

Army Days

Peter Ustinov

His experience when capturing Maidstone for the Home Guard.

Our next duty was to try and capture the town of Maidstone from the Home Guard, that civilian task force of veterans and the infirm who were supposed to harass the Germans in case of a landing, and hold vital positions until better-armed units of the army could be deployed.

We were, on this occasion, supposed to be German. As soon as the battle began, I detached myself from my unit, and advanced along to the centre of the town by the simple expedient of knocking on people's doors. When they were opened, invariably by men in pajamas or women in night-dresses, for it was a little before six in the morning, I would explain the vital nature of the manoeuvre, without ever revealing which side I was on. Flushed with patriotism, the good burghers of Maidstone forgot their annoyance at being woken so early, and let me through their houses, and into their gardens. Here I would climb into a neighbouring garden, and knock on the back door of another house. These people would then let me out of their front doors. Looking both ways, I would then race across the road and, knock at another front door, and the process would repeat itself. It took me over two hours to penetrate into the centre of the city at right angles, as it were, to the traffic.

There, I suddenly found myself before the Home Guard headquarters. A choleric general emerged. I aimed my rifle at him, and fired. Since the rifle was empty, it only produced a click, which neither he nor the umpire, a very stout lieutenant, heard. I consequently shouted 'Bang!' and then informed the general, politely, that he was dead.

Death was the farthest thing from the general's mind, and he spluttered, 'Don't talk such tommyrot. Who are you, anyway?'

The umpire turned out to have a terrifying stammer. His face scarlet with effort and apology, he told the general that he was indeed d....., but the word simply would not come.

It was the delay in the verdict which more than anything seemed to enrage the general. 'Look here,' he snorted, 'it's not good enough. Fellow points a gun at me and says bang. May be a bad shot for all I know. Might have come out of the encounter unscathed, what?'

'Would you have preferred me to use ammunition?' I asked.

The general lost his head. 'Who asked your advice?' he blustered. 'Haven't you done enough harm?'

'D... ead!' the umpire managed at length.

'I won't accept it. Won't accept it, d'you hear? Not from a mere lieutenant.'

It was the lieutenant's turn to be annoyed. 'I am the acc..... the.....of.....acc.....'

‘I don’t give a damn about all that,’ ranted the general. ‘I’m off to inspect the forward positions, and I’d like to see the chap who’s going to stop me.’

‘Sie sind tot!’ I cried.

The general spun on me, suspicious for the first time. ‘What did you say?’

‘Sie sind, tot, Herr General!’

‘Are you talking some foreign language, or something?’ asked the general, as though he was on the trail of something big.

‘Ich bin Deutscher.’

‘German, eh?’ the general asked, his eyes narrowing.

‘Acc..... redited umpire of this exc. .. exc.....sss,’ the lieutenant declared.

Just then, some other Home Guards appeared out of headquarters.

‘I’ve caught a German prisoner,’ cried the general. ‘Put him under lock and key,’ and then, brushing the umpire aside, he jumped into his staff car, and told the driver to leave the scene of his humiliation as quickly as possible.

The umpire was boiling with frustration.

‘I’ms. . .soso. . .’ he hissed.

‘So am I, sir,’ I said as I was led away.

A Home Guard major read all my correspondence, culled from my pockets, and then began a cross-examination.

I refused to answer in any language but German.

The major became very irritated. ‘Now look here, I’m going to report you to your unit if you don’t pull up your socks and answer a few questions.’

‘Das ist mir egal,’ I rasped.

‘That’s your final word?’ he asked, evilly.

‘Heil Hitler!’ I shouted.

‘That does it.’

They chose to lock me in the armoury.

I seized a Sten gun, broke open the door, upset the staff table, smeared ink on the maps and plans of the local high command, before I was overpowered by a cohort of old gentlemen, to whom I wished no harm, and therefore allowed myself to be locked into a disused scullery. They were all very angry indeed, and I felt that the frontier between fact and fiction had become unclear. One or two of them looked at me as though indeed I was a Nazi.

In the mid-afternoon, the colonel of my battalion arrived. He was a man whose voice rarely rose above a whisper, and whose head emerged from the front of his uniform at such an extravagant angle that from the side one could read the name of his tailor inside the jacket. He had the curious prehistoric look of a bemused turtle, and I always felt that if we ever had to face actual warfare in the company of this gentleman, he might well, in a moment of difficulty, disappear into his uniform until the storm blew over.

‘Now what is all this?’ he asked me almost inaudibly.

I explained, as so often, my version of the truth.

‘I see,’ he murmured. ‘But was it really necessary to confuse the issue by speaking in German?’

‘It’s a manner in which the Germans are likely to confuse the issue, sir, if they should ever land in Maidstone,’ I suggested.

‘See what you mean,’ he said, ‘although that’s an eventuality I consider to be most unlikely, don’t you?’

I was a little surprised to be consulted, but decided to suggest that if there was no likelihood of the Germans landing, in Maidstone, we were all wasting our time.

‘Quite, quite,’ he agreed absently, then smiled briefly. ‘Full marks?’

On his way out, he hesitated a moment. ‘You are one of my men, are you?’

‘I’m wearing the uniform, sir,’ I pointed out.

‘Yes, yes. I just thought you might belong to the Home Guard. But then, of course, there’d be absolutely no point in your talking German.’

Muttering confirmations of his own opinion, he left the room, and secured my release by suggesting the Home Guard should all learn German in order to know how to deal with recalcitrant prisoners if, of course, the Germans ever had the bad taste to come to Maidstone.