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Opening extract from

Duty Calls: Dunkirk

Written by

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Published by

Puffin Books

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
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Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
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Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

puffinbooks.com

First published 2011

001 – 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–33219–2

1 The Road to Cassel

A little after 7 a.m., Friday 24 May 1940. The sun was already clear in the sky, shining brightly cross the flat Flanders landscape. The road from Steenvoorde wound east to west so that as they left the small town the morning sun shone directly into the back of the truck, the sudden brightness jolting a young soldier from his sleep. A very young soldier – only just sixteen, although he was tall for his age and with a few hairs already on his chin that needed shaving, could just about pass for man two or three years older. If there were anything about him that betrayed his age, it was his eyes – deep brown under a mop of thick dark hair that suggested an innocence and lack of worldliness that was very much the case.

Private Johnny Hawke yawned, rubbed his eyes, then, squinting, looked out. The air was fresh and crisp after the rain, the water glinting on the grassy verges either side of the road. Somewhere to the south, desultory artillery fire was booming, dull and heavy, and Hawke felt a lurch in his stomach at this renewed proximity to the front line. Already refugees were traipsing alongside the road, most heading towards Steenvoorde. Several cars had been left on the grass verge, evidently out of fuel. Hawke caught

the eye of a young boy standing with his family beside a small wooden cart laden with suitcases and belongings, his expression one of exhaustion and resignation. Hawke nodded at him, but the boy just stared back as the truck trundled slowly by. The boy's father, sleeves rolled up already, pushed his hat back on his head and wiped his brow. Hawke could not help wondering what would happen if the Germans invaded Britain. He thought of his home in Leeds, in Yorkshire. Would the population really all leave their homes with just a few possessions, like these people had? Where were they going, anyway? Surely, he thought, it would be better to stay put. Certainly that's what Tom – Sergeant Spears – and the rest of the lads seemed to think. All that the refugees were doing, Sergeant Spears had said, was making matters worse – getting in the way, and clogging up the roads, and making it difficult to move troops around.

And, God only knew, it had been a hell of a job getting them this far. Corporal McLaren had told him that it was only around forty miles from Carvin to Cassel, but when they had embussed the previous evening, no one had thought it would take them all night to make the journey. Hawke looked at his wristwatch – one his father had worn in the last war. *Oh-seven-ten.* Nearly twelve hours! Twelve hours of stops and starts, of complete gridlock as they crossed routes with other British and particularly French units, and endless refugees. And they still hadn't

reached Cassel – not quite.

It had rained the day before and although Hawke had followed the lead of the others and taken his gas cape out of his large pack he had still got damp, particularly on the sleeves and legs of his battledress. As the youngest and newest member of the platoon, he was the last on to the truck and so had to sit nearest the tailgate, where the canvas surround was open to the elements and the cold night air. It had made sleep difficult. Since joining the battalion four weeks earlier, he had noticed how some of the older hands seemed able to sleep anywhere and at any time, but he found it difficult – especially on the hard wooden bench of a truck, in full marching order, being jolted as the Bedford rumbled over every stone, bump and pothole on the road. Eventually, though, his exhaustion had got the better of him. After long hours crawling across the back roads of northern France, he'd somehow drifted off.

How long he had been asleep, he wasn't sure. Three hours, maybe? Not enough; his eyes stung, and he had a slight, dull headache. Even now his battledress felt damp. He had got used to the thick wool serge but when it was wet it itched and chafed more than usual. Hawke sighed and rubbed his eyes, then gripped his rifle between his legs – a Short Magazine Lee Enfield No.1 Mk 3, with its hard, wooden butt and barrel casing, and ten-round magazine. Eight pounds it weighed and with the best part of sixty pounds

worth of kit he was grateful to have been made a rifleman and not one of the three men in the section's Bren gun team – the machine gun was three times as heavy as the rifle. Hawke liked to think of himself as strong for his age, but carrying full kit was tiring, and even more so when they'd had such little sleep over the past week.

Hawke looked across at Charlie Drummond sitting opposite him, who at eighteen was the second-youngest in the platoon, and saw his head lolling in sleep as the truck rumbled slowly forward. Next to Drummond was Bert Hebden, who caught his eye and smiled, then delved into the top pocket of his battledress for a packet of cigarettes. Hawke liked Hebden. Unlike most of the lads, who nearly all came from Leeds and Bradford, Hebden was a farmer's son. He could have avoided joining up, since farming was a reserved occupation that exempted him from front-line duty, but Hebden had an older brother and, in any case, explained to Hawke that he felt it was the right thing to do. 'I don't want that Hitler chappie coming anywhere near Yorkshire,' he'd told Hawke, 'so I thought I'd better do my bit to make sure he don't.'

Hawke looked out of the back of the truck, and at the rest of the column. There were some twenty trucks in all, a mixture of Bedfords and Morris Commercials, carrying the three remaining companies of the 1st Battalion, the King's Own Yorkshire

Rangers, a little over four hundred men in all. He brought a hand to the semi-circular black cloth badge on his shoulder, and felt the green stitching that said 'Yorks Rangers'. Few other regiments had such a distinction on their uniforms; it marked the Rangers out – a Yorkshire regiment with a proud history. His stepfather, Richard, had told him about some of the Rangers' battle honours. It read like a roll-call of most of Britain's greatest victories: Blenheim, Ramillies, Quebec, Mysore, Corunna, Talavera, Badajoz, Salamanca, Vittoria, Toulouse, Waterloo – so it went on. Anywhere the British Army had fought during the last two hundred and fifty years, it seemed, the Yorks Rangers had been there too. It was the same regiment his father, John, and stepfather, Richard Mallaby, had fought in during the last war. And it was the same regiment of which he, too, was now a part.

Hawke's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the faint whirr of aero engines. Another artillery shell exploded dully to the south, momentarily blocking out the noise, but then he heard the sound more distinctly, and saw Hebden cock an ear too. Leaning out of the back of the truck, Hawke craned his neck. The whir of engines was louder now and, as he shifted his position, he saw one of the men in the cab of the truck behind them also hoist himself up and crane his eyes at the sky.

'There!' said Hawke, suddenly spotting a number of dark dots heading towards them from the north-

east. He pointed and now Charlie Drummond had woken and was looking too.

''Ere,' said Corporal McLaren, hurrying towards the tailgate and pulling a pair of field glasses from his haversack, 'mind out the way, lads.' He peered through his binoculars but already Hawke could see the approaching aircraft were Stukas, their distinct gull-wings and fixed undercarriage clearly visible now against the pale blue morning sky.

'There's a bleedin' two dozen of the beggars,' muttered McLaren, then yelled to the front, 'Sir! Sarge! Stukas!'

The truck jolted to a stop.

'Everyone out!' shouted Sergeant Spears from the front of the Bedford. 'Quick!'

Hawke jumped down as Spears appeared from the front of the vehicle. He glanced at him, but Spears scowled and said, 'Go on! 'Op it, or I'll kick you off the road!'

The whole column had by now come to speedy halt, the trucks all at a standstill as men poured out and clambered up on to the grass verge and across the culverts running either side of the road, then across the fields of young, green corn. Above, the first of the Stukas were peeling off to begin their dives. Soldiers were frantically running, and so too were the civilian refugees. Hawke was conscious of a young woman trying to soothe a screaming child and paused, only for a hand to roughly grab his shoulder.

'I said, move it!' snarled Sergeant Spears.

The Stukas screamed down towards them, their sirens whining, rising to a deafening crescendo, one after the other, and then the first bomb exploded and Hawke flung himself on to the ground, brittle young wheat stalks scratching his face, and his gas-mask pack winding him as it was pushed against his chest. He gasped and the earth shook with powerful pulses that lifted him clean from the ground as repeated detonations erupted nearby. Another explosion now ripped the air apart and as grit and soil and bits of stone pattered down on him Hawke dared to glance back at the column. One truck towards the rear of the line was engulfed in flames, while the Bedford in front of it had also caught fire, the grey-green canvas livid with angry orange flames and thick, black smoke billowing into the sky.

The Stukas appeared to have gone, but as Hawke tried to breathe more easily again he heard more of the dive-bombers screaming down on another target a few miles away. His legs felt weak as he shakily stood up. Others were getting to their feet too, and now that he was away from the long line of trucks he saw what the Stukas were now bombing. Ahead, up the road, rising out of the softly rolling Flanders countryside was a hill – the only significant hill that could be seen at all in this relentless countryside. And on top of the hill, just visible amidst the mass of woods around it, stood a town.

'Will you look at that,' said a voice and Hawke turned to see Charlie Drummond standing beside him. 'You know what that place is, don't you, Johnny?' A ripple of bombs exploded and the two of them watched the hilltop town disappear under a cloud of rolling smoke and dust.

'Cassel?'

Drummond nodded, then dusted himself down. 'No wonder Jerry wants it. Must be the best view for miles and miles – when it's not covered in smoke, that is.'

Spears ordered them back to the truck, but then, as they made their way through the wheat, a flight of four Messerschmitt 109 fighters suddenly roared towards them, low and out of the sun. Barely before a warning could be shouted out, the four planes had opened fire, long lines of soil punched from the ground as the bullets tore towards them. Hawke had barely thrown himself on to the ground a second time when the aircraft were past them.

He clambered to his feet and watched them climb and bank away to the north, towards the coast. One man from the platoon had been hit – Lance Corporal Bellamy from 3 Section. Spears and Lieutenant Farrish kneeled beside him, Spears hurriedly pulling field dressings from both his and Bellamy's packs. Hawke watched, mesmerized by the amount of blood streaming from Bellamy's stomach and by the lance corporal's waxen-looking face, now drained of colour,

except for the blood already running from his mouth. He hardly looked like Bellamy at all.

'Stop staring, and get over to the truck,' Spears snapped.

'Sorry, To– I mean, Sergeant,' said Hawke.

Spears glared at him.

'Corporal!' called out Farrish, seeing McLaren picking up his Bren and slinging it on to his shoulder. 'Organize the platoon, will you, Corporal? See what help we can give, but get the men over to the truck ready to move out.'

'Sir,' said McLaren.

Along the road, frightened refugees were moving forward once more. Hawke noticed how much more tightly parents now held their children to them. A little further back down the road, someone was wailing, a woman, her body rocking as she crouched on the verge. Beside her a man was shouting at the sky, clutching his face in despair. Hawke recognized him immediately – the rolled-up sleeves, the felt hat on his head – and began running towards them, past a dead mule and an abandoned car with a line of bullets running across it. Ten yards from the man, he stopped abruptly. There on the ground was the boy he had seen just a few minutes earlier. The same wide, staring eyes looked up at him, but they were now lifeless, and then he saw the woman's hands, covered red with blood, her sobs of grief and incomprehension jarring the air that was now thick with the black,

whirling smoke of the burning lorries.

For a moment, Hawke thought he might vomit. He paused, bent over, his hands on his knees, then, breathing heavily, glanced around. Down the road, the last trucks in the column, those behind the burning lorries, were already reversing clear of the wrecks, while those ahead were starting their engines once more.

'Johnny!' he heard someone shout, and looked up to see Charlie Drummond hurrying towards him. 'Johnny,' he said again, 'come on, we're moving out. Quick!'

Hawke glanced back at the man and woman, then turned and ran, his rifle in one hand, his heavy haversack thumping against his hip. At the tailgate, Bert Hebden offered a hand, which Hawke clasped and then he felt himself being pulled back up on to the truck just as the engine coughed into life.

'Right,' said Spears, appearing from round the side of the Bedford. 'Everyone back on?' He was wiping blood from his hands as he spoke, his rifle slung over his shoulder. 'Still feeling brave, then?' he said, eyeing Hawke keenly.

Hawke swallowed. Anger and humiliation welled deep within him and he felt his cheeks flush.

Spears shook his head. 'This is no place for kids,' he muttered, then turned back towards the front of the truck.

Hawke sat there, unable to speak, his fingers

clenched ever more tightly round the barrel of his rifle. He was conscious of the eyes of others on him, so turned away, determined they should not see the tears he could feel welling.