

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One day during the harrowing siege of Malta my maternal grandfather, Captain Hill of the Royal Artillery, was assigned to mind Randolph Churchill, the brilliant but dissipated son of the British Prime Minister. 'Look after him, David,' said the Major General who conferred this extraordinary duty, 'and if at all possible keep him out of trouble.'

The novel began with me wondering what that instruction meant, exactly. The Axis had maintained a two-year stranglehold on the island of Malta, reducing garrison and islanders alike to a state of advanced starvation. Into this theatre poor Randolph was parachuted, groggy and overweight. It was hot and he wanted to go swimming, so my grandfather took him to the beach the officers used, where a thin strip had been left between the mines and the barbed wire entanglements.

Randolph was visiting Malta to recruit for the fledgling SAS. The prospect on offer to the starving officers was hard to refuse: full rations and a ticket off the island, in exchange for becoming a commando. Having helped Randolph to shop this deal around, my grandfather felt it would be churlish not to volunteer himself, and was later dropped behind enemy lines in North Africa.

Randolph was known to be fantastically brave, prone to strolling through gunfire to deliver orders. On Malta he might cheerfully get himself killed or – much worse – captured. In the pivotal phase of World War II, the Prime Minister's son would have

made a hostage of some significance. My grandfather had been issued with a good education, a Webley Mk IV revolver and a delightfully ambiguous order.

This novel, then, started out as a sort of stage play exploring the power dynamic between the two men. Yet in the end Randolph was the wrong central character. I found that I was more interested in my grandfather – a man who was brave despite his handicap of finding life full of opportunities to tell funny stories and build ice yachts and read *Charlie & The Chocolate Factory* to his grandchildren. In the novel something of Randolph found its way into the character of Simonson, but I leave the man himself – a great man in his way – to his excellent biographers.

Instead I went to Malta and spent some time trying to understand my grandfather's experience. Elderly islanders were kind and answered my questions patiently and in detail – I belong to the last generation of writers who can still talk to people who lived through the Second World War. I switched off my mobile phone and slept only in places where my grandfather had been billeted.

Both my grandfathers served in artillery. Wherever they were stationed one still finds the great concrete emplacements on which the guns were levelled, and the walls and crenulations that defended them. And so it was possible, when my grandfather told me that he was stationed in a certain spot on Malta, to go and find that exact place.

I spent time in the military cemeteries, too. In a memoir my grandfather had recorded in biro the names of some of the dead who were known to him, and I had typed it up. Here were those familiar names carved into stone: I traced them with my hands. The sadness of the war came over me in a way that I have heard other people speak of in relation to such places. Still, it was surprising and overwhelming.

I noticed that the cemeteries in Malta are different from Allied war graves elsewhere, in that four, five or even six men lie under

each stone. I asked about it and was told with a grin to try digging a hole anywhere I liked on the island. I discovered that there is seldom more than six inches of topsoil above Malta's yellow rock. Men on starvation rations had simply done the best they could, breaking up the limestone with blunt picks. This was how I came to feel about writing the book. It would inevitably fall short of doing justice to its subject. But perhaps that is the work of a novelist after all – to dig one small hole that must host a great number of men.

On my last day on the island I went to Bingemma, where my grandfather had been stationed for a while in an old Victorian fort, high on an escarpment overlooking a wide plain. I had my pad with me and I had envisaged the fort's ramparts as the place where I would begin writing the novel. But I found that the fort is private property now, crumbling and fenced off with barbed wire, guarded by dogs of the species that asks questions later.

The wind made vortices of dust and carrier bags in the lee of the decaying walls. The drawbridge was blocked by fly-tipped rubble and kitchen appliances. The moat where my grandfather had raised a thin and desperate crop was overgrown – and not just by scrub but by mature trees now. There were syringes on the ground. It was a forsaken and desecrated place. I didn't start the novel there after all – I realised I still didn't know how to begin. Instead I picked up a small stone that had fallen from the crumbling walls and took it home for my grandfather. In the end I never gave it to him. I was worried it would sadden him to see the photos and to learn how derelict his fort had become. Probably I needn't have worried. There's every chance he would have been tickled to learn he had outlasted the place.

My grandfather died while I was writing the novel – but, as he might have remarked, it wasn't necessarily my fault. I regret that he never saw the book. I had finished the third draft of what

turned out to be five, but I had decided to wait until the novel was perfect before I gave it to him to read. What a fool I am. If you will forgive the one piece of advice a writer is qualified to give: never be afraid of showing someone you love a working draft of yourself.

David Hill really did sail a fourteen-foot dinghy between floating mines, for fun, in the sparkling seas off Malta. He really did verify St Paul's account of his shipwreck in Acts 27 by reference to the relevant Admiralty chart. He really did volunteer on the day war was declared, and for reasons that remain mysterious he really did once go absent without leave for five weeks – and upon his return (for reasons equally obscure) his Colonel greeted him by glancing at his watch and asking “Why are you late?”.

Apart from these and the above-related facts, the character of Alistair in the novel has little in common with my grandfather, and certainly the book's plot is an invention. The novel is inspired by my grandfather and it would not exist without him, but it is not at all based on his true story.

The story begins in London, of course. Mary North became its central character for the same reason Randolph Churchill did not: that bravery is more subtle when one has a great deal to live for. Also, I had learned by now that I should draw on my family's history rather than presume to know the world's. If I could dig only a small hole, then it might at least have careful edges. The character of Mary is inspired by my paternal grandmother, Margaret Slater, who drove ambulances in Birmingham during the Blitz, and by my maternal grandmother, Mary West, a teacher who ran her own school and kindergarten.

Neither of my grandmothers could ever be persuaded to talk about the war, or if they did then it was simply to fend off our questions with a smile and a wave of the hand. Talking with

them as children we got the impression that the war had been brief, uncomfortable and not worth wasting breath on – like a camping holiday that had been marred by rain. One would not guess that Margaret, an artist, had driven an ambulance through bombs. One would never suspect that Mary's first fiancée had been killed at her side in a cinema in an air raid on East London, which nearly killed her too and of which she always bore the scars.

When the real-life Mary became engaged again, to my grandfather David in the blackout of 1941, her engagement ring had nine diamonds – one for every time they had met. Days later David boarded a troopship for Malta and they didn't meet again for over three years. Theirs was a generation whose choices were made quickly, through bravery and instinct, and whose hopes always hung by a thread. They had to have enormous faith in life and in one another. They wrote letters in ink, and these missives might take weeks or months to get through if they made it at all. Because a letter meant so much they poured themselves into each one – as if there might be no more paper, no more ink, no more animating hand.

We still have every letter that David sent to Mary. Of her replies to him we have none at all – the whole treasured bundle of them travelled from Malta on a different ship from David's, and halfway home they were sunk by a U-boat.

When I was beginning the project I might have said that by writing a small and personal story about the Second World War, I hoped to highlight the insincerity of the wars we fight now – to which the commitment of most of us is impersonal, and which finish not with victory or defeat but with a calendar draw-down date and a presumption that we shall never be reconciled with the enemy. I wanted the reader to come away wondering whether forgiveness is possible at a national level or whether it is only achievable between courageous individuals.

As I wrote, though, I realised I was digging an even smaller hole than that. Now I hope that readers will see the book simply as the honest expression of wonder of a little man descended from titans, gazing up at the heights from which he has fallen.



The first picture is of my grandfather David Hill (standing on the right) with the SAS in Algeria, 1944. The second, also from 1944, is of my grandparents David and Mary. The photo was taken by a Polish RAF officer who was sharing their honeymoon hotel.