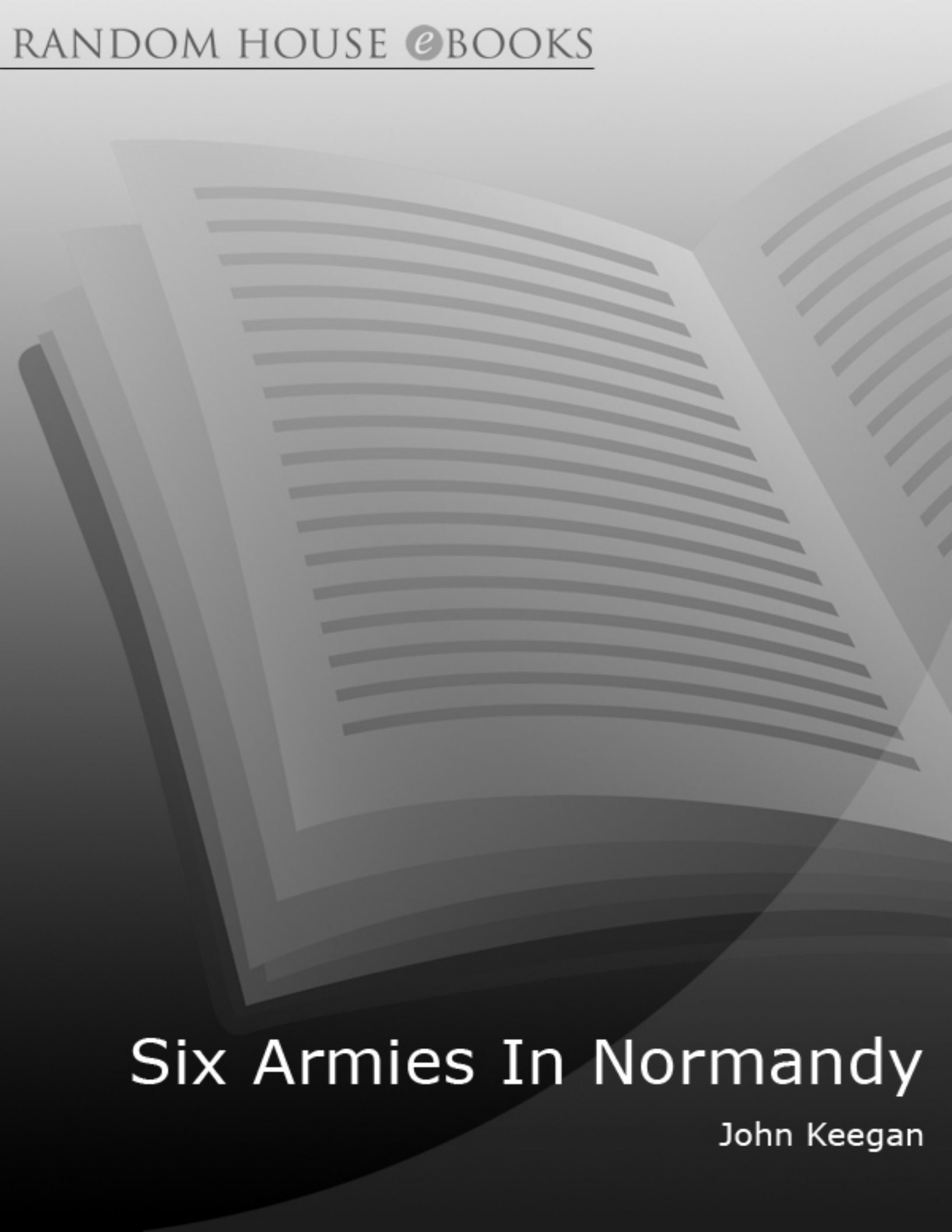
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



Six Armies In Normandy

John Keegan

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About the Author

John Keegan is the Defence Editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and Britain's foremost military historian. The Reith Lecturer in 1998, he is the author of many bestselling books including *The Face of Battle, The Mask of Command, Battle at Sea, The Second World War, A History of Warfare* (awarded the Duff Cooper Prize), *Warpaths, The Battle for History, The First World War*, and most recently, *Intelligence in War*.

For many years John Keegan was the Senior Lecturer in Military History at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and he has been a Fellow of Princeton University and Delmas Distinguished Professor of History at Vassar. He is Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He received the OBE in the Gulf War honours list, and was knighted in the Millennium honours list in 1999.

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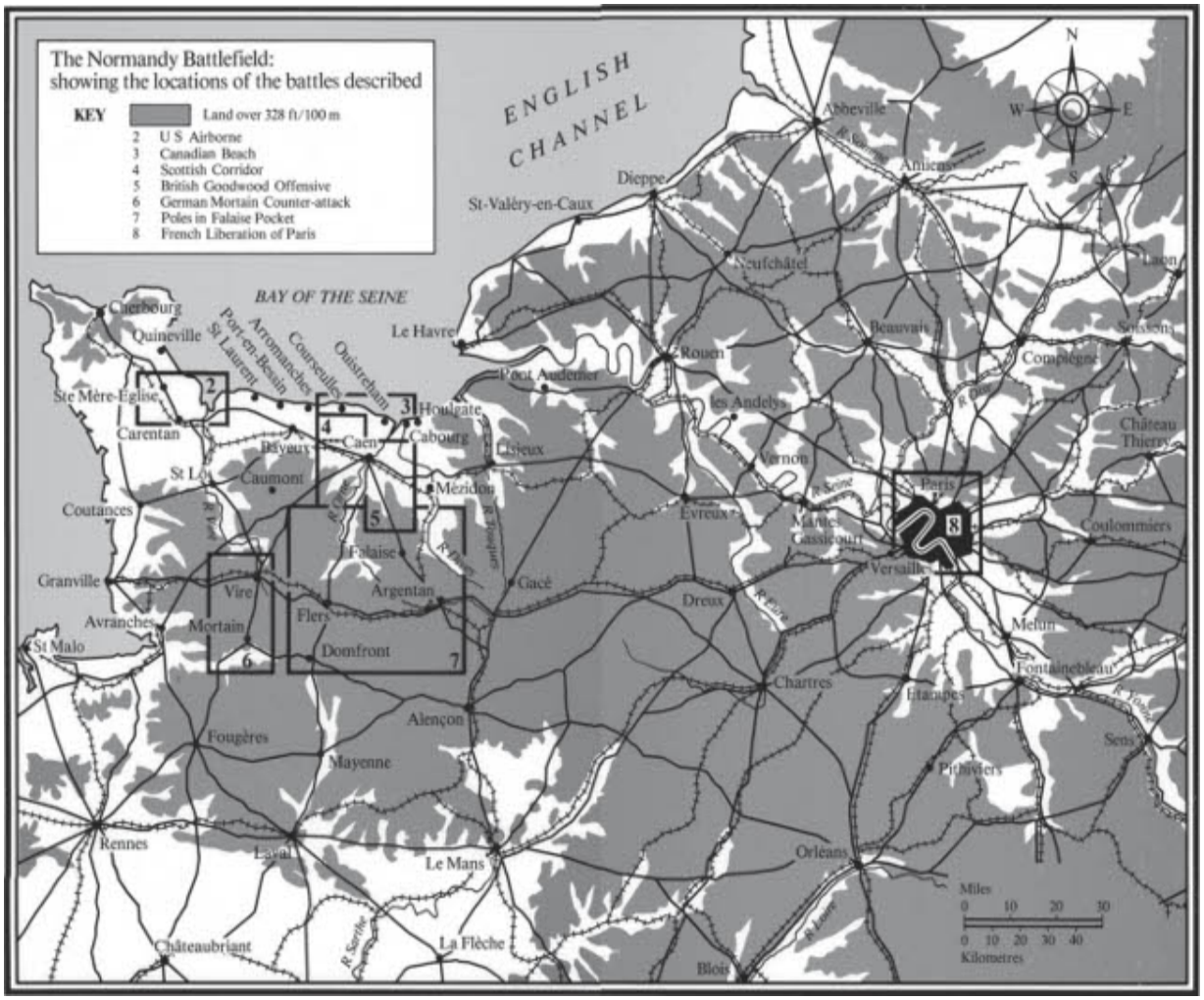
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showing the locations of the battles described
KEY
Land over 328 ft/100 m
2 U S Airborne
3 Canadian Beach
4 Scottish Corridor
5 British Goodwood Offensive
6 German Mortain Counter-attack
7 Poles in Falaise Pocket
8 French Liberation of Paris
ENGLISH CHANNEL
BAY OF THE SEINE
N
S
W
E
Abbeville
Amiens
Dieppe
St-Valéry-en-Caux
Neufchâtel
Laon
Cherbourg
Quineville
Port-en-Bessin
St Laurent
Arromanches
Courseulles
Ouistreham
Le Havre
Rouen
Beauvais
Soissons
Compiègne
Pont Audemer
Houlgate
Ste Mère-Eglise
Carentan
Caen
Cabourg
Les Andelys
Château Thierry
Bayeux
Lisieux
Vernon
St Lô
Caumont
Mézidon
Paris
Coutances
Evreux
Coulommiers
Falaise
Granville
Vire
Argentan
Gacé
Versailles
Dreux
Avranches
Mortain
Flers
Melun
St Malo
Domfront
Fontainebleau
Chartres
Etampes
Alençon
Fougères
Mayenne
Sens
Pithiviers
Rennes
Laval
Le Mans
Orléans
Châteaubriant
La Flèche
Blois
Miles
0 10 20 30
0 10 20 30 40
Kilometres

To my mother in thanks for a happy wartime childhood

SIX ARMIES IN NORMANDY

From D-Day to the Liberation of Paris
June 6th–August 25th, 1944

JOHN KEEGAN

PIMLICO

Foreword

Five years ago, in a book I called *The Face of Battle*, I set out to explore the predicament of the individual on the battlefield. Though a practising military historian, and the colleague in my academic life of professional soldiers, I had no understanding of the risks which the warrior faced in his encounter with his enemy, or of the means he found to quell his terrors and master himself at the 'point of maximum danger'. What I discovered, however near to the truth it was, surprised me. I learnt of the universality of fear, of the operation of inducements and coercion in its conquest but, above all, of the importance of male honour, as judged by a man's immediate comrades, in sustaining the soldier's resolution.

But, despite my concentration on the individual and the small group, I was also drawn to a recognition of the peculiar nature of the larger body to which both belong, the army itself. Armies are universal institutions which, in the dimension of purpose and authority, closely resemble each other. Yet each is also a mirror of its own society and its values: in some places and at some times an agent of national pride or a bulwark against national fears, or perhaps even the last symbol of the nation itself; elsewhere and otherwise an instrument of national power deprecated, disregarded and of very last resort. It seemed to me worth finding some episode through which the varying status of

national armies might be exemplified. And in the Normandy campaign of 1944 I believed that I had stumbled upon it. I knew the battlefield well. I had long been struck by the very different motives inspiring the armies which action conjoined there. And, over the years, I had become familiar with the wealth of corporate history and personal reminiscence which the campaign has thrown up. What follows is therefore another attempt to understand, from a different angle of vision, the role which warfare and its institutions play in social life.


Map 1 The German order of battle in the west, June 6th, 1944
KEY
OB WEST GHQ
Army Group
Army
Boundaries
Army Group
Army
Infantry Division
Panzer Division
Parachute Division
Boundary of OB West
NORTH SEA
ENGLISH CHANNEL
BAY OF BISCAY
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
London
R Thames
Southampton
Portsmouth
Dover
Plymouth
Calais
Boulogne
Cherbourg
Channel Islands
Le Havre
Dieppe
R Somme
Amiens
R Scheldt
Antwerp
Brussels
Tourcoing
Liège
Cologne
R Rhine
Luxembourg
FIFTEENTH ARMY
Rouen
Reims
Strasbourg
REPLACEMENT ARMY
PANZER GROUP WEST
Paris
R Seine
St Malo
Caen
St Lô
SEVENTH ARMY
Rennes
Le Mans
Lorient
St Nazaire
Nantes
Orleans
R Loire
ARMY GROUP B
ARMY GROUP G
Berne
Poitiers
FIRST ARMY
Vichy
Geneva
Lyons
OB SOUTH
Bordeaux
R Rhône
R Garonne
Toulouse
Avignon
NINETEENTH ARMY
Marseilles
Bayonne
Miles
0 50 100
0 80 160
Kilometres

PROLOGUE

In the Invasion Area

I HAD A good war. It is not a phrase to be written, still less spoken, with any complacency, breathed as it has been on clouds of *bonhomie* in saloon bars from one end of the Home Counties to the other during the last thirty years. But in my case it is accurate none the less: the good war not of a near-warrior at the safe end of one of the sunnier theatres of operations, but of a small boy whisked from London at the first wail of the sirens to a green and remote corner of the west of England and kept there until the echo of the last shot fired was drowned in the sighs of the world's relief in August 1945.

I was not, unlike so many other children swept from harm's way in September 1939, an evacuee. On the contrary – and it was this which did so much to make my war good – I was transplanted in an intact family from one reassuring fireside to another, with nothing but the excitement of the journey and new surroundings to mark the change. It was the evacuation programme, none the less, which took me to the West Country, for my father's war work was to help administer it. An Inspector of Schools, he had in the years before the war supervised teaching in one of the most densely populated districts of

south London, deemed by the government after the scare of Munich to be one of the likeliest targets for German air attack. Its schools had therefore been among the first directed to disperse their pupils to the countryside, and for the first week of the war he had shuffled manila-labelled children, teachers, burst suitcases and mislaid gas-masks between the platforms of Paddington station and seen them off westward to their billeting areas. At the end of it he followed the last train he had filled, too exhausted to be moved by the pathos of this extraordinary diaspora, to rejoin his wife and family, sent ahead to set up temporary home on the outskirts of the county town where he was to have his office. For the rest of the autumn we saw little of him. His days were taken with settling schools, half-schools, fractions of schools into church halls and village institutes the length of the Quantocks and Mendips and coaxing children and teachers back into the routine of the time-table. Meanwhile my mother, losing patience with the gimcrack villa to which long-distance arrangements had brought us, found a pretty white Regency cottage in the fields beyond the town, into which she settled her three children and their nursemaid, a kindly middle-aged soul in an advanced but harmless stage of religious mania, for the winter. By Christmas my father's daily round had slowed to the pace of our own, and there, for the next five years, our share of the war stopped.

Petrol rationing had already brought silence to the high road which ran beyond our front garden wall, broken only by the buzz of the infrequent rural bus, the roar of a very rare tractor passing from one field to another and the clatter of hooves of ponies seeking to escape the whiphand of an intimidating breed of leather-faced landed ladies, whom the war had put back into governess carts long cobwebbed and forgotten. My father, categorized as an essential user, retained his car and set off each morning, exactly as he had done days without number in London

before the war, to call on headmasters and headmistresses, monitor standards of reading among eight-year-olds, cast an eye on probationary teachers, discuss leaving certificates with their seniors and in general uphold the austere but uplifting ideal of standard and compulsory education for all which inspectors of schools had represented since Matthew Arnold's appointment to the first inspectorship a hundred years before. I often accompanied him, my private-school holidays overlapping the terms of the state schools in his care, an anomaly to which at the age of six or seven I gave no thought at all. Thus I began my discovery of the secret world of the English countryside – in 1940 literally secret, for among the flurry of anti-invasion directives issued after the fall of France was one ordering the uprooting of all rural signposts. Whatever twist that measure might have given to the wanderings of vagabond German parachutists, it had the effect of taking the two of us down every other wrong turning which offered itself. These false starts were corrected only by random knocking at the doors of remote cottages inevitably occupied by crones who regarded all strangers as foreigners, and so to be denied any but the most misleading information, or by shouted conversations with ploughmen following their horses in the middle distance of fields too muddy to enter. Staple Fitzpaine, Curry Rivel, Curry Mallet, Isle Abbotts, Isle Brewers, Hatch Beauchamp, Thornfalcon, Buckland St Mary, Combe St Nicholas: how slowly and circuitously did my father's car learn to pick its way from one hidden place to another through a countryside as silent and empty as it had been before the coming of the railways.

As I grew a little and learnt to bicycle, these expeditions became my own, no doubt of short range but in memory of immense extent, excitement and mystery. The war having taken the young men from the farms, and forced their employers to concentrate on essentials, hedges and

roadside trees grew unchecked from one springtime to the next, turning every lane in summer into a green tunnel, waist-deep at the verge with campion and cow-parsley, and trellised overhead at harvest with the yellow of corn stalks scraped from the tops of wagons bringing grain to the threshing machines. Near by the tunnels led to farms from where eggs, pots of cream and sometimes an unplucked chicken found their way, in the teeth of all rationing regulations, on to neighbours' tables, our own included; farms where there were ricks to be scaled, pigs poked, rats chased, cats followed to their litters of kittens in high, hot, dusty haylofts, and sheds filled with obsolete horsedrawn machinery to be examined, with much squeaking of rusty levers and squealing of long-frozen gears.

Farther away the tunnels led to stranger destinations, to secret lakes in overgrown woods where swans rose screaming from their nests with a flap of wings which we children believed, with the force of gospel truth, could break a man's arm at a single blow; to small waterfalls tinkling bright in the gloom of stream-cut grottoes under bridges at the turn of an oak-hung road; to short-tufted upland sheep runs where we improvised picnics in the wheeled, hump-backed sheds in which shepherds lambed their ewes; to an isolated crossroad forge, dark as midnight within even at high summer and pungent with the smoke of hooves burning under red-hot iron – I was seeing the last days, know it though I could not, of a thousand years of heavy-horse farming. In summer the horses came to the fields behind our house and we rode beside their drivers on machines seemingly no different from the cast-offs discovered in our exploration of the neighbouring out-houses, waiting for the word to lift the blades on the turn and leave the long swathe of mown grass to lie like a broken wave on the stubble behind; a day or two of sun took us out again with pitchforks to turn the drying crop and then, mounted behind a horse rake, to gather the drift

into lines, watch it pitched on to wagons and, last of all, brought to the stacks for thatching against the storms of winter.

And yet I remember no wartime winter. The German Sixth Army froze in its filthy, iron-hard foxholes at Stalingrad; I pined for snow on a bright Christmas Eve and thought myself cheated when the morrow brought not a flake. The PQ convoys skirted the edge of the pack on the north Russia run, shrinking by every mile of sea room they could find from the basilisk eye of the Luftwaffe; I scouted the hedge-bottoms for a ditchful of bearing ice and came home with wet socks. The Hunger Winter of 1944 sent Dutch families to scratch for overlooked potatoes in the twice-dug earth of north Holland; I cracked hazelnuts in the November sun on Sunday afternoon walks with my father and returned to hot treacle flapjack by the kitchen fire. Perhaps there were other corners of war-enwrapped Europe where children lived as well-fed, warm and carefree as us. But I wonder if any retain, as I do, a memory of six years so consistently illuminated by sunlight, so deeply suffused by happiness, so utterly unmenaced by danger? Today conscience attacks memory with accusations of involuntary guilt at what I was spared. But at the time it was simply as if the war was not.

Chance decreed that I had no close relatives of an age to serve in the armed forces; nor apparently had any of the families who lived round about. Our nearest neighbour with military connections was a long-retired colonel of Indian Mountain Artillery, venerated by me for his gift of a patent field-sketching pencil presented to him on his relinquishing command of a screw-gun battery at Aden in 1903. His incomprehension of current military realities was as total as my own. Locality ensured that not a bomb fell within thirty miles of our retreat; on one thrilling night of, inevitably false, alarm, we were taken in our pyjamas to sit in the cellar of the large house across the way, and on

another my parents stood in the garden for an hour after the nine o'clock news to watch the glow of Bristol burning beyond the horizon. But on neither night, nor on any other, did we hear as much as the engine-note of an errant German bomber. Parental protectiveness shielded us entirely from disturbing facts or rumours. My father, who had spent what I now realize to have been two horrible years on the Western Front in 1917–18, was nightly badgered by my sister and me for stories of what he had done in the 'First War', as he called it; but the world of active service he conjured up was all friendships, horses and rest from the trenches in billets as warm and secure as the darkened bedroom in which we prompted him down his train of entrancing, evasive memories. Habits of rural independence and self-sufficiency spared us any real want; in a countryside of mixed farming cultivated by yeoman tenants as close-fisted in their dealings with the War Agricultural Committees as they had always been with landlords, there was inevitably a tithe of produce which escaped the official collection, circulating by barter, payment in kind or down-to-earth cash from larder to larder within the parish, The only deprivations I therefore suffered were entirely psychological and largely formed by reading. I yearned in particular for the company of Roger, Susan, Nancy and the rest of Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* children, whose Lakeland life seemed so enviably and eventfully different from ours but which, save for the absence of a dinghy and a stretch of navigable water, I now recognize mine must have closely resembled.

And yet, in this unruffled pool of peace, the war entirely possessed me. I walked to school each morning – a walk along paths I again recall permanently dappled by sunshine, against which we wore curious regulation grey flannel hats apparently inspired by E. H. Shepard's drawings of Christopher Robin – in the pleasant confidence that between arithmetic and Latin there would be half an

hour of commando raids behind the football hut, or hard-driven bargains in Dinky Toy models of Blenheims and Hurricanes, or detailed technical discussions of the Lee-Enfield and its laughingly obvious superiority to the Mauser and the Mannlicher-Carcano which, as the possessor of a small brown linen-covered manual of small arms, I knew to be the contemptible equipment of the Italian army. I also possessed an out-of-date edition of Jane's *Fighting Ships*, which I had read even more often than *Swallows and Amazons*, a complete set of Ministry of Information pamphlets on the war effort (*Combined Operations, Bomber Command* and the rest, now collectors' pieces and still a model of what sensible propaganda can achieve), and a file of articles on military subjects torn from *Picture Post*, including a particularly informative one on the Red Army. This last provoked my father, who held unchangingly to the view that we had declared war in solidarity with Poland and could not forgive Stalin for partitioning it with Hitler, to contemptuous snorts.

As a result of this diet of print, I can still recite the characteristics of most models of British equipment from the earlier half of the war with as little effort as the two-times table – Supermarine Spitfire Mark II, top speed 365 miles per hour, service ceiling 35,000 feet, armament eight ·303 Browning machine-guns, HMS *Norfolk*, six 8-inch guns, 10,000 tons displacement, 33 knots – and instantaneously recreate their silhouettes without the need to shut my eyes. It is only the earlier models with which I have this trick; later and improved types, like the Typhoon fighter-bomber or the Dido-class cruisers, interested me but failed to imprint themselves in the same way. Perhaps this was because they lacked the very striking grace of the designs conceived in the interwar years, when aesthetics could stake a claim beside mere lethality, but chiefly because, I conclude on reflection, of the fixed conviction I had formed as soon as my consciousness grasped the issues

– and which therefore made improvements in equipment quite irrelevant – that *Britain was going to win the war*. But that formula does not convey the strength of my conviction strongly enough. It was rather the case that I knew, with an unshakeable moral and intellectual certainty, that Britain *could not lose*. So powerful was this sensation that my feelings towards Hitler, a figure whom the newspapers rarely let one forget and who was represented by every medium of public information as a mixture of monster and leper, were those of protective indulgence. If only, I used to muse, I could get him to myself for a moment or two, talk things over, put the facts straight, open his eyes, he'd have to see that there was no point in going on, that it would be better to chuck the towel in at once and ask to be let off. The sense of silent and unconsummated communion with the Führer had the parallel effect of compromising and devaluing for me all official efforts to put heart into an anxious and uncertain people to which the British were subjected during the war years. My disapproval was particularly aroused by a National Savings Committee poster, displayed month after month over the ping-pong table in one of my prep-school day-rooms, which showed an exaggeratedly aggressive lion snarling into mid-distance over the caption *The Spirit of 1943*. I thought it tastelessly overstated as an expression of the national spirit, which I was certain the artist, had he only made the right inquiries, would have found as sublimely confident of ultimate victory as my own.

My conviction had its roots, I now diagnose, in two circumstances. The first was my sense of place at the centre of an enormous empire, Not only did our school atlas show its extent in red ('Couldn't Hitler see …?') and not only did we know that Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Indians were back here, as they had been in the First World War, to take their place at our side, but, in my class of eight-year-olds, the life of the

empire was actually an immanent presence. One classmate's father was the squadron leader who held the record for long-distance flying between Britain and Australia, another's a district commissioner in West Africa, while the boy with whom I shared a desk was the son of a soldier commanding a brigade on the North-West Frontier of India, standing where Pakistan, a country not yet invented, and Afghanistan, then totally disregarded, now meet. By not one flicker of prescience was it suggested to us that within five years India, the jewel in the crown of empire, would have fallen away and within twenty all but the smallest seed pearls would have followed. The very scale of the empire was a guarantee to us of its unshakeable permanence.

That quality determined the second reason for my confidence in the war's outcome. It was clearly the reassuring stability and solidity of Britain's imperial power which had brought all those other people, unlucky enough to live outside its boundaries, to join us also. If you counted them all in, Chinese and Russians and Norwegian and Dutch and Free French and the bits of empire (not, of course, to be spoken of in the same breath as our own) which some of them owned, you found that almost everyone was against Hitler. ('Couldn't he see …?')

Moreover, these co-belligerents were not propaganda figments, like the overdone lion in the day-room. Their representatives, wearing British uniform differentiated by cloth shoulder patches which read 'Netherlands' or 'Free French' or 'Belgium', were here in Britain among us and could occasionally be seen walking the streets of the county town. Religion assured that I should meet a disproportionate number in the flesh, for ours was a Catholic family and the local church, a very solitary beacon of the faith in the deeply Protestant west, was a natural haven for uprooted and lonely fellow-believers. There were some oddities and mistakes among the acquaintance

Sundays brought us. My father formed an inexplicable affection for a community of conscientious objectors, bearded men and sandalled women otherwise largely clad in untanned sheepskins, who had one day confronted our austerely orthodox parish priest – a man I held in considerable awe for his ability to transfer himself from the ground to the seat of the monumentally upright bicycle on which he paid his parish calls by a process akin to levitation – with a request to be 'received' *en masse*. Many subsequent afternoons were consequently spent at their settlement, a handsome Georgian mansion tepidly vandalized by their occupation, where my father carried on high-minded conversation across the tea-table and I avoided as far as possible the copious offerings of unrefined peanut butter on which the community appeared principally to subsist. Less innocuous was another of his church-door adoptees, an Italian prisoner-of-war paroled to a local farmer. Swarthy and almost dwarfish, he was, I suppose, a Sicilian or Calabrian peasant boy for whom the Duce's call to live dangerously can never have sounded very loud, if indeed it had meant anything at all in whatever southern dialect he spoke. He had none the less learnt a sort of English and on his first, only and never-again-to-be-mentioned visit he subjected my parents to a lengthy description of what they eventually grasped to be his single-handed massacre of a platoon of Australians in the Western Desert. This wholly incredible tale lapsed into a deepeningly distasteful pantomime of hand-to-hand combat, from which my father took refuge in a hasty armchair nap while my mother sat the fable out in frozen politeness to its loathsome end. Christian charity did not extend to a second invitation.

Other military transients were more warmly welcomed, the Slavs in particular. I can still recreate the slightly stable-like odour left in the car by a Czech soldier, given a lift on a rainy day, and though it offended me at the time it

was, I now realize, simply a soldier's smell, compounded of infrequent baths and shoddy khaki. It clearly repelled my father, who must have recognized it from the trenches, not at all. He and his hitch-hiker passed an agreeable twenty miles in companionable deprecation of the small miseries of military life. But his regard for the Czechs, whom he illogically associated with Chamberlain's appeasement policy, took second place to what he felt for the Poles. They were peerless: Catholic, high-spirited, heroes of the Battle of Britain, undaunted by exile, they satisfied every one of his exacting tests of warriordom, and he sought out their company whenever he could find it. 'Always glad to help a Pole' invariably concluded the street directions he offered them, answers to questions stumbled out often so haltingly that it was clear even to me that the sentiment was quite lost on the hearers (though not perhaps the good will).

The arrival of a Polish squadron at a near-by airfield allowed ampler scope to his Slavophilia; thither his car developed a habit of calling on its roundabout journey from one refugee school to another, to wait outside the mess while within he imbibed hospitality and far-fetched dog-fighting stories with indiscriminate pleasure. My harder-headed mother was less susceptible to Polish charm. It was the chance appearance of peacetime friends, transformed by khaki and the open air into bronzed and gallant cavaliers, which brought out the girlishness in her, sent her tripping to conjure up cream teas and bottles of sherry from cupboards which should have been bare, and tempted her to listen to talk laced with the shorthand of wartime English – 'Gib' and 'Alex' and 'the Med' – without for once any of that impatience I sensed she otherwise felt for a world suddenly, self-importantly and sadistically masculinized.

I too was entranced by these incursions, for our visitors brought with them the flavour of the 'real' army, quite different from that of the few, drab, static units which

populated our operational backwater. The county town, true, was the depot of an ancient regiment of the line, the lintel of whose castellated Victorian gatehouse bore the deeply incised name of a Kiplingesque North-West Frontier siege; but the guard at the gate was mounted by pensioners. Convalescents in unbecoming bright-blue flannel suits occasionally found their way from a local hospital on to the benches of the municipal park. And though a unit of the Royal Artillery was billeted in one of the larger houses in the town, it was equipped only with searchlights. I knew that elsewhere the military scene must be more glamorous, for I had a small book which depicted the badge of every regiment of the army underneath a picture of the coloured side-cap proper to each: green and yellow for the Inniskilling Dragoon Guards; cherry red for the 11th Hussars; scarlet for the 12th Lancers; purple and navy for the Essex Regiment; black and grey for the Leicesters; maroon and black for the East Yorkshires; yellow, blue and Lincoln green for the Sherwood Foresters. I searched the horizons for this brilliant millinery. In vain: the only soldiers I saw wore khaki from top to toe, khaki so ill-cut, shapeless and hairy that I could find almost nothing in its wearers to admire. ‘Battledress’ was the official description of the outfit; but it was not thus clad, I knew, that Wellington’s infantry had stood in square to receive the charge of Napoleon’s Cuirassiers at Waterloo.

The ‘real’ army, of course, was elsewhere, capturing, if the propaganda photographs were anything to go by, Italians by the acre in the Western Desert. Term by term the boys at the top of the senior school left to join it – less often the navy or the air force – news of their service occasionally percolating back to us, commissionings, decorations, sometimes a death in action. I had known them too little to be touched. The only death which at all punctured my cocoon of serenity was that of a stupid, jolly sixth-former, who, the masters despairing of his passing

exams, had been allowed to spend his last term learning to manage a pipe and a shotgun, equipped with which he had become a familiar sight under the rookery which swayed in the tops of the gigantic elms below the cricket field. Almost as soon as he left, it seemed, he was reported killed in the Sicily landings, a private soldier, not quite eighteen years old. By then, as I can now date it, the army had left North Africa and begun the invasion of Italy. But still there was no sign of the soldiers who, failing the arrangement of my *tête-à-tête* with Hitler, were going to bring the war to an end. There were hints of their existence. Once a glittering battery of 25-pounders came to the school to give a demonstration of firepower, to such effect that the shock of their first salvo almost dislodged me from the walnut tree in which I had established a vantage point, my neck-saving clutch at a branch sending a cascade of ripe nuts to patter a muffled answer to the echo of their thunder on the soft turf below. On another afternoon a squad of Herculean young commandos, training for some amphibious derring-do, came tumbling over our garden wall in flight from the 'enemy' and took refuge among the fruit trees and vegetables. Their heavy breathing and wordlessly transmitted wish that I should stop staring so pointedly at their hiding place and play elsewhere remained to thrill and disturb me long after the crash of their departure through the strip of adjoining woodland had died behind them. But thrills and disturbances by anything resembling a genuine menace to the Germans were so few and irregular that, had I not been possessed by my unreasoning certainty in victory, I might, with a little reflection, have allowed myself to question during 1942 and 1943 how it was ever going to be won.

And then, suddenly, there were the Americans. There had been portents of their coming, in particular the appearance of a US Office of War Information booklet, snapped up by me from a town bookstall, on the Eighth US

Army Air Force (USAAF), filled with photographs of the construction of the airfields from which it was to begin its bombing campaign over Europe, and containing a cut-away drawing of the Flying Fortress, for which, through counting the enormous number of machine-guns it mounted, I quickly formed almost as strong a regard as I already had for the Spitfire. There had been outriders, a scattering of officers in the unfamiliar rig of olive jacket and beige trousers – 'pinks and greens', as I subsequently learnt veterans nostalgically describe it – whom I used to see walking home on warm sunlit evenings to the lodgings which had been found for them on the outskirts of the town. On one of these, astounding myself by my forwardness and in flagrant violation of family rules, I tried the formula, which I knew to be in universal circulation, 'Got any gum, chum?' and was rewarded by an embarrassed halt – my embarrassment was altogether greater – a rummaging in pockets and the presentation of a packet of Spearmint. As it happened, I did not like chewing gum. But the superiority of the American over the British product, and particularly the sumptuousness of the wrapper and the lustrous simplicity of its design, instantly and deeply impressed me. Much of that evening, which would normally have been spent reading at a gap illicitly opened in my bedroom curtains, I devoted to a study of its elements, struggling in an increasingly trancelike state to draw from its symbolism the message which I sensed the designer sought to convey. Thus I made my first encounter with the science of semeiotics; but also with the bottomless riches of the American economy.

They were shortly to be made manifest in super-abundance. Towards the end of 1943 our backwater, which British soldiers had garrisoned so sparsely for four years, overflowed almost overnight with GIs. How different they looked from our own jumble-sale champions, beautifully clothed in smooth khaki, as fine in cut and quality as a

British officer's – an American private, we confided to each other at school, was paid as much as a British captain, major, colonel – and armed with glistening, modern, automatic weapons, Thompson sub-machine-guns, Winchester carbines, Garand self-loading rifles. More striking still were the number, size and elegance of the vehicles in which they paraded about the countryside in stately convoy. The British army's transport was a sad collection of underpowered makeshifts, whose dun paint flaked from their tinpot bodywork. The Americans travelled in magnificent, gleaming, olive-green, pressed-steel, four-wheel-drive juggernauts, decked with what car salesmen would call optional extras of a sort never seen on their domestic equivalents – deep-treaded spare tyres, winches, towing cables, fire-extinguishers. There were towering GMC six-by-sixes, compact and powerful Dodge four-by-fours and, pilot fishing the rest or buzzing nimbly about the lanes on independent errands like the beach buggies of an era still thirty years ahead, tiny and entrancing jeeps, caparisoned with whiplash aerials and sketchy canvas hoods which drummed with the rhythm of a cowboy's saddlebags rising and falling to the canter of his horse across the prairie. Standing one day at the roadside, dismounted from my bicycle to let one such convoy by, I was assaulted from the back of each truck as it passed by a volley of small missiles, which fell into the ditch beside me with the same soft patter I had provoked under my grandstand at the artillery display. But when I burrowed in the dead leaves to discover the cause I unearthed not walnuts but a little treasure of Hershey bars, Chelsea candy and Jack Frost sugar-cubes, a week's, perhaps a month's ration, of sweet things casually disbursed in a few seconds. There was, I reflected as I crammed the spoil into my pockets, something going on in the west of England about which Hitler should be very worried indeed.