

Paul West

A Boy's Blitz

There in the archaic light of a late fall afternoon, the field of dead search lights glinted a little and awaited the switch. At midnight, or soon after, Nazi bombers that had flown the forty-five minutes from their bases in northern France would arrive en route for the city and drop their so-called eggs. Huge lenses would eye the night, even the fog, and catch them, moths in the quiet flame. Or so we thought, eyeing the glass arrayed at regular intervals throughout the field, once a pasture or the big juicy bed of hay or barley. We had faith in the anti-aircraft devices of our country, little as we respected the anything of anybody. A little bit of each of us was Nazi to be sure, much as a little bit of each Nazi boy was pseudo-English. War was between adults, wasn't it, and boys just approaching puberty were entitled to smaller wars of their own making, in which no one took much interest or offered to help. Whether or not the search lights, flicked on in a big thunder of the lamp, spotted and trapped a bomber was beyond us. Somehow, we felt, being young and cocky, we would survive, our heads and hearts full of the vainglorious cheer of greenhorns.

After all, so far we had survived, even the landmine that landed a half-mile from our village and converted an entire field into a quarry with deep sides and enough water to drown in at its bottom, thirty feet down. This Nazi toy had floated down on a parachute, intended to do something more monstrous than shred a rural postbox, an ancient plow, and one decrepit outhouse in which women laborers from the nearby farm took hot tea from thermos flasks and told one another obscene stories about their Friday nights. Surely the Nazis were poor aimers, this far from the city that made famous steel, a good ten miles to the north.

What had they got against us? Had they somehow divined our futures, recognising the terrors both civil and martial, we were going to be, and decided to wipe us out before our time: gutsy little guttersnipes with less than Aryan blood, yet boldly inheriting our guts from Lord Nelson, the Duke of Wellington, even Sir Francis Drake, and more recent heroes, especially of the air war, already gone to an early grave, in the parlance of those times “buying the farm” or “going for a Burton,” which we knew meant going down in the drink (the Channel). The expression meant, really, going for a bottle of beer.

We were staring at those big glass eyes, seen sideways on and therefore lopsided, deciding what *we* would do with them if the switch was within our grasp. The guns were nowhere near, of course, because anyone shooting down the long cylinders of white light would hit the gunners as well; so the anti-aircraft guns were a mile away, trigonometrically arranged to fire when the lights touched a target. We understood only too well.

What possessed us next I have no idea. It was surely no whim of pacifism, or even envy of the full-blown role of grown-ups in all this massacre. Playing marbles along the gutters, with glass alleys or steel ball bearings filched from the war effort, we knew what it meant to eye what shone or gleamed, almost like a model version of the big show. So too with our little war—bows and arrows in the bluebell woods, bow of yew and arrows of thin cane—in which we either imitated or parodied, whooping and yelping as Indians or the US Cavalry, who perhaps did not whoop or yelp at all. Indian women had captured the dead Captain Custer and shoved their knitting needles into his ears, through his brain, to make him listen better in whatever happy hunting ground he had gone to. We were, I see it now, little infidels: we had lost our loyalty, our faith, neither targets nor conquerors, but weirdly shoved aside so that adults could get on with their killing. Yet the war, certainly in those years of the Blitz, had readied us, we who were supposed to be marginal, restricted to the world of our school reading (*As You Like It*, the campaigns of Caesar in easy Latin) or adventure books we read by flashlight under the bedclothes: John Buchan, Eric Ambler, Leslie Charteris. The war had singed us after all, at least on the night of the landmine, when six other bombs had landed too, killing nobody, but wrecking the uncanny cross-plan of the village, an old Roman settlement with a Northgate, a Westgate, and a Southgate, these three being the old routes in and out of chariots. There was no Eastgate, for reasons unknown, it having been suggested

that the Romans quit England before they had a chance to build it, not having gone clockwise, which was to say (to us) they had derivatively timed themselves by King Alfred's old candles, on which he had scored the hours. He invented this. So: the Romans went away eastward, fed-up, not north, west, or south, before the English occupation struck them as too costly, too locally unpopular. What slowed our minds as much as the crescendo whistle of bombs, driving us to shelter under the kitchen table, or deep in the cellar down sweating concrete steps, was perhaps the clean retreat of the Romans, the little we were told in history lessons about their invasion and evacuation. The truth, I mean, not some easily memorized outline convenient for examiners. Did they itch? Had they scabs? Were they drunkards? What happened between them and local women? Did the Ella, Bella, and Della of those ancient times incite them amid the muck of urine and manure in the Gates? These were three streamlined, bosomy sisters who swung in step down the village street, farting behind them a brackish aroma of beer nobody could resist. I remember wanting to know. We all wanted to know, but we were no doubt going to be killed before we found out. War, like peace, kept so much of what really mattered away from us. We were growing up on rumor and soft soap, buttered up by genial parents and austere teachers, never having our noses rammed in what mattered, what had driven the Germans to occupy France and Belgium, and God knew what else. All I had to ballast my juvenile imagination was a picture of some poor slob of a German wheeling a barrow full of paper money, *pfennigs* (their word for penny. I'd thought), and this was what he needed to buy a loaf of bread. In such a world, where a loaf cost *us* tuppence, not a thousand million, wasn't something missing, some explanatory flash of light, or recognition, as in aircraft recognition (a "subject" already being taught at school to boys over fifteen, callow members of the Air Training Corps, which I had tried to join at twelve (the number of the Apostles, I said, and of scintillating noon). I was turned away, too much of a kid, though my mind reared on Caesar was hunting Marcus Aurelius, and ready for him, and I was arranging belts on my brown blazer to mimic the military belt called a Sam Browne (which supported your revolver holster by spreading the weight up over your opposite shoulder). Holster, I later found out, was a word for darkness, so the holster was where you nestled your gun in darkness like a baby kangaroo. A joey.

I am coming to it now, the moment of shame, brought into being by ignorance, lack of knowledge, and general impatience with a war that,

too much with us, wasn't with us enough. I had seen the wounded and battered from the Dunkirk evacuation sipping soup in the street and having their bandages changed, and heard them talking, grandly, about shoving impaled Nazis with their booted foot off their bayonets. They had escaped, but they had also lost, and so had we, excluded from the bloodshed and the infamous betrayal of the French, left to cope with the Nazi horde as best they could.

What, out of spite, we did, was to pelt the array of lamps or lights in that field with fist-sized rocks, pitching perhaps fifty in among the glass and doing some damage, though not as much as bombs. Could we be shot for this? Disgraced, certainly, and stripped of our medals, if any we had. Why did we do it? What did we gain? Was it an act of pure scorn, saying a pox on both houses, to hell with your war, down with all your flags. Include us in, to help, or expect only the worst from us, patriots nipped in the bud and cankered with Nazi caterpillars. What did the local crooners sing about? Ann Shelton and Vera Lynn? "When the lights go on again all over the world." Left to us, they would never go on again, and Churchill would condemn us to be bound in barbed wire and kept in the slop of a pig farm. We sabotaged the often-mentioned war effort, not from afar but on the spot, eager to be doing something crucial.

Sufficient unto shame is the occasion thereof. Or so we had been taught. Or had we read it in Shakespeare and was this the garbled version? The Romans were gone, wrapping their togas around them against the dank northern winds, but we were stabbing Caesar all over again. No, it was worse. What I came at last to understand, many years later, was that the glassy optics in that field were not searchlights at all, but a cunning device to foul up German radar beams conducting bombers to the city. A clever man called Jones, a boffin or "backroom boy," certainly no boy, had come up with a way of conning Nazi bombers with a false beam that led them several miles astray, and they were none the wiser, expecting a beam and following it almost blindly. The counter-beam was the stronger of the two, aimed up at the advancing bombers by a one-eyed king. So, we had not sabotaged the local artillery in its role of "ack-ack" or anti-aircraft, but, by destroying the exquisite symmetry and coordination of the apparatus in the field, exposed the neighbor city to appalling punishment night after night until repairs were made, and repairs were never made at speed in those days. Who would ever have predicted that a bunch of boys would mess up a clever spoof that saved thousands of lives, throughout the breadth and length of the land so often invoked in

hymns? We were never found out. We never confessed, not having done much amiss, as we thought. The night when the landmine and the other bombs fell near our village had been proof that Jones's decoy beam was working well. The navigator and bomb-aimer were off by ten miles or more. We lived on in a blaze of indolent glory as the war erupted, then slowed, and victory began to be talked of, colloquial standby long deferred. I winced only later, when the desire to get it out all in one lethal word took over, ousting any desire for precise, cogent explanation, so that I wanted to ram the *oh* of dismay into the *but* of shame, and the *if* of evasion: *ohbutif*, no more meaningful to me at that point than *Stuka*, *Zersplitterung*, or *shaduf*. It was as if we had left poor old clever Jonesy's magnificent erector set, all ten shiny boxes of it, from Beginner to Advanced, along with its batteries and neat electric motors, out in the rain, hoping he would blame the cows.

Paul West has two new works of fiction scheduled for 2000: *O.K.*, his novel about Doc Holliday, and a novella about Hitler as a failed art student in Vienna. His other book, *The Secret Lives of Words*, is Book of the Month Club selection for May. He was recently invested by the Government of France as a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters. He visited the United States Air Force Academy two years ago to read from his work.