

Guiting, Postbridge, Devon 20.9.56 — 54 718

Dear Mums and Dad,

So nice to get the letter from both of you, and so glad too to think my letter gave you such pleasure. I hadn't realised that it would. I have often come very near to telling you, and then years of traing, I suppose, made me slide away from it. But dammit why shouldn't I? If it does you good, there can be no harm to it. You won't tell anybody else; and I did want you to know. So I'll fill in a few of the details.

As I told you it was my trip to the old German colonies of South-West Africa that caused me to be drawn into the Firm. L.S. Amery (he is dead now; died last year; so there can be no harm in mentioning his name) was then very high up in the organisation. Even we never know the identity of CSS, as he is always addressed by us, but I rather suspect Amery actually was Chief of Secret Service at that time. He was a very nice man...a great patriot who believed before anything else in the British Empire...a smaller, chirper Churchill in fact. He had been in Africa and India, and all over, and it was a tonic to meet him in those days just before the war. General Mike O'Dwyer was another; and Page Croft---Churchill's men, every one of them, with that old genius behind the whole thing; even though at that time he was officially out in the political wilderness, laughed at by the public as a war-monger and scare-maker; which I guess was of course part of a deep-laid scheme to enable him to reorganise the Firm, which, like everything else, had got into a slack sort of mess between the wars. I never met him, although I had a personal phone call from him once, and many chits. After all I was never more than a very small cog in a very big wheel. In those days of 1936/7/8/9/40, a recruit.

Those recruit days were so amazing. I often wondered that everybody didn't smell a rat. Everything was so secret, and yet should have been obvious. Do you remember Hele-Shaw, an old engineer, whose lifestory I lived in London to write?...No book was ever produced! For the simple reason that all that was simply the excuse for me to be up there to take my first course of training. It is very like a comic opera...I lived in a little room near King's Cross, and went to Hele-Shaw's office in Victoria Street... entered through one door; and, most times, went straight out by the other!!!! He in person (and his secretary) bashed away on typewriters producing notes on the book that were supposed to have occupied me during the day, and I would take them all home at the week-ends to show how busy I'd been on his book. And my pay came in the form of advances from the old man, which he had to make a great show of giving grudgingly and grumbling about!!! What a life! Makes me laugh when I think back.

Then, in 1946, I did a second course. This time I was supposed to be working for a chap called 'rookes who ran a weird sort of news agency in Fleet Street. And the weird people they used to keep an eye on me...a lame chap who kept bobbing up because he wanted to be a writer and came to me for advice; a chap who sold

furniture for Smarts!!!!

And the absurd thing was that I had been enlisted because of my work in Africa, and my knowledge of Africa (based on not only my bit of personal experience, but because Africa always fascinated me so I had studied it so intensely)...and then it was found that, as a result of the South-West Africa book-- South African Cinderella---I was on the black list of our opposite numbers in Germany. So I dare not be used in Africa. I'd be nobbled the moment I set foot there. The same went for Europe. There was quite a fuss about my Baltic trip, and it was discovered that Brian and I were watched the whole time...not by the Lithuanians, etc, as we thought; but our Hun friends. So it looked as though I was a bad investment for the Firm.

At first when the war came it seemed I would be kept on counter-espionage in England. So I joined the Observer Corps (which gave me the excuse to live erratic hours and be away nights; and also made me automatically a Special Constable), and that seemed to be that. I didn't have much to do, although I did play a part in the trapping of a bloke called William Truetler Holmes, one of the first enemy agents to be bunged in the Tower!! (Awful really to remember the smash up of that bloke's very nice home and family by us). But I was very restless, and kept pestering to go to Africa and be hanged to black lists.

They were very understanding. Africa was off, but a chap called Colonel Buckmaster was organising S.O.E--- Strategic Operations Executive-- a branch of the Firm, to drop agents in occupied Europe and bolster up the Maquis and other guerillas. Men like Churc Hill (not relation to Winston) and women like Odette, who have all written books about their experiences!-- worked for Buckmaster. I made a huge point of the fact that, although I was no linguist, my mother was, I told them, three-quarters French; and I thought at one time I was going to get away with it. I was even booked for intensive French lessons and a spell living with French people in England, who took blokes like me and taught them not only to speak but to think and live French. But that black mark came up again. It was absurd, but the Firm is naturally ultra careful. After all, a chap with the slightest thing against him is a danger to so much more than himself. So I began to see visions of messing around in England during the war and having to find excuses to make to people like you why an able-bodied Hardinge was dodging the army!!!!

Then came Pearl Harbour, and Rangoon and Singapore went, and a whole new important field of operations faced us. And a hell of a field...shot through with every sort of Fifth Column; our peacetime network torn to bits. The chaps didn't realise when they put prominent businessmen and others in internment camps that in several cases they shut up members of the Firm. On top of that, of course, the old difficulty East of Suez...that no European can really masquerade as an oriental. We could bung men and women into Europe and make out they were French, or Scandinavian, or whatever was required, and by intensive

training get away with it; for there are some many types of Englishman (plus Welsh, Scots, Irish of course) that one could always find suitable ones, often with some of the blood of that European country in his veins. All were white. In the Far East we needed blacks, browns and yellows. Also, refugees from over-run European countries could be used--- and trusted. But you are the last person to need to be told, Dad, that...it is an awful thing to say...absolute integrity is rare East of Suez. Some were found...wonderful chaps, and chapesses...but they were so few; and we could not supplement them with disguised Britishers.

On top of this was the political set-up. Nationalist China, under Chiang Kai-shek, was our ally...one of the Big Four... but China was already divided, not only into pro and anti Jap Chinese governments, but by the Communists, operating on their own. And in certain areas, to get what we wanted we must work through them. But the Chiang-kai-shek lot would shoot on sight any man who had any dealings with the Communists. They would never allow us into China if they thought for one moment we would contact the Communists.

As though this was not enough, the Allies made China an American theatre. We (British) were to have a Military/Air Mission of course, and diplomatic representation, BUT, running things were the Yanks. And, although our allies in this show, and of course allowing us to run normal military intelligence outfits and that sort of thing, they could not be told that the Firm was on the job. The Firm doesn't operate for one war. It operates for ever, war and peace. We have no end ever to our war; and are always rated as on active service. And the Yanks of course have a similar secret service, which was working in China to build up all knowledge for after the war! They would do their best to keep us out; and to spoil our work if we got in.

You see the position...the Japs were only one counter force-- enemy, if you like-- against us. Our allies were in many ways in our work also our enemies. They might actually be in the next war!!!

Well, we had to get in somehow; and some genius decided that agents be put in as soldiers, airmen, even sailors (with the navalattache). I didn't know anything about all this of course until I was told to join the army. I was told to make it the Armoured Corps, as in that you get the most comprehensive military training. With ten guns (up to a 6-pounder) a tanky is almost a qualified artillery officer; he is also a radio-communications wallah; an engineer; mechanical transport expert (all vehicles from motor-bikes to giant infantry-tanks), and of course basically an infantry soldier...for one has to take the lot! I must say I found it a pill. I was 36, and one hasn't the brain of a young student at that age; it cannot assimilate masses of stuff so readily. I often thought I'd go crackers from sheer swotting. On top of that, mine was the vague, imaginative, undisciplined mind of the writer. But, luckily, there is no doubt a family tradition

of military service-- growing up in the atmosphere from the time I was born-- Wellington, and all that-- did give me some sort of natural aptitude that saw me through. The discipline and routine of army life, so hard for newcomers, did come quite easily to me; and, in spite of a seemingly frail physique as the result of my premature start in life, I had my queer love for a tough, active life; and..although I say it myself, but again it was born in me of course...an aptitude for giving as well as taking orders--- leadership, and that sort of thing. After all I had spent years bossing Kaffirs around, what is more. So I slipped into army life reasonably well.

Mind you, it was quite crazy. The Firm seemed to go mad. During my recruit days at Tidworth it was nothing for a despatch-rider to arrive with a message for ME; and, instead of going on parade, I several times departed to London in a Staff-car!!! God knows what the chaps really thought!!! I even made one visit to the Admiralty (dressed as a very new Trooper, R.A.C.), where I found among other things that Brien's old schoolmaster (his prep school; a naval bloke; forget his name) was one of us. And so also was Shepherd, editor of Times of India when we were in Bombay.

Well, that was a fantastic time. I duly collected a stripe... took over a squad of Irish Guards for a spell to toughen me up (believe me, it did!!!), and passed to OCTU. But things were moving pretty fast out East by then. The chaps we had already got through were up against it. We had already lost several. Replacements had to be rushed. So I was one who must be speeded on my way. I was scooped out of the OCTU and transferred to the Indian Army.

Then I threw a spanner in the works. I was still being called on for odd jobs in England, when an extra trained chap was needed; and as the result of a foul night in a gale when I crouched on the top of a cliff to meet a bloke who never turned up, and I went down with pneumonia a few days before I should have left for India!!!!

Again it is so absurd. Ordinarily I would have gone to a military hospital; but I stayed at home...because it was easy to switch me from there to the first outfit going East after my recovery; whereas all the red tape of military hospitals would have been in the way, otherwise. And poor Nelly thinks to this day that it was she who won a great victory over the Army by making them let her keep me at home!!!!!!

Anyway, I got off at last. Had a rest on the voyage... although that had its difficulties, for I had lots of special stuff to study, and so took my C.O. partially into my confidence, and used to spend a lot of time in his cabin!!! You can imagine the name this earned me among my fellows...Colonel's toady was the most polite!!!! No, it is not nice being a spy!!!

I was posted to the Infantry Training School at Mhow, to round off that side of my training by putting me through the complete course as a footslogger. I enjoyed that spell. I was almost left in peace to imagine I was just like the other blokes. But of course it couldn't last.

I was commissioned and sent to Delhi forthwith on a Cipher Course. Cipher Course!!!!...My God! that included, all in the course of a few weeks, such items as learning to jump with a parachute, and doing enough actual jumps to get used to it; learning to interrogate Orientals as against Europeans; the history of China and Japan, and the customs etc...and all manner of ciphers and secret communications; they WERE included. On top of that we were taught all forms of skulduggery...a charming old dacoit was brought from jail to show us his specialities, including the nonsense of sahibs thinking any lock means a thing!!! ...and coached in the parts we had to play until we almost forgot who we really were. It was the maddest school imaginable; and our instructors beggar description. No writer could invent such men (and women...for they were there. We were even put through courses of what to expect from clever female agents and how to deal with it!!!!) Traps were set for us during the brief moments we managed to prowl around Delhi. Several chaps dropped out because of encounters with people (women and the like) in hotels, etc, who were planted to report on them. Although aching to do so, one did not go off and get drunk in desperation more than once. Imagine next day, with a hang-over, listening to a detailed account of all that one said and did!!!! That's what I got. We all did.

Well, some of us actually got through; and I, as a matter of fact, passed out top of my batch...don't ask me how; except perhaps that I was mad when they started, and they couldn't make me more of a lunatic!!!!

At last, in June, 1942, I arrived in Calcutta with Alva St. J. Giles. He was a real Old China Hand. Born and largely educated there (his father compiled THE Chinese dictionary); and he had worked several years out there with the Hong-kong, Shanghai Bank. We were the first 2 replacements to go in on the new scheme. He was a great chap, and I don't know what I'd have done without him; although he had as fiendish, moody temper as mine, and we fought like a pair of kilkenney cats at the drop of a hat. But he was a tower of strength on my introduction to China. We flew over the hump in a wretched old Dakota (how I came to know them and hate'em!); struck foul weather, and (after having to go to over 20,000 ft without oxygen) came down at Yunan-fu (Kunming), pea-green, stone deaf, and me in agony. This was due to the fact that Delhi slipped up and forgot to send my medical papers. Calcutta said I could not go without proof of vaccination and all the other inoculations, which I had had the day I left Delhi. I showed my arm, which was swollen like hell, for they had all taken; but

you know what authorities are for paper...my arm meant nothing; they must have certificates!!!! Well, we daren't hold things up, so...as there was no place on my left arm for more jabs...I had the whole lot over again immediately before taking off, in my right arm!!!! And that lot took also during the flight! My arms were twice their normal size, and all colours of the rainbow, when I reached Kunming. What a welcome to China!

Of course there was no food or anything for us; so Giles took me to a coolie eating-house, (sort of place you see coolies squatting around in India, only worse), and I had my introduction to chopsticks! Nothing else to eat with!!! I didn't eat much. I wasn't in much of a state to use the familiar knife and fork, let alone ~~the~~ K'uai-tzu (to rhyme with wide, sir)...the translation is really Quickies, and when you see a Chinese using them you realise it's a jolly good name. I was lucky the second time I came up against them, for that was after arrival in Chungking. And, most unusual, it was a mixed party, and the charming little Chinese ladies on each side of me soon realised I would starve on my own, so...like two busy little birds with the big cuckoo they found in the nest...they popped the titbits into my mouth, left and right!!! Later of course chopsticks became second nature; and to this day I find it hard not to hold my plate close up under my mouth, Chinese-fashion.

Well, Giles and I had put up our ~~mission~~ three pips by then, and duly reached Chungking and took up our various duties, which in my case were to last for 4 years. Poor old Alva was killed before that same Xmas.

Gradually the organisation built up and went into action, and I have pretty well told you the rest...how we worked; soldiers and the like on the surface, and up to queer antics on our own. We saw action with Chinese troops, for part of the Mission's peculiar functions was to provide patrols (of all sizes from a few men to company strength, or even more) to stir up the Chinese by prodding the ~~mission~~ Japs into action. The Chinese would say the Japs weren't there...or were only a small force--- and the Mission would send a patrol in to prove by the hell they stirred up just how wrong the Chinese were and force an action. Naturally, those were pretty expensive in men. We (the Mission) ran convoys to the head of the Burma Road (Kunming), and one found oneself Convoy Officer; and at times there was trouble with Communists en route as well as Jap; not forgetting odd Chinese bandits looking for loot. I did special Embassy ciphers, including the whole text of the extra-territoriality treaty that was signed around that time. And of course we all took our part in what you might call normal garrison duties in and around Chungking; for it had to be demonstrated all the time that we were just part of the Mission. It is lucky I wasn't only that, for I feel I would soon have been returned to India, reduced to the ranks, or even cashiered. There was so much to think about; and anyway I had my dreamy spells!!!! There was the time during a rest period

that I was Duty Officer, Chungking, and I forgot all about changing the guards we had spread out around the place. With the result that those who should have been on duty had a gloriously lazy day; and the poor devils who had been there on night came near to mutinying!!!! Another time I lectured some men for a long while before one of them plucked up the courage to tell me they were Roman Catholics waiting for their padre to give them a service; the blokes I should have been lecturing were somewhere else altogether and by the time I got there had fallen out and gone home. On ceremonial parades I shudder to think how often my company ended up in the wrong place facing the wrong way!!! And on one infamous occasion when Mountbatten came to inspect troops, I nearly was cashiered. I had to leave town for a long time. I hadn't expected to be on the parade, having only recently come back from a foul job, but blokes were ill so I found myself commanding a mob of miscellaneous ruffians. Well, I was mooning along the ranks behind the Supremo (as he was called) in the course of his inspection, when I saw one of my pet hooligans looking as awful as usual, and, quite forgetting this wasn't one of my routine chatty inspections on my own, I piped up--"Stick your helly in, So-and-so! You look like a pregnant woman!!...and added brightly--"You're not, are you?"

Well, of course, a lot of the maniacs laughed; and I had quite forgotten that Lady Mountbatten (who accompanied the Supremo everywhere) was about two paces behind me with various bigwigs! No, there were times when I must have given many headaches to my worthy General de Wiart. He used to fix me with his one fearsome eye, and say, with adjectival trimmings--"Go and get yourself shot!" ...and send me off to the Gobi desert or somewhere to do my own job until I dared show my face in Chungking again. I know some people hated me. But after all we were living under a terrific strain. It was tough on everybody, but we had to keep up such a web of lies all the time. At times one felt so ashamed. When somebody very nice confided in you, and you could only tell him lies...or, worse, when it was a her!!!! And there were some very nice ones.

Some of them belonged to the Firm, which made it all right. The Firm always did use women a lot. We had some grand ones... English, Chinese, Eurasians, all races and mixtures. It must have been hell for them. Our casualty rate remained very high. So much was against us besides normal war risks. Sickness took a big toll, for our chaps had to operate often on their own beyond any hope of taking normal precautions. I was in Ho-nan in the Big Famine, when more than a million died; and you can imagine the cholera, plague, all manner of pestilence at a time like that, when not just houses...whole villages, even towns, were crammed with dead. And I couldn't take along special water even...had to drink what I found when I could go no longer without.

Others went in queer ways. Some of course were caught by the Japs; betrayed by the Chinese. Awful mistakes were made. One chap dropped by parachute, instead of going behind the lines,

must have landed in just about the middle of the Jap headquarters camp for the area...a change of wind; error on the part of the pilot...who can say? Needle's to say we didn't see him again. It was like the ten little nigger boys.

More than one was drowned in a cesspit. These huge, terrifically deep holes are all around Chinese villages; and working in the dark a chap didn't really have a chance. I nearly went that way. Luckily Reggie Home was with me; and, in some incredible way, although it was pitch dark, he grabbed my wrist, and being one of the strongest men I have ever known, hoicked me back. There can be no doubt I was MEANT to come through, for I had the longest spell of all.

Some went mad (literally), and were quietly removed; others cracked physically and disappeared with 100% disability pensions. Even the women...Ruth Stewart was hit on a job with me; nothing much, and the arm healed; but cancer set in, and although they took the arm off, and I saw her in India in 1945, they weren't in time. Helene Jardine was one of over a thousand in a Chinese air-raid shelter with one small exit...and that was blocked. Ingerborg Vordaans stayed behind in Ho-nan when we finally pulled out; she was a trained nurse originally. She hadn't a hope, of course. With her were 3 Friends Ambulance lads (Quakers; conscientious objectors who wouldn't fight, but chose to run an ambulance in China instead...one of them young Cadbury, one of the heirs to the cocoa firm). They don't give medals to Conchies, but every man of that team should have had a double V.C..

In the
jamine

What people they all were. ~~Thammanan~~ And you know a visiting Member of Parliament, chap called Lawson, told the Ambassador he considered it disgraceful, so many able-bodied British officers hanging around a funk-hole like Chungking, doing ciphers and the like!!!! I believe he raised it in the House on his return!

All M.P.'s were not like that. There was the fabulous Walter Fletcher. He keeps cropping up in the news nowadays, usually asking the government awkward questions on finance. He is a financial wizard. The fattest man I ever knew, he was the one who when we launched a huge campaign of bribery and found there simply wasn't enough Chinese currency in China for our purpose...and we daren't ask the Chinese Government for it, as some of their high-ups were on our list to be bribed...well Fletcher looted printing machinery from somewhere, shaghaied engravers and other experts, and set up a private mint hidden in the jungle, where he printed such perfect forgeries that I don't doubt millions of them are being used in China to this day!

And Maskayne (grandson of the original of Maskeyne and Devant) who came out to do some camouflage for us, and with some pots of paint and bits of netting could move a whole town, so that the Japs reported it bombed off the map...while the real town was made to become invisible by Mr. Maskelyne.

And Cecil Beaton, the Court photographer, who from photographing society beauties developed a system that did a lot towards winning the war. What a man!...like a society debutante himself...everything was... "Oh, my dear, no!..." The story goes that he once called a visiting general a naughty old thing!

And young Hall Caine, grandson of the great Victorian novelist, who used to quote his grandfathers books by heart when drunk; and Julian Amery (L.S. Amery's son), now also in Parliament. And Alan Grant, schoolmaster, a cipher expert, who was also such a rabid Communist that he insisted on calling Lady Seymour Mrs!

And our own Medical Officer... Ben Elliss--- who in some magical way kept men in the field who, by all the laws of nature, should have been dead or, at least, home with 100% disability pensions. He is responsible for me having two arms to be typing with at this moment; any other doctor would have had what was left off at the first glance. And I didn't even go to hospital; in fact carried on without a break. In ordinary times Ben was a fashionable obstetrician, specialising in bringing the babies of London's rich and famous into the world. And the way to get into his good books-- and incidentally get some treat from medical stores, such as a bottle of brandy--- was to get him to the spot in time when some insignificant Chinese woman was having a baby. His eyes would gleam with joy, and he would drop whatever he was doing and come galloping. I often wonder about the hundreds of insignificant Chinese among China's present millions who were brought into the world by this society specialist keeping his hand in!!!!

Oh dear, I could go on for ever. But I must give a mention to Ian Lightbody, who right up to when he was killed looked about 15. He was called the Boy, and took a great fancy to me. ~~When~~ He would never turn in until he was quite sure "the Old Man" was snug. I always hoped he would come through and marry Helene Jardine...they were a charming pair of babes. She, incidentally, used to call me Uncle. Most of them did! For so many of them were so very young, as time went on and the other old hands dropped out. I was positively the patriarch.

Except of course Colonel Harmon...Gordon...our Number One to the end; although as he was operating in Burma in 1942, he didn't have as long with the Chungking-based team as I did. In peacetime he was a big business man in China...head of the Salt Cabal...and knew China marvellously. He had a little Chinese wife, Rose, who mothered us all. She wasn't much over 20, if that...very tiny, and slipping fast into the last stages of consumption...but we all took all our woes to her. I've still got the weird waistcoat she made me, padded with silk from I don't know how many of her Chinese gowns she cut up, because I suddenly had to go North, and, by some crazy error, was sent nothing but tropical kit. And when I got my majority-- I was in Chungking at the time, and on getting back to quarters after

being told, I ~~mmm~~ found all my uniforms with the crown already up--- and there was no need to ask who stitched them on. Poor Rose...it was her death that cracked Gordon finally, and led to him compromising us all. And I think she would have been glad, for it led to us getting away out of China to our own lives again. Otherwise most of us would still be there, probably being brain-washed by the Commies.

Well, well, what a screed this has become. I should be working...not dragging up all that ought to be forgotten. ~~It~~ is all over. Although (a reason why one must still be careful) you don't leave the Firm. There isn't such a thing as honourable retirement even. They stop using you (just as they have left me to go my own way for quite a long time), but...well, they called Oscar ~~Marmen~~ back to tramp with me on that last, greatest mission from Chungking to Peking...and Oscar was in his late 40's, at least. He was well-known in China, a grown man, long before the revolution in 1911!!!! And he had not been called on by the Firm since the first war!!! So you never know...blast it!!!

And of course that Pekin work of ours does hang over those who worked on it, for it's real purpose was that, recognising that Communist domination was inevitable, no set-up planned to work in conjunction with ~~Chiang~~ Chiang-kai-shek would last. We set in motion what is running out there now. If it goes off the rails, those who engineered it are likely to be hauled in, I'm afraid.

So there you are. Now you know what a crazy loon I've been. You have just about the whole picture. Whether I should have told it I don't know, but it does seem right that you should be told, and of course you will not tell anybody else. I am only telling you to get it out of my system and set your mind at rest. Now we must all forget it. It goes against my training to put this in the post, but that is the funny thing about England...one trusts the post so implicitly!! But I am going to register it. And please take great care of it and make sure that it is not left around but eventually destroyed. Not that I have really said much that matters.

And now I must stop and get to work. Will write an ordinary letter to-morrow. Do hope you are both all right. Take care of yourselves.

Always your loving son

Russ