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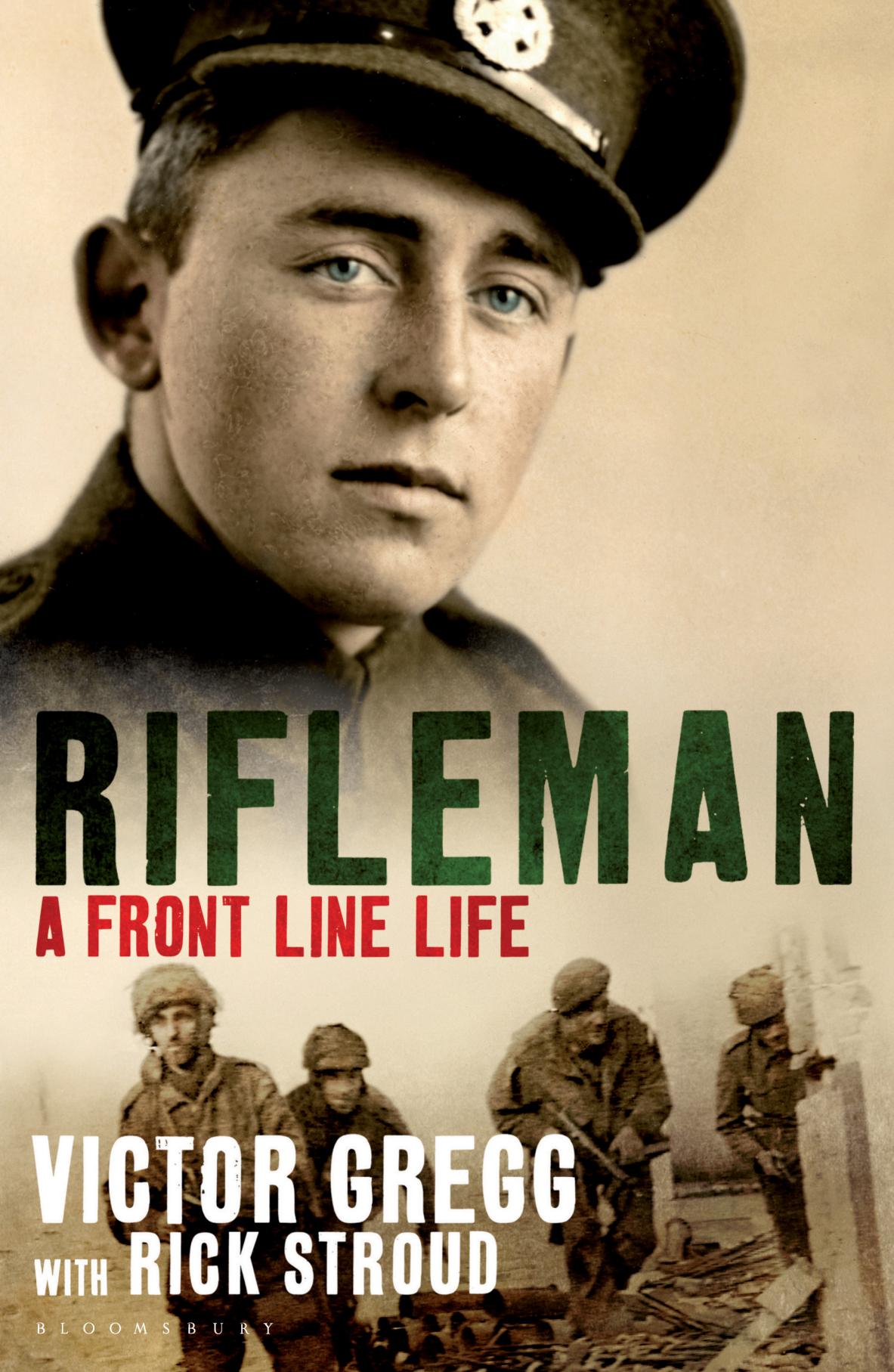
A Front Line Life

Written by
Victor Gregg with Rick Stroud

Published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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RIFLEMAN

A FRONT LINE LIFE

VICTOR GREGG

WITH RICK STROUD

BLOOMSBURY

RIFLEMAN

A Front-Line Life

Victor Gregg
with
Rick Stroud

BLOOMSBURY
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For my comrades who were left behind.

FOREWORD

I met Victor Gregg in December 2009, just after his ninetieth birthday. I was researching the war in the Western Desert and was keen to meet anyone who had been there. We were introduced by Tom Bird who had been his company commander at Alamein. At the end of our first meeting Vic gave me a memoir he had written for his grandchildren. In it he describes the first seventy years of his life. Inevitably, after such a long period, his memory for precise dates is not always 100 per cent accurate, but his recall of events is vivid, honest and gripping.

He tells how he left school at fourteen and spent his teenage years knocking around Soho. Then he joined the Rifle Brigade, signing on for twenty-one years. Nineteen forty found him in the Western Desert seconded to the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). At Alamein he fought in the Snipe action where the medals won in the action included a VC awarded to the Colonel, Vic Turner. In September 1944 he parachuted into Arnhem, where he was captured. He was sent to a labour camp outside Dresden and managed to sabotage a soap factory. For this he was condemned to death. The night before his execution the Allies bombed the city. Vic's prison received a direct hit and the blast blew him to freedom. He survived the firestorm and spent a week working with the rescue forces. Then he escaped to the east and the Russian army. The bombing of Dresden was a major event in Vic's life; it took him thirty years and a painful divorce to come to terms with it.

After the war, Vic's life continued to be colourful and parts of it read like a cross between *The Italian Job* and *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. He became a communist and driver to the chairman of the Moscow Narodny Bank. The Russian embassy sent him on mysterious errands and he was recruited by shadowy men from the British security services. His passion for motorbikes led him to travel extensively to bike rallies behind the Iron Curtain, where he became involved in dissident politics. By one of life's more far-fetched coincidences he was reunited with Major Albert Jünger, the German officer who had sent him off as a POW from Arnhem. Through Jünger, Vic became involved with Wehrmacht veterans in East Germany and served as a link between them and the Hungarian People's Democratic Forum. In August 1989 the seventy-year-old Vic was invited by the Democratic Forum to be one of the guests of honour at a rally in Sopron, near the border with Austria. Vic was asked to be one of a small party that was to make the first cut in the wire that divided East from West, and a few weeks later the Berlin Wall itself was breached. Vic had played a small part in its downfall.

Vic is still a player and old habits die hard. When I first met him he said he would pick me up from Winchester station. I arrived and waited: no sign of Vic. Eventually I realised that someone was watching me from a car parked about a hundred yards away. It was Vic checking me out, making sure I wasn't trouble before making contact. He drove me to a pub where we talked about the war in the desert. Vic was still checking me out. I must have passed the test because he invited me to his home to meet his wife, Betty. It was after this that he gave me his manuscript. I didn't realise it at the time but he was giving me the thumbs-up and we were off on what was to be another of his adventures.

More than seventy years separate Rifleman Vic Gregg from the British soldiers who are fighting today in Afghanistan, but the lessons are the same. The fight does not end when a man walks off the battlefield – the consequences of war reverberate right through

a soldier's life. Vic has always been on the emotional as well as the physical front line.

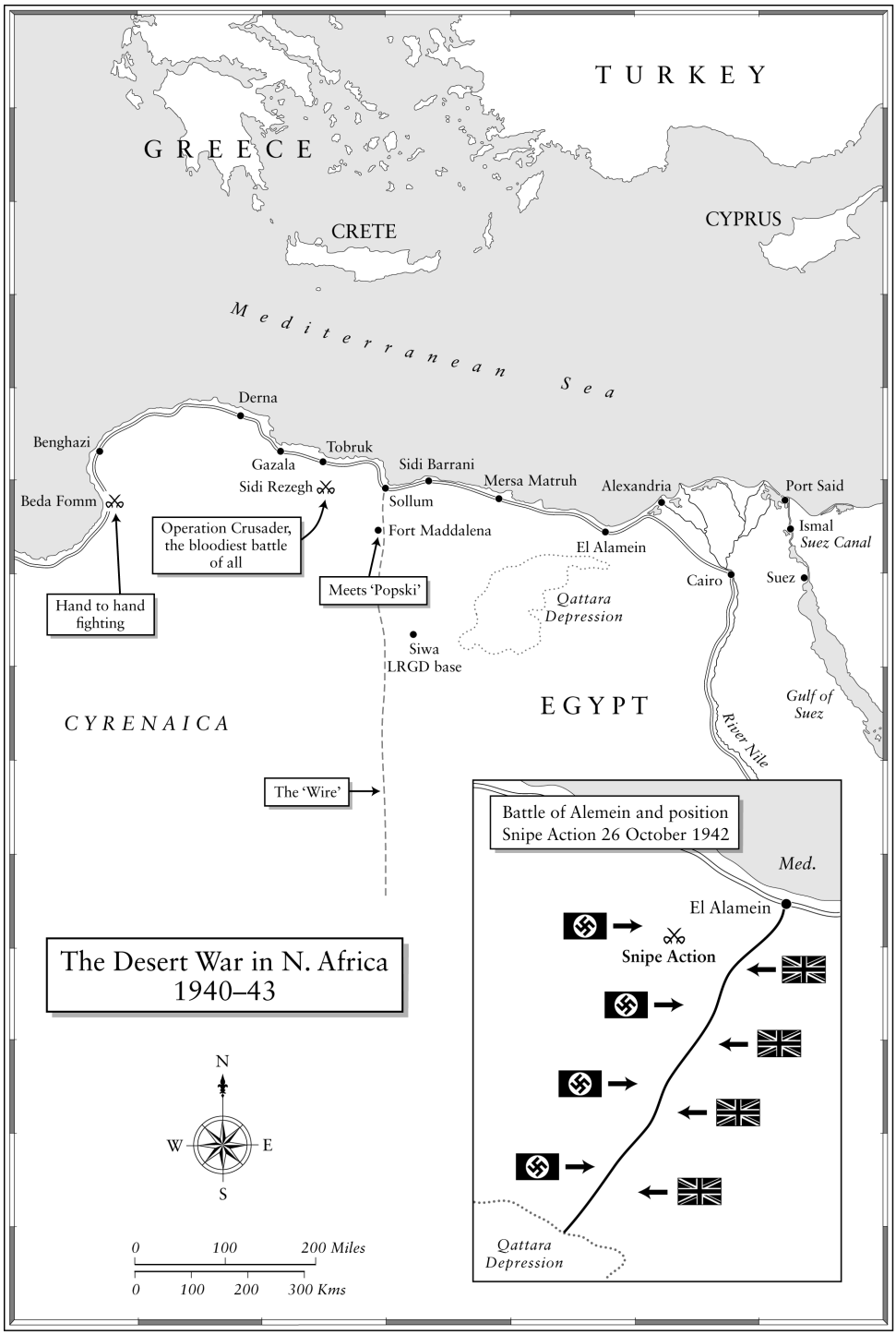
Rifleman was not written lightly or easily. Mixed with the excitement and the action are some very painful memories. Vic does not flinch from criticising some of the people he has met along the way but there is no one he is more critical of than himself. The better I have got to know him the more I have come to respect and admire him and hope I can now count him as a friend.

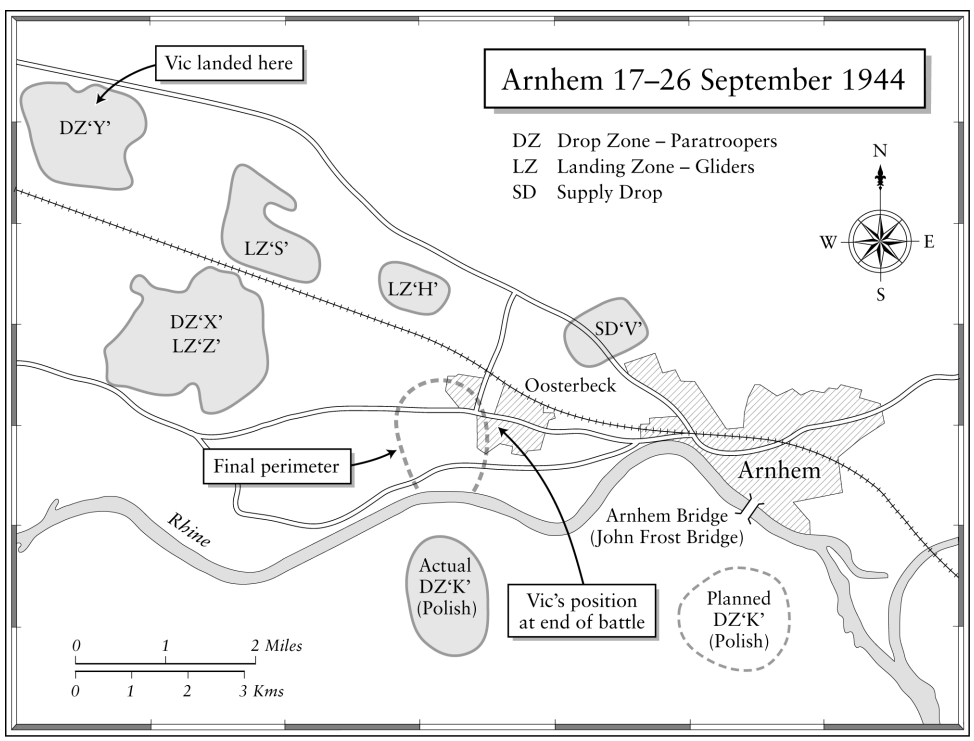
Vic's Certificate of Service, issued in 1946, when he left the army, contains a paragraph which was meant to sum up his military record, but in a way it sums up his whole life:

> *During an exceedingly colourful career, this rifleman has served long and continuous periods in active operations with front line units.*
>
> *He is an individual of great courage, capable of applying himself best to a task when the need is greatest.*

This statement accurately describes the ninety-year-old Vic I met on that cold December day in 2009. If I have been of any use to him in getting his book ready for press, the pleasure has been all mine.

Rick Stroud
London, November 2010


TURKEY
GREECE
CRETE
CYPRUS
Mediterranean Sea
Derna
Benghazi
Tobruk
Gazala
Sidi Barrani
Sidi Rezegh
Mersa Matruh
Alexandria
Port Said
Beda Fomm
Sollum
Ismal
Suez Canal
Operation Crusader, the bloodiest battle of all
Fort Maddalena
El Alamein
Hand to hand fighting
Meets 'Popski'
Cairo
Suez
Qattara Depression
Siwa
LRGD base
CYRENAICA
EGYPT
Gulf of Suez
River Nile
The 'Wire'
The Desert War in N. Africa 1940–43
N
W
E
S
0 100 200 Miles
0 100 200 300 Kms
Battle of Alemein and position
Snipe Action 26 October 1942
Med.
El Alamein
Snipe Action
Qattara Depression


Arnhem 17–26 September 1944
DZ Drop Zone – Paratroopers
LZ Landing Zone – Gliders
SD Supply Drop
N
W
E
S
Vic landed here
DZ'Y'
LZ'S'
LZ'H'
DZ'X'
LZ'Z'
SD'V'
Oosterbeck
Final perimeter
Arnhem
Arnhem Bridge
(John Frost Bridge)
Rhine
Actual
DZ'K'
(Polish)
Vic's position
at end of battle
Planned
DZ'K'
(Polish)
0 1 2 Miles
0 1 2 3 Kms


Trips behind the Iron Curtain
1972–89
Iron Curtain
N
W
E
S
EAST
GERMANY
(DDR)
First meeting
with Marcus
Hartz
forest
Main pick-up
area
Efurt
Leipzig
Chemnitz
(Karl Marx Stadt)
Dresden
POLAND
Hof
Prague
Nuremberg
CZECH REPUBLIC
WEST
GERMANY
SLOVAKIA
Vienna
AUSTRIA
Sopron
Budapest
Where the wire was cut,
19 July 1989
SWITZERLAND
HUNGARY
ROMANIA
YUGOSLAVIA
Belgrade
ITALY
Adriatic Sea
0 50 100 Miles
0 50 100 150 Kms

PART ONE

1

The Early Years

When I was born the Great War had been over for almost a year. Of my father I remember little; my brother, John, came along the following year, my sister, Ellen, six years later. That was when Father decided to exit our life for ever, never to be seen again. We heard that he had gone to Australia, but we never found out for sure.

We all lived on the second floor of a house in Compton Street, near King's Cross, London, a right hovel of a place. Like every other building in the neighbourhood, its lath and plaster walls were a breeding ground for vermin. Every weekend Mother would go through the ritual of delousing us. It was a futile task but she did her best using copious measures of carbolic with water and a fine-tooth comb. It would be many years before I appreciated what she had to endure to keep us fed and halfway clean and presentable.

At the age of five I was packed off to the local infants' school; at the age of seven we would be transferred to the junior boys' school. There we were taught simple arithmetic, reading, writing, and how to behave ourselves. The next step up would be the boys' school, where the discipline was harsh, especially considering how young we were. The slightest deviation from the straight and narrow was severely punished. A boy would be caned hard for the slightest misdemeanour. But neither the boys nor their parents thought it necessary to challenge the authority of the school. It was accepted: the boy had done wrong, and he had to take his medicine.

Yelling while the cane or strap was doing its worst was allowed. Crying wasn't. If you were silly enough to complain to your father, or in my case my mother, they would give you another whack for good measure. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' was a maxim that was fully endorsed by every God-fearing parent of the day.

Outside school there was the discipline of the gangs. Every boy belonged to a gang, usually related to the street where he lived. Streets were sacrosanct to the people who lived in them. If three or more strange boys entered a street they were treated with suspicion and usually challenged. Singly or in pairs you were no threat; mob-handed meant only one thing, and then out came the knuckle-dusters, the coshes, and any other weapon which might come to hand. If by chance the injuries to the interlopers were considered to be excessive war would be declared. The fighting would go on until such time that a peace conference would be arranged, or until the police intervened in the proceedings. These wars happened all the time and were a sort of apprenticeship for life.

Mother's wages for her weekly work weren't enough to feed us properly, so at the weekends my brother and I would be turfed out of the house and sent off to Covent Garden or Smithfield or even the fish market at Billingsgate to see what we could scrounge. With a couple of jam sandwiches and twopence to buy a bottle of 'R White's Lemonade' (there was a ha'penny deposit on the bottle), we would be sent on our way.

'Wotdya want us to bring back, Mum?'

'Go down to the Garden and bring back some pot herbs and don't forget to get some wood for the fire.'

Off we would scuttle, out of Compton Street, into Tavistock Place and through Marchmont Street, into Russell Square. Here we would consider trying to annoy the major-domo standing at the entrance of the Imperial Hotel. Then down Southampton Row to the junction with Kingsway.

This was an area which we considered to be very posh. One of our favourite ploys was to stand outside a pastry shop trying our

best to look like the Bisto Kids – hungry, forlorn and unwanted. Then we would summon up the courage to go inside and ask: 'Got any stale cakes, missus?' If we were lucky a bag of broken cakes would be thrust at us. It was not often that we tasted the luxury of cream cakes, even if they were stale. We might have looked like waifs but we weren't; we were just two kids trying to make the best of the life we were part of.

So on we would travel, through the backstreets to Drury Lane and then into Covent Garden Market itself. The first objective would be to get some string or rope and a couple of wooden boxes. This was easy: the whole area would be littered with the debris of the early morning trading. Then we would start scrounging.

From the pavements of the Garden we could easily pick up enough potatoes and greens to fill a sack. At Smithfield we would scrounge the bits of meat that were normally left for the sweepers. Having crammed everything into the fruit boxes, we would then have to drag our loot back home. The string would constantly break under the strain, either that or the boxes would collapse leaving a trail of vegetables in our wake. The other problem was the danger that a larger force of boys would descend and demand their share of the booty. If you were outnumbered all you could do was be philosophical and give in to the inevitable, hand over the goods and start all over again.

Getting to Billingsgate meant a trip through the very hostile territory of Hackney, or, worse still, Shoreditch. To get home we would make a detour along Fleet Street, through High Holborn, and down into Gray's Inn Road. A longer but much safer route.

When we finally made it back, Mother would give her opinion as to the worth of the spoils. She would always give some to the old lady who lived above us and that night we would go to bed with a good vegetable stew in our bellies.

2

The Concrete Playground

In our neighbourhood, most families lived in two rooms. One room would have a gas cooker and a bed, the other would also serve as a bedroom for the rest of the family, and would often be divided by a curtain. Not surprisingly, Mother would chuck us out on to the street as often as possible and it was there that we found our amusements.

There were three gangs in the area. By far the most dreaded of these was the Harrison Street Gang. They could muster a force of about twenty. Then there was the Sidmouth Street Gang, no less vicious, mustering about fourteen. Finally, the lot my brother and I mixed with, the Wakefield Street Gang, with a full force of about nine. You had to gain the respect of the other gangs; giving in to force was never a good idea. Any adventure by our gang into foreign streets meant considering the strength of the opposition. Luckily we had plenty of places to go where there were no other gangs.

For a start there were the three main line railway stations, Euston, St Pancras and King's Cross. We loved to watch the steam engines, huge monsters belching smoke, as they pulled into the station. The noise and bustle was very exciting. If we were lucky, we would get to carry a passenger's luggage to the nearest hotel. This didn't happen very often. Any attempt to do the porters out of earning a bob or two would get us a cuff round the ear, and we would be chased out of the station.

Behind King's Cross and St Pancras was the 'coal base', the area where mountains of coal were stored to supply the never-ending hunger of the engines. This was one of our major sources of free fuel. A raid

down the coal base would involve a certain amount of advance planning. A couple of boys would be sent down to determine the strength of the railway police, then, as soon as night fell, we would bunk over the wall and throw huge lumps of coal to our waiting mates. If you were caught it meant an appearance in the local police court charged with theft. This led to real trouble as your parents would have to pay up. The winter had to be really cold for us boys to do the coal base.

To the rear of the stations were the stables. This was another area where we could earn a little cash. 'Clean yer 'orse darn, mister?' For sixpence we would have to wash and brush the horse (or horses) and clean out the stables.

The greatest fun of all would come from a foray 'up the other end' into the West End. There we would spend our time doing our best to annoy the toffs, or, failing that, the doormen who worked outside the big hotels. These doormen would reign in great splendour dressed in black coat and tails, shiny top hat and campaign medals polished until they dazzled the eyes. Their job was to control the endless comings and goings of guests and luggage, call cabs and, of course, pocket the tips that the guests seemed obliged to hand over.

We would go up to one and out would come the phrase: 'Gisusasprazeemister.'

Back would come the reply: 'Bugger off, yer little turds, or I'll get the rozzers.'

This would constitute an outright declaration of war, which would last five minutes at the most. In the end he would dip into his pocket and out would come a coin, but he knew full well it had to be silver. Copper would be an invitation to more abuse. This type of operation would be, at the most, a once-a-week job. The law at Savile Row had a very nasty reputation.

Another source of entertainment would be bunking in at the London Zoo in Regent's Park. The keepers could tell at a glance that none of us had resources to fund the sixpence entry fee, and would chase us all around the zoo.

Regent's Park had quite a large lake where brother John and I

would go to fish. Mother would make nets out of some old stockings fixed with a piece of wire to a couple of canes. Then off we would set to spend the day fishing for tiddlers, complete with jam jars, the obligatory sandwich and a penny each to spend. Mother's usual parting shot would be: 'And don't come back here soaking wet.'

The day would end when it was impossible to cram another tiddler into the jam jars. When we got back home to proudly display our catch the poor fish would most likely all be dead.

Another favourite activity was to walk to the Tower of London. At low tide it was possible to swim in the Thames. On one occasion, as we were larking about on the steps of Cleopatra's Needle, my brother John slipped into the river and I had to pull him in from a watery grave. We both got a walloping for coming home soaked.

There were three cinemas in the area: the Euston Cinema near the corner of Judd Street and the Euston Road, the Tolma up the other end of the Euston Road in Tolma Square, and the Cobo, so named because it was in Copenhagen Street up the Caledonian Road (the Caley). All three of them were out and out fleapits. On Saturday mornings, for threepence (or twopence in the case of the Cobo), we'd witness the exploits of Tom Mix, Bronco Bill and other favourites. These were all silent films but there was nothing silent about the audience: loud boos if the baddies seemed to be getting the upper hand, the boos soon turning to cheers as the villains got their comeuppance.

Then there was the Tonbridge Club on the corner of Cromer Street and Judd Street, named after the sponsors, the public school based in Tonbridge, Kent. The school was part of a growing movement in the better parts of British society which saw the need to alleviate the poverty and deprivation that blighted the lives of the so called 'working classes'. Tonbridge School raised considerable sums of money to erect and run a club where we could learn the finer aspects of traditional British sport.

The senior boys of the school would come to London to teach us the rules of cricket and football. The sports master would occasionally put in an appearance, too. Boxing was his speciality, and

we had a proper ring, with proper boxing gloves. We also had our own ideas as to what was fair and what wasn't. The well-meaning master would attempt to teach us the rudiments of the Queensberry Rules. The contestants usually came from different gangs and no quarter was given. Seventy years later the Tonbridge Club is still there, or at least the building is.

Other amusements would be to go to the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens to watch the posh people sailing their model boats. Sometimes Mother would be able to give us sixpence each to get a return ticket to Edgware on the Underground from Russell Square. Edgware was out in the country in those days and it would be very exciting for us. If by chance we lost our return tickets (as we often did), a pair of doleful eyes would get us past the ticket collector. Even looking into the shop windows of the West End transported us into another world, a world, funnily enough, against which we held no grudge. We were poor, they were rich: that was the way it was to our young minds.

We also played cricket and football in the streets. The goalposts were bits of clothing with the ball made up of rolled-up newspaper and tied together with string, and that would be it. Sometimes a game would be arranged with the kids in an adjoining street. Getting the ball past the opposing goalposts by any means possible was the name of the game. Kicking, punching, shoving and pushing were all allowed. One thing that was completely out of order was kicking anybody when they were down on the ground. This would be considered a foul, and at this point the game would end and a 'bundle' would start. A 'bundle' was our word for a fight. It would go on until one side gave up or the police came, in which case a general truce would be called and both sides would 'scarper'.

Cricket was riskier than football. A wicket would be chalked up on a lamp post or wall. A bat would be made out of a piece of wood and the ball would be solid rubber. Sooner or later (generally sooner) the ball ended up through somebody's window and that would be that.

At the age of eleven I was despatched to the senior school in

Cromer Street. This was a very good school run by a highly intelligent and dedicated headmaster, Mr Thornton, who wanted us to have more than the basic education that was the norm for deprived areas of London. As well as the usual curriculum we were taught the rudiments of music, poetry and painting, the latter mostly watercolour because oils were too expensive.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHORS

VICTOR GREGG was born in London in 1919 and joined the army in 1937, serving first with the Rifle Brigade in India and Palestine, before service in the Western Desert. Later, with the Parachute Regiment, he saw action in Italy and at the Battle of Arnhem, where he was taken prisoner. He was released from the Army in 1946. He now lives a peaceful life with his wife in a housing complex owned by his old regiment, the Rifle Brigade, in Winchester. 'They're all lads who have put their heads above the parapet,' he says. 'I trust them, they are Riflemen.'

RICK STROUD is a film and television director. He has received Emmy and BAFTA nominations and teaches at the National Film and Television School. As a writer he is the author of *The Book of the Moon*. He lives with his wife in London.

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