secretary Herbert Morrison 'has issued a statement that pilotless 'Robot' planes are now being fired off from the coast of France at us.' Cynthia writes. June 17th: 'Queen Mary Abbots Hospital has been hit & we had to evacuate it. To stay with the Grazebrooks, nice to see Michael, just the same. He told me what he thought of the Middle East & Italy.'

Michael Grazebrook is one of Cynthia's admirers. He has recently spent 3 months in hospital having

been wounded at the Battle of Monte Casino in Italy in January. There he was ordered to command a new company in desperately difficult circumstances, trying to get footholds and read the map, uphill in the dark. They captured the hill and with it 46 prisoners. He was awarded an MC. A very modest man.

June 19th : Cynthia writes: 'We took the mobile canteen to Chislehurst to feed people from the slums, suburbs, etc. who are sheltering in the caves there.' The Chislehurst Caves, 22 miles of man-made tunnels through a disused chalk and flint mine, made robust bomb shelters. Near a railway station, Londoners pay one old penny a night to stay in caves equipped with electric lights, running water, air ventilation and a basic sanitation system. Children can run around and play. There are beds and families can snuggle down between 7pm at night and 7am in the morning. The sound of bombs cannot be heard and people can feel safe and sleep. More than 15,000 people make the caves their night-time bunker over WW2.

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June 18th 1944. London War notes. The Spectator.* 'London, since D Day, has seemed more normal than it had for months before. There's a lot more room on its pavements, for one thing, now that the uniforms, both British and American, have thinned out, and the effect of their departure upon the average citizen's ability to get about town is staggering. Civilians lifting a timid finger for a taxi are overwhelmed when two or three cabbies race up. They are unsettled by the novelty of being able to buy a meal or seat in a cinema with ease. Any newsreel theatre showing pictures of the landings in France, however, draws enormous if quite unexcitable, audiences.' *Mollie Panter Downes..

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France. June 1944

Now we come to Janet Teissier du Cros, beguiling, enchanting, sensitive and so lowered at times that tears may flow freely, but at others, with a delicious ability to laugh at herself in any number of impossible circumstances or occasions when she has embarrassed herself by a blunder. Her position is in many ways an invidious one as she is in effect, an enemy alien. A Scots woman married to a French National who from the outbreak of war was obliged to serve his country, as an army captain. Janet speaks fluent French, but with a Scottish accent. The British were not at all popular with the French at the earlier stages of the war. So often, Janet has to employ discretion and diplomacy and cultivate understanding. How complex the French were, how uncertain they themselves sometimes were of their own views in their occupied country. It is not for nothing that her memoir is entitled 'Divided Loyalties.'

How wretched it was for Janet to be entirely separate for the duration from her beloved father Professor Grierson back in Edinburgh, and her sisters to whom she was close. She misses her homeland of Scotland nearly unbearably at certain junctures in the years of war.

But here she is in summer 1944: living in the tiny holiday house which she and Francis own, La Coustete, set on a hill top above the River Herault, deep in the rural heart of the Cevennes in southern France. She resides here with her three small sons, Henri, Andre and Nicholas, a baby. A writer and professional pianist, her husband Francois is a French civil engineer.

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It is necessary to wind back a little, to revisit the beginning of Janet's existence in wartime France. It is not easy to summarise anything about her life, a diverse existence, richly coloured by intriguing and talented dramatis personae. It's like setting forth to cover a long range of hills, mountains even, each one with a different character, subject to endless changes in the weather.

Serious walking is very fashionable today, life transforming for people young and old. Contemporary walkers tend to be equipped with the right outdoor gear and appropriate boots or shoes. Janet, in wartime France, does not have those resources. She is often obliged to walk because it is the only choice she has of getting from somewhere to somewhere else. In this extract around D Day, she tells a wonderful anecdote about a hair- raising downhill drive with very young, crazy members of the local Maquis Resistance.

Throughout the war she has to make one trek after another on foot, sometimes in boiling weather; in The Cevennes in high summer it is stony, rocky and without the cool of shading trees. In winter it is often wet, fierce winds blow and it is usually freezing cold, even in doors with a big log fire but myriad draughts. At all events, the real deprivation is an absence of appropriate and comfortable footwear. No lovely boots and warm socks, but wooden soled clogs. All Janet's winter clothes were left behind in Edinburgh before the war….but she does have ' a huge ermine cape inherited from the Mactavish grandmother whose father helped to found the Hudson May Company'. Janet wraps it round herself in bed in mid-winter, whilst immersing herself in the consolation of reading Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, fantasising about how the latter would have dealt with World War 11 in her fiction.

As the private use of petrol is forbidden, the main vehicle travel option is on a bus fuelled by charcoal and it is all pretty dusty and smelly. The main mode of transport is a bicycle. It's very easy on those rough roads to get a puncture, and as the war progresses, impossible to repair them. I think tyres end up being stuffed with unbouncy old newspaper or straw, but perhaps I'm inventing that.

There is a side benefit. The hard walking makes her as strong and fit as she had ever been.

The Cevennes has a wild beauty all its own, but to begin with, even with a local maid to help with her two little sons (baby No 3 was born in 1942) coping with this primitive life in harsh and remote countryside was very challenging, one for which her earlier privileged existence had ill prepared her, an exciting round of extended travels to European cities or in comfort at her social family home in a well-staffed Edinburgh town house. Domestic tasks were completely unknown to her.

In June 1940, Francois was taken prisoner. For a time Janet did not know whether he was even alive. That he was a POW came as a relief, but it was not a promising position. After a few months, he had the good fortune to be released on parole in order to work for the Germans, based near Paris, organising repairs and reconstruction on the bridges, railways, and utilities in general that were being regularly sabotaged, either bombed by the Allies or blown up by the Resistance. There were long periods of time when they were not able to see each other.

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By 1944 Janet has experienced and endured much and at many levels. She is completely separated from her homeland of Scotland. As the occupiers of France, The Germans are entitled to all produce

and materials as well as charging the country rent for occupying them. The privations for French citizens are considerable; their rations, even for children, are minute. Janet has several close friends nearby in similar plight. She is helped by some support for herself and her children by Francois's parents and family in the neighbourhood.

Now it is early June. The air is light with expectancy for the long anticipated Allied Invasion. On 4th June, The Allies occupy Rome. In France, the question is when will they invade and where? It is on the cusp of D Day.

Janet's immediate concern is to sort out a valid identity card, rather than the irregular one originally made out by the secretary in the Valleraugue town hall, citing her town of birth, Aberdeen, ' as 'Aberdun', to give it a French look, and passed over in silence my country of orgin.' she wrote. This was the consequence of leaving her wedding certificate and other legal documents back at her family home in Edinburgh, totally forgetting them in the rush to return to France with Francois at the beginning of September 1939, before war was declared. Francois was required to be available within a week of the declaration of war to receive his mobilisation orders with his regiment.
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There is now a further anxiety, a new inconvenience. 'The Germans have issued an order that everyone in France must hand in his identity card to the police and make a regular application for a new one.' A correct card will most likely be achieved through the local Gendarmerie in Valleraugue, where she is known. She bicycles there to find the Gendarmes in buoyant mood.

'I am received almost with open arms. I was told to cast care to the winds; they would make me an identity card if I wanted one, but they added that I would need none so long as I stayed in Valleraugue. "In the meantime" said the Gendarme, "If anyone makes trouble for you, send him to us. We'll answer for you!" '

The same morning, Janet sees a long term acquaintance at her friend Helena's house, The Pasteur Olives. He was one of the first to organise a Resistance group, a Maquis, in the region. Before she goes on her way, The Pasteur tells her: 'The message that the Maquis was waiting for had come through. This meant that the Allied landing in France was imminent. There was no need to swear us to silence.'

A whole new chapter of possibility is opening up. Janet busies herself with making La Coustete ready for the children and the imminent school summer holidays. She would also have a maid to help. When permitted, Francois would join them from Paris. Next day she bicycles to the station at Pont d'Herault to take the train to collect the children from their grandparents at Mandiargues.

'At the first stop, Ganges, a man got into our carriage. He was bursting with excitement. He told us the Allies had attacked the coast of Normandy and were even then landing in France…. Everyone began talking to everyone else, in an uncontrollable explosion of joy. We reached St Hippolyte station before I was even aware we had left Ganges, before it even dawned on me that I had not really believed the announcement made by Pasteur Olives. I had been grateful to him for giving me something to keep me going; but this, this overpowering joy, was something I had not really expected ever to happen, at any time.'

On arrival at Mandiargues, Janet finds her parents in law in a completely contrasting mood. 'Papa and Maman saw things differently. Papa gave me a blood curdling account of the crimes that were

being committed by the 'bandits' as the Vichy press called the maquisards. ' He was concerned for the safety of Janet and the children in their remote little home. 'I discounted much of what Papa told me.

'My in laws were convinced that the landing could never be successful and would mean only new and more dreadful suffering for France. "Has our poor country not suffered enough?" asked Papa. What could I answer? If it came to a discussion, we would both argue not from facts but from pent up passion and it could only lead to a quarrel. But I was proof against pessimism. We left, the children and I, for Valleraugue. I was no longer in any fear of the Maquis; on the contrary, I believed that only in its shadow would we be safe. '

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Once the joy and hope of freedom from the Nazi yoke sinks in, the ordinary business of living under their rules continues…. at an even harsher level. 'The most immediate effect of the landing at Normandy was a tightening of the screw as regards food. The Valleraugue region produces little at the best of times. Those of us who came from the outside and had neither a pig nor goat, nor, in most cases, a vegetable garden, were almost completely dependent on the outside world. Now that the railway system was dislocated, we were in a serious plight. We could no longer count even on our rations. I would have to go far afield to find food for my family.' wrote Janet.

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London. June 20th 1944. Cynthia writes in her diary: 'After the theatre, Mummy, Pat & I dined with Daddy in the Savoy Grill.' 5 /- is the maximum charge permitted for a meal in a restaurant. The Savoy, Claridges, and The Ritz still benefit from game, fish, vegetables and fruit from their client's country estates. Earlier in the war a note was attached to the menu at the Ritz: 'Caviar can no longer be included in fixed price meals and will be charged at an extra 9/- per person.' London night life weathered the fear, the bombs, the destruction around them, countering the horror with humour, pride, and glamour. Dance the night away. Live now for tomorrow we die.

The night that the Café de Paris was bombed in March 1941, Joe the barman in The Berkley Hotel next door took an order from a dusty, damaged survivor leaning on the bar, requesting 'Something to revive me and with 'a sting'. Joe shook some crème de menthe, brandy and ice in a cocktail shaker, knocking up the first 'Berkley Stinger'.

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Paris. June 1944. As the liberation of France comes closer, Hitler's noose tightens. The process of the Holocaust intensifies. The Railway Station, La Gare d'Austerlitz, continues to be the point of departure for trains pulling chains of cattle trucks crammed with prisoners destined for those camps of hard labour until death, or immediate extermination, in Germany and Poland. The Red cross beg the Nazi authorities to allow them to distribute water and food packages to the passengers. Men, women and children are rounded up from prison transit camps in France, or hunted down, arrested and newly imprisoned. Hitler calls for all captured French resisters to be sent as slave labour to German factories. Within three weeks of the D Day landings, 6,000 men and women are transported by train to Germany.

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La Coustete. Late June. 1944.

Shopping, bargaining, foraging, scrounging. The simplest expedition often acquires a dramatic edge. The sweet and nearly saintly Roman Catholic family, the Passets at Les Laupies, have become a regular port of call. After one lengthy bicycle expedition there, Janet returns with 'the usual load of cheese, milk and butter' but too late to catch the bus which completes the journey She bicycles on, but soon enough, one tyre springs a puncture, without the kit to fix it, her only alternative is to walk…

She pushes on another mile, deeply discouraged, until around a corner, she meets a peasant tramping his ox cart 'at the slow pace of another age.' They walk together for a while, conversing a little. 'He seemed to live in a world utterly detached from the tragic web in which we were all caught.' He is, however, prepared to take her bicycle on the ox cart and leave it for her at Valleraugue, whilst she takes a short cut on foot. 'But I was not at the end of my troubles.' The sole of one of her wooden soled shoes comes off. 'They were quite unfit for those rough steep paths.' She sits down on a wall, finally discouraged, slumped in despair.

Suddenly, there is the unusual sound of a motor, zooming at some speed towards her. 'Full of Maquisards, it drew up beside me and they bad me get in. The young men squeezed together to make room for me, and one of them put his tommy gun under the seat and put my basket on his knee. They looked pathetically young, probably not more than seventeen or eighteen and they were in high spirits'. As they whizz down the road 'at breath-taking speed, swerving unnervingly on hairpin bends, with its twists and turns and its seven 'devil's elbows', and a sheer drop at one side or the other,' they tell Janet they had only recently joined the Maquis and that they were giving the boy at the wheel a driving lesson. I began to regret the slow pace of the ox cart. We were nearing the end of the descent and my companions said they would turn back at the foot of the hill because they must not go too near a village. Thoughtlessly, I said it was just as well because one of my near neighbours was a member of Petain's Legion. They gave a shout of joy, seized their guns and suggested making him a visit….' They dropped her off at the foot of the hill and 'We parted on the best of terms. '

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London. June 23rd 1944. Cynthia's diary. 'The "Doodle Bug" flying bomb really has frightened people incredibly. When you think of what they stood up to in the Blitz - this is new and sinister.'

London war notes. The Spectator. * 'The city is uncomfortable and harassed but doggedly getting it first wind. It is also as garrulous as a village suddenly plagued with some peculiar flying pest. Housewives standing in queues with their baskets glance up, when they hear a robot coming, with no more than the uneasy expression of a woman who has just discovered there is a wasp in the room…..In the matey chat that is always set off by danger, total strangers gossip like neighbours on a country green about how many of 'those things' have buzzed over their rooftop etc. People are adapting themselves with courage and humour to being under fire again, but the courage and humour are three years older and wearier than they were. * Mollie Panter Downes.

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London. June 24th 1944: Cynthia's Diary: 'Down to Bournemouth. No wonder that the coast areas are prohibited. They are absolutely crammed with guns, tanks etc. all waiting to go to France.'

Beyond the landing beaches of Northern France, our Allied Forces are confronted by impenetrable thickets of boundary hedging planted on compacted mounds of earth, like walls, The Bocage, which divides Normandy into a patchwork of countless pockets of small fields and deep lanes. On the other side of this dense, green defence, Germans guns are at the ready. In a particularly wet Normandy summer, our troops progress towards the key breakthrough position is frequently hampered. By the end of August, the seven infantry divisions fighting in Normandy will have lost three quarters of their original strength. Junior infantry officers had a mere 1/10 chance of surviving unscathed.

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Bournemouth. June 25th 1944 Cynthia writes, 'Very tired & breakfast was brought to us in bed & I slept for most of the morning. We drove back to London, taking 2 incredible officers in the back of the Ambulance.' Breakfast for troops in Normandy included tins of self heating cocoa, instantly warm after an incorporated wick is ignited by a lit cigarette.

June 26th 1944: 'We left London very early for West Hartlepool. A very ill woman was the patient. It rained all the way. So my first glimpse of the North Country was through one long cloudburst. It was nice to turn South again. We got to London 8.30pm, after nearly 600 miles.' June 28th 1944: 'Met wives & children from Canada, not quite the moment for the latter to come back here.' Those British wives and children who evacuated to Canada at the beginning of the war. 'As I drove them to their homes, we passed endless damage done by Doodle Bugs; while waiting at the station the children had to take cover as there was a warning, & a Bug went over.' June 30th 1944: 'Drove sweet, old, bombed out people all day. One wonderful old lady of 84, I did admire her pluck. Home on the 5.00. Simon Sitwell on the train, we talked in the corridor until he got out at Basingstoke. He is on night flying & the other day saw a flying bomb take off while over France.'

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I have not ventured into additional detail here about Cynthia, my mother. I can tell you that her home was in a lovely old farmhouse in Dorset. She adored her parents and loved being at home with them. Why wouldn't she? She was their pretty and spirited youngest daughter, very well indulged by my grandfather. Everything was beautifully run by my grandmother. They welcomed all her friends. There were horses to ride and to hunt, her great passion. There was a beautiful garden, a grass tennis court and a squash court. She was good at both. She had enjoyed nearly a year at Finishing School in Paris in 1938, making lifelong friends there. Later, a stream of boyfriends. She becomes engaged several times…She does not meet and fall in love with my Coldstream Guards Officer father, Roger Mortimer, until 1947. She has several different jobs. The last one preceding employment by The Red Cross in London was as a trainee draughtswoman at Westlands Aircraft Factory in Yeovil. She felt proud of what she learned in the process, but she was by then desperate to go to London. As for so many others, the war was the time of her growing up, of joy and sadness, gain and loss.

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Paris is liberated in August 1944 but the war in Europe rages on until May 1945.

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Acknowledgment to the original publications sourced for ‘Sentences of War’.

‘Divided Loyalties’ by Janet Teissier du Cros, published by Hamish Hamilton. Third edition January 1963.

‘On the Other Side: Letters to My Children from Germany 1940-46 by Mathilde Wolff Monckeberg, Persephone Books edition published in 2007.

‘London War Notes’ by Mollie Panter-Downes. Persephone Books edition published in 2014.

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