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Opening Extract from...

Darkest Hour

Written by James Holland

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DARKEST HOUR

JAMES HOLLAND



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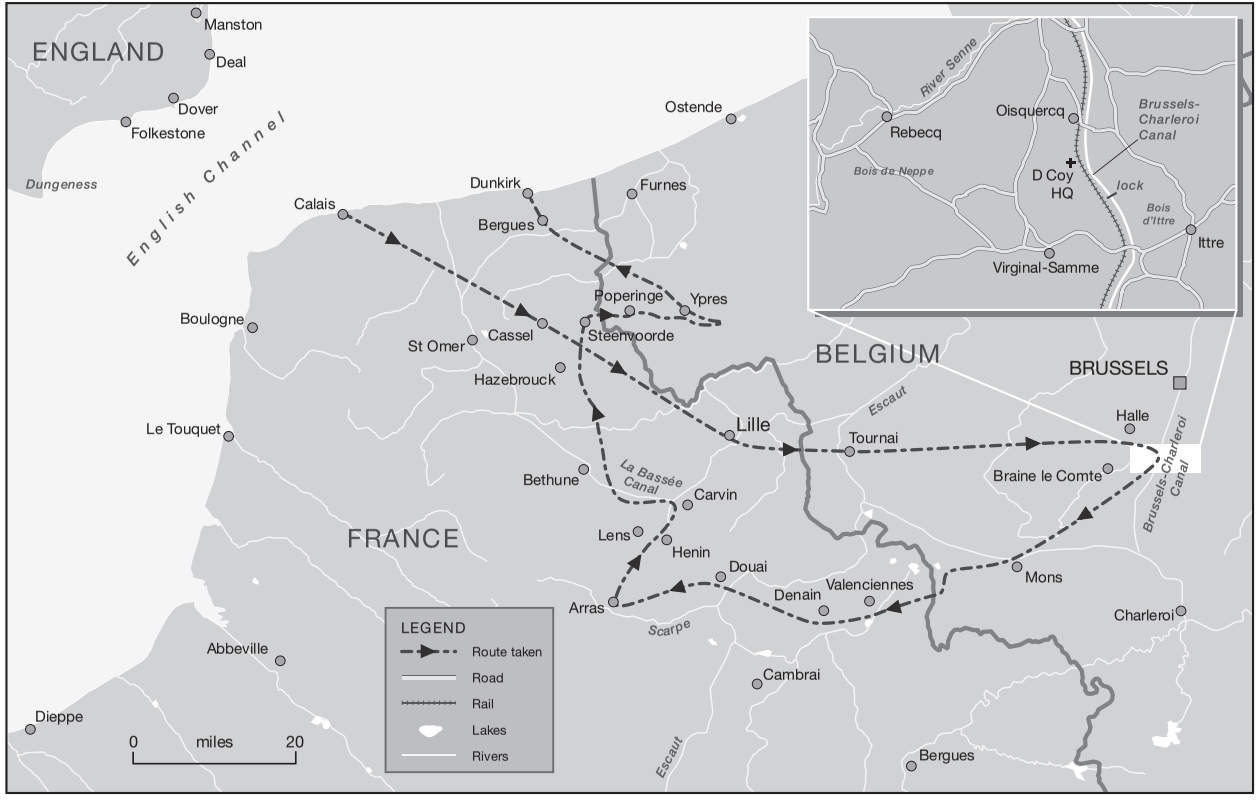
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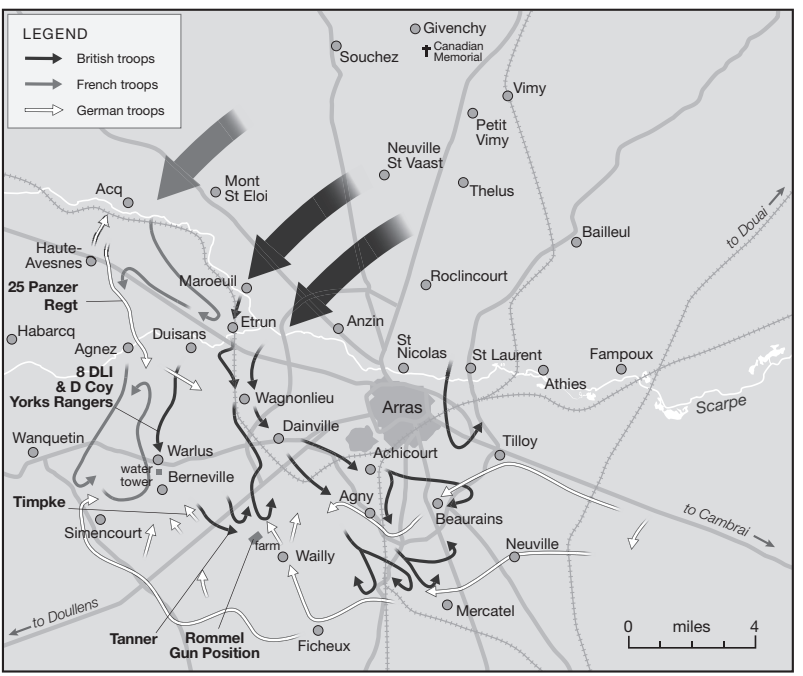
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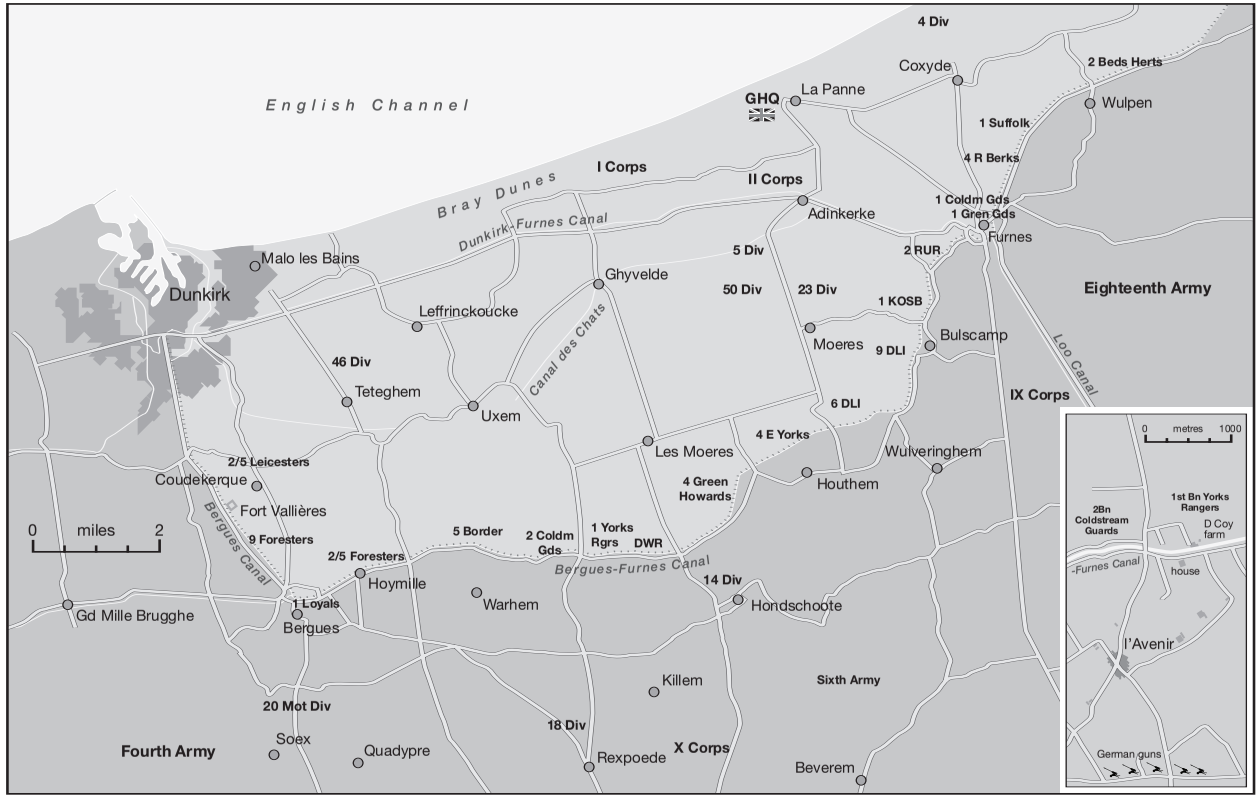
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ENGLAND
Manston
Deal
Dover
Folkestone
Dungeness
English Channel
Calais
Boulogne
Le Touquet
Abbeville
Dieppe
Dunkirk
Bergues
Furnes
Ostende
Poperinge
Ypres
Cassel
Steenvoorde
St Omer
Hazebrouck
Lille
Bethune
La Bassée Canal
Carvin
Lens
Henin
Douai
Arras
Scarpe
Denain
Valenciennes
Cambrai
Escaut
Bergues
FRANCE
BELGIUM
BRUSSELS
Escaut
Tournai
Halle
Braine le Comte
Brussels-Charleroi Canal
Mons
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LEGEND
British troops
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Givenchy
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Vimy
Petit Vimy
Neuville St Vaast
Thelus
Mont St Eloi
Acq
Bailleul
to Doual
Haute-Avesnes
25 Panzer Regt
Maroeuil
Roclincourt
Etrun
Anzin
Habarcq
Agnez
Duisans
St Nicolas
St Laurent
Fampoux
Athies
8 DLI & D Coy Yorks Rangers
Wagnonlieu
Arras
Scarpe
Dainville
Wanquetin
Warlus
Achicourt
Tilloy
water tower
Berneville
Timpke
Agny
Beaurains
to Cambrai
Simencourt
farm
Wailly
Neuville
Mercatel
to Doullens
Tanner
Rommel Gun Position
Ficheux
0 miles 4


English Channel
Bray Dunes
Dunkirk-Furnes Canal
Dunkirk
Malo les Bains
Leffrinckoucke
Ghyvelde
Canal des Chats
Teteghem
Uxem
Coudekerque
Fort Vallières
Bergues Canal
0 miles 2
Gd Mille Brugghe
Bergues
Hoymille
Warhem
Bergues-Furnes Canal
Les Moeres
Houthem
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Adinkerke
La Panne
GHQ
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Furnes
Moeres
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Eighteenth Army
IX Corps
Sixth Army
Fourth Army
X Corps
I Corps
II Corps
4 Div
2 Beds Herts
1 Suffolk
4 R Berks
1 Coldm Gds
1 Gren Gds
2 RUR
5 Div
50 Div
23 Div
1 KOSB
9 DLI
6 DLI
4 E Yorks
4 Green Howards
46 Div
2/5 Leicesters
9 Foresters
2/5 Foresters
5 Border
2 Coldm Gds
1 Yorks Rgrs
DWR
14 Div
1 Loyals
20 Mot Div
Soex
Quadypre
18 Div
Rexpoede
Killem
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Hondschoote
0 metres 1000
2Bn Coldstream Guards
1st Bn Yorks Rangers
D Coy farm
house
l'Avenir
German guns

1

A little after half past ten in the morning, Thursday, 9 May 1940. Already it was warm, with blue skies and large white cumulus clouds; a perfect early summer's day, in fact. It was also quite warm inside the tight confines of the Hurricane's cockpit, even fifteen thousand feet above the English Channel, and Squadron Leader Charlie Lyell was wishing he hadn't worn his thick sheepskin Irvin over his RAF tunic but the air had seemed fresh and crisp when he'd walked across the dew-sodden grass to his plane just over half an hour before. Now, as he led his flight of three in a wide arc to begin the return leg of their patrol line, the sun gleamed through the Perspex of his canopy, hot on his head. A line of sweat ran from his left temple and under the elastic at the edge of his flying goggles.

Nevertheless, it was the perfect day for flying, he thought. It was so clear that he could see for a hundred miles and more. As they completed the turn to head southwards again, there, stretching away from them, was

the mouth of the Medway, shipping heading towards and out of London. Southern England – Kent and Sussex – lay unfolded like a rug from his starboard side, a soft, green, undulating patchwork, while away to his port was the Pas de Calais and the immensity of France. Somewhere down there were the massed French armies and the lads of the British Expeditionary Force. He smiled to himself. *Rather you than me.*

Lyell glanced at his altimeter, fuel gauge and oil pressure. All fine, and still well over half a tank of fuel left. The air-speed indicator showed they were maintaining a steady 240 miles per hour cruising speed. He turned his head to check the skies were clear behind him, then back to see that Robson and Walker were still tight in either side of him, tucked in behind his wings. *Good.*

Suddenly something away to his right caught his eye – a flash of sunlight on metal – and at the same moment he heard Robson, on his starboard wing, exclaim through the VHF headset, 'Down there – look! Sorry, sir, I mean, this is Red Two, Bandit at two o'clock.'

'Yes, all right, Red Two,' said Lyell. He hoped he sounded calm, a hint of a reprimand in his voice, even though he was conscious that his heart had begun to race and his body had tensed. He peered down and – yes! – there it was, some five thousand feet below, he guessed, and perhaps a mile or so ahead. It was typical of Robson to assume it was an enemy plane – they all wanted the squadron's first kill – but the plain truth was that most aircraft buzzing around the English coast were British, not German. *Even so.*

'This is Red One,' he called, over the R/T. 'We'll close in.' At least the sun, already high, was behind them, shielding them as they investigated. Lyell pushed open

the throttle and watched the altimeter fall. His body was pressed back against the seat, and he tightened his hand involuntarily around the grip of the control column. A few seconds later and he could already see the aircraft ahead more clearly. It appeared to have twin tail fins but, then, so did a Whitley or a Hampden. The brightness was too great to distinguish the details of the paint scheme or symbols on the wings and fuselage.

Ahead loomed a huge tower of white cloud and together they shaved the edge of it, so that Lyell fleetingly lost sight of the plane before it appeared again and then, in a moment when it hung in the shadow of the cloud, he saw the unmistakable black crosses. His heart lurched. *Christ*, he thought, *this is bloody well it.*

Pushing open the throttle even wider, he closed in on what he could now see was a Dornier. It appeared not to have spottedthem yet, but as he was only around seven hundred yards behind and a thousand feet above, Lyell checked that Robson and Walker were still close to him before he said, 'Line astern – go!' Still the enemy plane continued on its way, oblivious to the danger behind it. Lyell turned his head to see Robson and Walker now directly behind him.

Taking a deep breath, he flicked the firing button to 'on' for the first time ever in a real combat situation, then said into his mouthpiece, 'Number One Attack – go!' Opening the throttle wide he dived down on the Dornier. As it grew bigger by the second, he pressed his thumb down hard on the gun button and felt the Hurricane judder as his eight machine-guns opened fire. Lines of tracer and wavy threads of smoke hurtled through the sky but, to his frustration, fell short of the enemy plane. Cursing, he pulled back on the stick, but

already he knew he had misjudged his attack. Seconds, that was all it had taken, but now the Dornier seemed to be filling his screen and he knew that if he did not take avoiding action immediately, they would collide. He pushed the stick to his left and the Hurricane flipped onto its side to scythe past the port wing of the Dornier, just as a rip of fire cut across him. He could hear machine-guns clattering, Robson and Walker shouting through the airwaves – all radio discipline gone – and saw tracer fizzing through the air, and then he was away, circling, climbing and scanning the skies, trying to pinpoint the enemy again.

Lyell swore, then heard a rasp of static and Robson's voice. 'Bastard's hit me!' he said.

'Are you all right, Red Two?' Lyell asked, peering about desperately for the Dornier and conscious that several enemy bullets had torn into his own fuselage.

'Yes, but my Hurri's not. I'm losing altitude.'

'I've got you, Robbo.' Walker this time.

Damn, *damn*, *damn*, thought Lyell, then spotted the Dornier again, a mile or so ahead, flying south-west once more. 'The bloody nerve,' he muttered. 'Red Two, turn straight back for Manston. Red Three, you guide him in.'

'What about you, sir?' asked Walker.

'I'm going after Jerry. Over.' *Damn him. Damn them all*, thought Lyell. He glanced at his instruments. Everything looked all right; the plane was still flying well enough – it was as though he had not been hit at all – but the fuel gauge showed he was less than half full now. It was a shock to see how much he had used in that brief burst of action. *Well, bollocks to him*, thought Lyell. He was damned if some Boche bomber was going to make a fool of him or his squadron. Applying an extra six pounds of

boost he climbed five hundred feet and turned towards the Dornier.

He was soon catching up and, making sure the sun was behind him again, waited until the German plane began to fill his gunsight. Then, at a little over four hundred yards, distance, he pressed down on the gun button. Again, the Hurricane juddered with the recoil and Lyell was jolted in his seat despite the tightness of his harness. Lines of tracer and smoke snaked ahead, but the bullets were dropping away beneath the Dornier. Lyell pulled back slightly on the stick and continued pressing hard on the gun button. His machine-guns blazed, and his tracer lines looked to be hitting the German plane perfectly, but still it flew on. It was as though his bullets were having no effect.

'Bloody die, will you?' muttered Lyell. Then tracer was curling towards him from the Dornier's rear-gunner, seeming slow at first, then accelerating past, whizzing across his port wing.

'For God's sake,' said Lyell, ducking his head.

Suddenly the Dornier wobbled, belched smoke, turned and dived out of Lyell's line of fire. 'Got you!' said Lyell, then pushed the stick to his left and followed the enemy down. Not far below and away from them there was a larger bank of cloud. So that was the enemy's plan – to hide. In moments, the Dornier was flitting between puffs of outlying cloud, all signs of black smoke gone, but Lyell was gaining rapidly, the Merlin engine screaming, the airframe shaking, as he hurtled towards the enemy and opened fire again.

Just as the lines of tracer began to converge on the German machine, Lyell's machine-guns stopped. For a moment, he couldn't understand it – could all eight really

have jammed? But then it dawned on him. He had used up his ammunition. Fifteen seconds' worth. Gone. More than two and a half thousand bullets pumped out and still that bloody Dornier was flying. Lyell cursed and watched the German disappear into the cloud. Following him in, he banked and turned reluctantly towards home, a strangely bright and creamy whiteness surrounding him, the airframe buffeted by the turbulence. Suddenly, it thinned, wisping either side of him and over his wings, and moments later he was out in bright sunshine, the Kent coast ahead. Trickles of sweat ran down his neck and from beneath his leather helmet, tickling his face.

He throttled back, lifted his goggles onto his forehead and rubbed his eyes. He felt sick, not from being thrown about the sky but from bitter disappointment. The squadron's first kill! It should have been his – a sitting duck if ever there was one. And yet, somehow, it had got away.

From the corner of his eye he noticed feathery lines of grey between the cockpit and the starboard wing. He glanced up at his mirror. It was filled by the enemy plane bearing down on him, pumping bullets, its ugly great Perspex nose horribly close.

Christ almighty, thought Lyell, momentarily stunned. Then something clicked in his brain. He remembered that a Hurricane could supposedly out-turn almost any aircraft and certainly a lumbering twin-engine Dornier. Jamming the Hurricane to its full throttle, he turned the stick, added a large amount of rudder and opened the emergency override to increase boost. The Hurricane seemed to jump forward with the dramatic increase in power. With the horizon split between sky, land and

sea, Lyell grimaced, his body pressed back into his seat.

In no more than half a circle, he could see he was not only getting away from the enemy but creeping up on the Dornier's rear. Again, the German rear-gunner opened fire. *Jesus*, thought Lyell. *How much ammunition do these people have?* The two aircraft were circling together now in a vertical bank. Lyell wondered how he would get away without the German rear-gunner hitting him, but a moment later the firing ceased. He pushed the stick to starboard, flipped over the Hurricane and reversed the turn, breaking free of the circle and heading out of the Dornier's range as he did so.

Although he was certain the enemy aircraft had neither the speed nor the agility to follow, Lyell glanced back to make sure the German pilot was not coming after him. The Dornier was banking away from the circle too, levelling out to return home. And as he straightened, he waggled his wings.

'Bloody nerve!' exclaimed Lyell. Was the enemy pilot saluting or sticking two fingers up at him? Either way, he had foxed three RAF fighter aircraft – out-thought, out-flown and out-gunned them.

About thirty miles away, a fifteen-hundredweight Bedford truck turned off the Ramsgate road that ran through Manston village, almost doubling back on itself as it entered the main camp at the airfield. The driver swore as he ground down through the gears, the truck spluttering, jerking and rumbling forward, past two hangars on the right, then towards several rows of one-storey wooden huts. He turned off the road, brought the truck to a halt and, letting the engine idle, said to the sergeant beside him, 'Hold on a minute. Let me find out

where they want you.' He jumped down from the cab, and strode to what appeared to be an office building.

Sergeant Jack Tanner stepped out and went round to the back of the truck. 'All right, boys?' he said, to the five men sitting in the canvas-covered back, then pulled out a packet of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his serge battle-blouse.

'It's certainly a nice day for it, Sarge,' said Corporal Sykes. 'Not bad up here, is it? I've always had a soft spot for Kent. Used to come as a boy.'

'Really?' said Tanner, flicking away his match.

' 'Op-pickin' in the summer. Quite enjoyed it.'

Tanner made no reply, instead turning to the open grassland of the airfield. A number of aircraft were standing in front of the hangars to their right, bulky twin-engined machines, their noses pointing towards the sky. Further away to his left, he saw several smaller, single-engine aircraft that he recognized as Hurricanes. A light breeze drifted across the field. Above, skylarks twittered busily.

'It's all right round here,' said one of the men, a young-looking lad called McAllister, 'but give me Yorkshire any day.'

'Nah,' said Sykes. 'It's always bloody raining up there. Every time I go to HQ it bloody pours. Half my kit's still damp. And the air's a lot cleaner here than it is in Leeds.' He breathed in deeply and sighed.

'I meant the Dales, Stan,' said McAllister. 'The Dales are grand, ain't that right, Tinker?' He nudged another of the men, a short, fair-haired boy.

'Don't know, really,' said Bell. 'I suppose. I like our farm well enough.'

Tanner smiled and took a drag of his cigarette. A faint

hum caught his attention and he looked back towards the coast. The sound grew louder and he stepped away from the truck, a hand to his forehead to shield his eyes as he looked up into the deep blue sky.

'Sarge?' said Sykes.

'Aircraft,' he said. 'Sounds like one in trouble.'

Immediately Sykes leaped down from the truck and onto the road beside Tanner. Together they scanned the skies.

'There,' said Tanner. Hepworth and McAllister were out of the truck now too. Two Hurricanes were approaching the north end of the airfield, one above and gliding effortlessly towards the grass strip, the other belching dark smoke, a grey trail following. The engine of the stricken aircraft groaned and thrummed irregularly, the airframe slewing and dipping, the port wing sagging.

The men watched in silence as the crippled plane cleared some buildings on the far side of the 'drome, dropped what seemed like fifty feet, recovered briefly, gave a last belch of smoke and crashed into the ground. The port wing hit the soft earth first, the undercarriage collapsing and the plane ploughing in an arc through the grass. Its propeller snapped and the fuselage buckled.

'Come on – get out, you stupid sod,' muttered Sykes. For a moment there was silence. Then the pilot heaved himself out of the cockpit, jumped onto the wing and sprinted away from the scene for all he was worth. He had not gone thirty yards when there was an explosion and the broken Hurricane was enveloped by a ball of angry orange flame and billowing black smoke. Tanner and the others flinched at the sound, saw the pilot fling himself flat on the ground then watched the fire-wagon,

bells ringing, speed out from the watch-tower and hurry to the scene.

'Look, 'e's getting up again,' said Sykes, who had taken it upon himself to be the commentator.

'Good lad,' said Tanner, as the other Hurricane touched down safely behind them.

The truck driver returned. 'One's still not back. The CO an' all. Station commander's not at all happy.' He clicked his teeth and indicated to them to get back aboard. 'You're just down here,' he added, as Tanner clambered into the cab beside him, 'the other side of the parade-ground.'

He took them to the last of a row of long wooden huts. 'Here,' he said, pulling up. 'Make yourselves at home. The CSM'll be along shortly.'

Tanner undid the tailgate, waited for his men to jump down, then grabbed his kitbag and rifle. Like all British rifles, it was a Short Magazine Lee-Enfield, a No. 1 Mark III model, and although the newer No. 4 version was now coming into use, Tanner had no intention of surrendering this personal weapon. The son of a gamekeeper from south Wiltshire, he had learned to shoot almost as soon as he could walk and with it had come the well-drummed-in lesson of looking after a gun, whether it was an air rifle, twelve bore, or Lee-Enfield rifle. But, more than that, Tanner had made an important modification to his.

He had done it almost as soon as he had returned to Regimental Headquarters in Leeds back in February after nearly eight years' overseas service. Having been issued with new kit, he had gone straight to the Royal Armoury where he had had a gunsmith mill and fit two mounts and pads for an Aldis telescopic sight. They were

discreet enough and few people had noticed – no one in authority, at any rate, not that he imagined they would say much about it even if they did. The scope had been his father's during the last war and Tanner had carried it with him throughout his army career. Although he had never attempted to become an army sniper, he had certainly sniped, and on several occasions the Aldis had proved a godsend. Slinging the rifle and his kitbag onto his shoulder, he followed the others into the hut.

Jack Tanner was twenty-four, although his weather-worn and slightly battered face made him appear a bit older. He was tall – more than six foot – with dark hair, pale, almost grey eyes and a nose that was slightly askew. He had spent almost his entire army career in India and the Middle East with the 2nd Battalion, the King's Own Yorkshire Rangers, even though he was a born and bred Wiltshireman. This last Christmas he had finally returned to England. Home leave, it had been called, not that he had had a home to return to any more. He had not seen the village where he had been brought up for over eight years. *A lifetime ago*. He wished he could return but that was not possible and so he had spent the time in Yorkshire instead, helping a gamekeepeer on an estate in the Dales; it had reminded him how much he missed that life. Four weeks later he had presented himself at Regimental Headquarters in Leeds and been told, to his dismay, that he would not be going back to Palestine. Instead he had been posted to bolster the fledgling Territorial 5th Battalion as they prepared for war. In Norway, the Territorials had been decimated; Tanner and his five men, along with a few others, were all that remained of the 5th Battalion. A fair number were dead,

but most were now either in German hospitals or on their way to a prison camp.

Tanner had hoped he might be allowed back to the 2nd Battalion now, but the regimental adjutant had had other ideas. The 1st Battalion was with the BEF in France; new recruits were being hurried through training and sent south to guard the coast. Men of his experience had an important part to play – all the veterans of Norway did. The 2nd Battalion would have to do without him for a while longer. Forty-eight hours' leave. That was all he and his men had had. The others had gone home, to their families in Leeds and Bradford, or in Bell's case to his family farm near Pateley Bridge, while Tanner and Sykes had got drunk for one day and recovered the next.

The hut was more than half empty. Just ten narrow Macdonald iron beds and palliasses were laid out along one wall, but otherwise it was bare. Tape had been criss-crossed over each window. Tanner slung his kitbag beside the bed nearest the door, then lay down and took out another cigarette.

'What are we supposed to do now, Sarge?' asked Hepworth.

'Put our feet up until someone tells us where we're to go,' Tanner replied. He lit his cigarette, then closed his eyes. He was conscious of another Hurricane landing – the engine sound was so distinctive. *Bloody airfield and coastal guard duty*, he thought. *Jesus*. He told himself to be thankful for it. They had escaped from Norway by the skin of their teeth so a soft job would do him and the others good. In any case, the war wasn't going to end any time soon, that much was clear. Their chance would come. Yet part of him yearned to rejoin his old mates in Palestine. For him, England was an alien place; he had spent too long overseas,

in the heat, dust and monsoon rains of India, and the arid desert of the Middle East. Before that he had only ever known one small part of England, and that was the village of Alvesdon and the valley of his childhood. He still missed it, even after all these years. Often, when he closed his eyes, he would remember the chalk ridges, the woods on the farm, the clear trout stream, the houses of thatch, cob and flint. But both his parents were gone, and dark events from his past ensured there could be no going back.

He sighed. Long ago, he had resigned himself to exile, but it still saddened him. That long train journey south from Leeds: too much time to think, to remember. Tanner chided himself silently. *No point in getting bloody maudlin*. What he needed was a distraction. Activity. It was, he realized, barely a week since they had returned from Norway yet already he felt as though he had been kicking his heels for too long.

Soon after, he dozed off, the others' chatter a soporific background noise that lulled him to sleep. He was awake again, however, the moment his subconscious brain heard a new voice in the hut – a distinctive one: a deep, yet soft Yorkshire accent that was strangely familiar.

'Morning, gents,' Tanner heard, followed by a squeak of springs and the clatter of boots on the wooden floor as the men stood quickly to attention. Tanner swung his legs off the bed.

'All right, lads,' said the newcomer. 'As you were.'

Tanner's eyes widened in shock. A big, stocky man of nearly his own height stood in the doorway. The bright sun behind cast his face in shadow, but Tanner would have known him anywhere. *Blackstone. Jesus*. He groaned inwardly. That was all he needed.

Blackstone stared at him, then winked and turned

back to the others. 'Welcome to Manston, lads,' he said, 'and to T Company of the First Battalion.' He had a lean face, with deep lines running across his brow and between his nose and mouth. He was in his mid-thirties, with thick sandy hair that showed beneath his field cap.

'I'm Company Sergeant-Major Blackstone,' he said. 'Captain Barclay is the officer commanding of this training company, but as far as you lot are concerned, I'm the one who runs the show. So if I were you I'd try to keep in my good books. It's better that way, isn't it, Sergeant? Then everything can be nice and harmonious.' He grinned at Tanner. 'Now,' he continued, 'I'm going to take Sergeant Tanner here away with me for a bit. Later on you'll meet your platoon commander and be shown about the place. For the moment, though, stay here and get your kit together. All right?' He smiled at them again, pointed the way to Tanner and said, 'See you later, boys.'

Outside, he said, 'Well, well, my old friend Jack Tanner. Fancy us ending up here like this.'

'Fancy,' muttered Tanner. 'You recovered, then.'

'Oh yes, Jack. You can't keep a good man like me down for long.' He chuckled. 'I'm taking you to see the OC.' He took out a packet of Woodbines and offered one to Tanner. 'Smoke?'

'No thanks, sir.'

'Don't tell me you've given up the beadies, Jack.'

'I just don't want one at the moment.'

'You mean you don't want one of mine.' Blackstone sighed. 'Jack, can't you tell I'm trying to be friendly? Come on – let's have no hard feelings. It was a long time ago now. Let bygones be bygones, eh?'

Tanner still said nothing. Blackstone stopped and

offered him his packet of cigarettes again. 'Come on, Jack. Have a smoke. Water under the bridge, eh?'

They were now at the parade-ground. A platoon of men was being drilled on the far side, the sergeant barking orders. Tanner looked at Blackstone, then at the packet of cigarettes being held out towards him. Briefly he considered taking one.

'Look here, Jack,' said Blackstone, 'we're at war now. We can't be at each other's throats.'

'Agreed,' said Tanner, 'but that doesn't mean I have to like you.'

The smile fell from Blackstone's face.

'A few pleasantries and the offer of a smoke,' Tanner continued, 'and you think I'll roll over. But I was never that easily bought, Sergeant-Major. Trust and respect have to be earned. You prove to me that you're different from the bastard I knew in India, then I'll gladly take your bloody cigarette and shake your hand.'

Blackstone stared at him, his jaw set. 'Listen to you!' he said. 'Who the hell do you think you are? I offer you an olive branch and you have the nerve to spit in my face.'

'Don't give me that crap. What the hell did you expect? You listen to me. Whether we like it not, we're both here, and for the sake of the company I'll work with you, but don't expect me to like you and don't expect me to trust you. Not until you've proved to me that you've changed. Now, I thought you were taking me to see the OC so let's bloody get on with it.'

Blackstone laughed mirthlessly. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'You always were an obstinate beggar. I can promise you this much, though, Jack. It's really not worth getting on the wrong side of me. It wasn't back then, and it certainly isn't now.'

'Just as I thought,' snarled Tanner. 'You haven't changed.'

'You're making a big mistake, Jack,' said Blackstone, slowly. 'Believe me – a very big mistake.'