

EMPIRE'S WITNESS

A SOLDIER'S SECRET DIARY 1942-45

PHILIP JAMES DAY



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First Edition

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*TO MY GRANDFATHER, ALWYN ROBINSON DAY,
WHO SHOWED ME THAT EVEN QUIET LIVES
CAN ECHO ACROSS GENERATIONS.*

THE BRITISH EMPIRE & COMMONWEALTH, 1942

THE EMPIRE ON WHICH THE SUN NEVER SETS



GLOBAL REACH

By 1942 despite heavy wartime losses in Asia, the British Empire still spanned much of the globe. Nearly one in four people were ruled by the Crown. Some areas were ruled directly, others were self-governing, and some under military occupations.

BY THE NUMBERS

THE HOME ISLES

England
Scotland
Wales
Northern Ireland

THE DOMINIONS

Canada
Australia
New Zealand
South Africa
Newfoundland

CARIBBEAN & THE AMERICAS

Jamaica
Trinidad
Bahamas
British Guiana
British Honduras

EUROPE

Gibraltar
Malta
Crete
Iceland
Gambia
Sierra Leone
Gold Coast
British Cameroons
South West Africa
South Africa
Bechuanaland
Swaziland
Northern Rhodesia
Southern Rhodesia
Mosambique
Madagascar
Tanganyika
Kenya
Uganda
Sudan
Ethiopia

THE MIDDLE EAST

Palestine
Transjordan
Iraq
Kuwait
Iran
Bahrain
Oman
Libya
Syria

SOUTH ASIA & PACIFIC

India
Burma
Ceylon
Malaya
Singapore
Hong Kong
North Borneo
Papua New Guinea
Solomon Island
Fiji

WHY IT MATTERED

The Empire was the Allies supply chain providing:

- Soldiers from 50 countries.
- Oil from Iran and Iraq.
- Rubber from Malaya.
- Steel and wheat from Canada.
- Strategic wartime positions.

The Royal Navy bound it all together, using a network of ports and routes that spanned the globe.

British controlled territories in 1942, including colonies, dominions, protectorates, mandates, and regions under military occupation. Not every territory or dependency is shown.



A WORLD ON FIRE

Liverpool Docks, 19 June 1942

“My story commences when I went aboard H.M.T. Abosso. Everything was very strange from the start.”

Lance Corporal Alwyn Robinson Day shut the small notebook and put it away in his khaki pocket, buttoning it tight. He wasn't a devoted writer, but he'd given Gwen his word he'd keep a record.

He climbed up to the upper deck. One hand holding the rail, the other to his kit. The weight was familiar now, not quite second nature but it was getting there.

All around, soldiers crowded the deck. Hundreds of them, maybe a thousand. Some were barely out of school. Others with tired faces and wedding rings. Ordinary men like Alwyn, called up, kitted out, and sent off for something bigger than themselves.

He caught the eyes of a few nearby. Men spoke in short bursts, then fell quiet when the NCOs called instructions.

Alwyn looked at the men around him. Who was coming back and would he be one of them?

Naval officers moved with clipped efficiency. Boots struck the deck, hands signalled, cranes clattered, crates thudded, steam hissed. Liverpool's skyline loomed hazy and scarred, burned beams and

blasted walls, not much repaired, everything worked around. The war had passed through here already, and it wasn't finished.

Further along, hulking ships vanished in fog or swallowed men and cargo whole. Civilians still threaded through the work, despite the troops. A sergeant snarled.

Alwyn handed over his embarkation tag. No word of welcome, just a scrawl on a clipboard and a curt wave. And then he saw her. The *Abosso*.

She was much larger than he'd expected. It had once been a passenger liner on the West Africa crossing; all polish and promises. Now it was stripped down to needs and purpose. Portholes blacked out. Name scraped away. In the fog it looked like a dark block of iron that had decided to float.

Boots rang on the gangway steps. At the top, an NCO pointed him along without looking up. He found his hold and his assigned mess. Hammocks were numbered. Alwyn moved on without question.

What none of them knew, that June morning, was that they'd stepped into one of the biggest troop convoys yet put together in this war. All of it sliding out of Liverpool under silence and fog, headed for places most of them could not name.

He was just one dot in that sea of khaki. A small part of a giant machine. Would he ever see Yorkshire again? Gwen? His children? He pictured her smile, the warmth of a quick cuddle. The laughter of his kids ringing in his ears. His wife had told him to write it down. Whatever he was allowed to say, he should put it on paper this time, she told him as she pressed the notebook into his hand.

It was a plain little book, nothing fancy. But it mattered. His fingers brushed the flap of his shirt pocket. Then in his kit he felt the outline of the Kodak camera she'd given him, telling him to take pictures as well.

The memory slipped away quickly. He was back aboard the *Abosso*. Someone barked a command to keep moving. He stepped forward, never more uncertain of what lay ahead. But this time he would keep a record. Unlike last time.

Two years before, Alwyn had already lived through an episode that shaped him and the rest of the country. The truth of it would

remain hidden in files for decades, unknown even to those closest to him. Not even his wife knew.

Two Years Earlier

Saint-Nazaire, France, 6 February 1940

Private Alwyn Day, dressed in a new uniform and looking fresh faced, watched the docks appear through the morning haze as the transport eased into French port. Cranes, ropes, silhouettes, the whole place waking up like a machine.

Hitler's army was huge, hard, and quick. The comfort came from above. Seagulls circled, shrieking. Ships berthed all along the quay were unloading drums and crates, with thick ropes hitting the ground. Soldiers yelled instructions. Convoys rumbled forward. The whole port moved like a living machine, loud, ordered, relentless.

Five months had passed since Britain had declared war on Germany. The British Expeditionary Force was almost 400,000 troops, now stationed alongside French troops and other allies.

Their orders weren't complicated. If, or when, the Germans attacked, they were to hold. An assault that hadn't yet come, though it balanced on a knife-edge.

Intelligence reports were grim. Hitler's army was known to be vast, and incredibly mobile. He had taken Poland in days eight months earlier. But reassurance had come from the top. They were confident the Maginot Line was impregnable. The vast wall of forts and bunkers along France's eastern border, was designed so nothing could get through. Or at least that's what they said.

Alwyn had originally joined the British Army's Supplementary Reserve a year earlier in February 1939. He was listed as a Category 'C' clerk and assigned to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC). It didn't change his life. Not then. He remained in his job, lived at home, and carried on as usual.

Apart from a brief spell of training, army life remained mostly on paper and war was still just a rumour. But the moment Britain declared war on 3 September 1939, Alwyn was ordered to report to Didcot barracks straight away.

Now, with three little ones at home and no certainty of return, he stood in the thick of a war no one wanted, but few could now avoid.

Months passed. Winter dug in and still no shots were fired. Newspapers started calling it the 'Phoney War'. Though in places like Saint-Nazaire, where Alwyn was posted, it was never quiet.

This rear engine room of Allied strategy orchestrated troop deployments, food, munitions, tanks. Huge volumes came through here. The RAOC held it all together, and Alwyn, now a qualified clerk, was a small yet important part of the machinery that kept it all moving.

He stepped off the boat, with a week of compassionate leave behind him. His mother had died. He'd travelled home, seen her laid out, watched the coffin leave the house. Both parents were gone now but he still had Gwen. And the kids. After a week of grieving, he returned, dutifully to a war that hadn't yet started.

He knew the port well by now. He'd been posted here since December, moving between Saint-Nazaire and the 2nd Echelon headquarters in Nantes, about fifteen miles away. That was the administrative headquarters.

Inside, clerical staff tracked everything: troop positions, shipments, leave passes. If it moved, they needed to know. Almost every part of the war machine except ammunition. It was logistics, supplies, paperwork. The stuff that kept it all running.

In the early days, the French winter had hit hard. Most of the men were young, fearful, and unsure. But by February, things moved better. Trucks offloaded quicker. Crates got where they needed to go. Mistakes were fewer. Orders flowed. By early spring routines were settled.

At the gates of the military yard, Alwyn handed over his papers. The corporal looked, brief and efficient, then waved him through. Alwyn walked on. He entered the cubicle and sat down. A clerk's desk. Nothing more. The papers hadn't moved, though there were more of them. It all felt routine and functional. Reassuring, even.

Two long months passed. The paperwork never stopped. Trains came. Trucks left. Orders shifted. Rumours flickered, then faded. The front line held. And yet there was a tension moving beneath the

surface. Everyone carried the unease but kept it quiet. It lived in the pauses. By the next morning, the old assumptions were gone.

Blitzkrieg

Northern France, 10 May 1940

The German assault slammed into Northern France. Blitzkrieg, they called it. Lightning war. And it lived up to the name. One moment things were holding. The next, they had collapsed. Defences folded like paper under an assault from hell.

Across Europe, countries had fallen with shocking speed. Now France and the Low Countries were hit.

Alwyn's unit, stationed south-west of the Belgian line, watched as orders changed by the hour. Nothing held. The French had staked everything on the Maginot Line. Hundreds of miles of fortifications. They said it couldn't be breached. Solid. Impenetrable.

The Germans did not throw themselves at the line. They went around it. They slid through the Ardennes instead, a forest the Allies had dismissed as impassable. Trees and ridges were meant to slow the enemy.

They did not. The nimble Panzers were relentless, moving straight through the one place no one had guarded properly. Commanders like Rommel pushed hard and fast.

The Allies reeled. Scrambling to make up ground. But it was already too late. This confrontation favoured speed and surprise. The Germans dodged strongholds and hammered the soft spots.

Backed up against the Atlantic coast, Alwyn's unit faced a nightmare unfolding in real time, an onslaught that defied belief. No one had expected to witness a modern army collapse this fast.

Vast German forces advanced in ruthless co-ordination. The British Force stood severely outnumbered and outmanoeuvred. It was not only force of numbers. It was the speed. The precision. The refusal to stop. The Luftwaffe, with clear air superiority, in many sectors was constantly droning overhead with reminders of who was winning.

Then came the Stukas. The sirens first. A rising scream that hit

the nerves before the bombs ever landed. Incoming death. Alwyn had never heard a sound like it. The men flinched. You didn't endure. You survived, only if you were lucky.

Stories spread quickly. German troops pushing day and night, barely resting before launching another assault. Some said they had super powers. It was not until many years later that the truth emerged.

Pervitin was issued widely in the German forces early in the campaign. The drug sharpened focus, erased fear, and stopped fatigue. They marched sixty kilometres without rest or sleep. And in war, speed kills.

The Allies couldn't match it. Not even close. Commanders moved positions, trying to respond, but wherever they went, the Germans had already got there first. Hitler's generals had one goal: trap the British, block every exit, and break them fast. Imprison or kill all of them. And step by step, that plan was advancing.

Hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers got pushed north, past Calais. Dunkirk was where the pressure drove them to. A small port, hundreds of thousands of Allied troops, the entire British Force. Trapped. No space behind them, only the enemy. Only the sea ahead and no ships to take them.

Meanwhile, the entire drug fuelled German army charged towards the Allies at terrifying speed.

In Whitehall, dark whispers of surrender floated through the corridors. In Parliament of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill spoke with the hard calm of a man trying to steady a shaking room.

'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.'

He told the country he could never trust Adolph Hitler. There would be no deal, no retreat. Britain would stand against tyranny, no matter the consequence.

'If the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say: This was their finest hour.'

What it meant for soldiers like Alwyn was that the fight would continue, whatever the cost. Unflinching. Yet for his plan to work,

Churchill needed time. As much as he could steal. The order from Downing Street was brief and final. Calais must hold.

Heroes to a Man

Calais, France, 22 May 1940

News filtered to Alwyn's unit in Nantes that a small British and French force was still holding on at Calais. But no one knew how long they could hold. Men from the 30th Infantry Brigade and the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment had arrived earlier that day. But most of them were barely trained. A good deal of those were still teenagers.

Waiting across the fields for them? Tens of thousands of German troops backed by hundreds of tanks. Officially, the defence of Calais was a holding action. In truth, it was a sacrifice. They were told to hold the line. That was it. There was no second plan.

The Luftwaffe came first, sweeping the skies and pounding the port. Then the artillery. Followed by tanks. They came in waves, like a tsunami. The defenders scrambled behind old city walls and sand-bagged shopfronts, using medieval stone and modern rubble in equal measure. What followed was close-quarters fighting. Brutal, improvised, and desperately uneven.

The Germans expected Calais to fall in hours. It didn't. Somehow, the British held out for days. But the lines of communication went early and supply chains vanished. The men inside the walls knew what was coming. No reinforcements, and there was no way out. But still, they stood. Defiant.

A dispatch from Churchill came through the haze:

'Every hour you continue to fight is of the greatest help to the British Forces. I have the greatest admiration for your splendid stand.'

They knew what it meant, and by the third day, the coastal town was destroyed, barely a building was left standing. But still they held the Germans from marching straight through to Dunkirk.

Word of it reached Alwyn's unit through the signals crew. The officers didn't say much, though every man knew it was bad. They also knew the stand was buying everyone else time. If the city fell too

fast, the entire Allied Force, including Alwyn's unit, might not make it.

He carried on as best he could. He logged vehicle numbers, his hands trembling with fear. But he kept going, knowing that if they were going to escape, they needed every chance. And that included trucks that worked.

By the morning of 26 May 1940, the garrison surrendered. Hundreds of defenders had been killed. Most were captured and imprisoned, but their work was already done.

German losses were significant. Dozens of tanks were crippled in the fighting. The delay cost them precious time. What was meant to be a fast push became a costly delay. Hitler ordered a halt to the armoured advance, leaving the job to the Luftwaffe, in what proved a major error.

The Germans lost momentum, and in war that can be as valuable as ground. The fighting at Calais delayed the advance just long enough for Operation Dynamo to begin at Dunkirk.

In the nine days that followed, more than 330,000 Allied troops were evacuated from the beaches. Some historians argue that without Calais, the 'miracle' of Dunkirk might never have happened. It would have trapped the entire British Force, and Hitler would have won the war.

The Allied garrison at Calais was not meant to save itself. It wasn't even meant to hold. Yet it did. Four long days and nights it held. Long enough for the main British Force and thousands of allies to get away just 30 miles up the coast.

Their stand did not win the war. But it stopped it being lost. The men who defended it gave everything. And for soldiers like Alwyn, those sacrifices were critical. Their stand bought him, and tens of thousands more, the chance to survive.

Trapped in France

Western France, 1 June 1940

Most of the British and Allied forces were successfully evacuated

at Dunkirk. But further south, in Brittany, Alwyn and thousands more were trapped. Directly in line with the German push.

Hitler was agitated and prone to fits of rage. He had missed his shot at trapping the British. Now his focus turned to those left behind in France, including Alwyn and his RAOC unit in Nantes.

The Germans regrouped and swept west with a mission to destroy. Tens of thousands of Allied troops were stranded along that entire coastline, stuck in the path of whatever came next. The fighting was not only brutal. It became personal.

The Luftwaffe came hard, engines screaming overhead, blowing bridges, twisting rail tracks, burning ports. Exit routes disappeared into smoke. Supply yards went up one after another, leaving only flame and rubble.

Roads crumbled into dust. For Alwyn and the troops in Nantes, survival became a waiting game. The front was getting closer. Everyone could feel it. There was no time to think. Only work, move, and stay alive.

Orders kept changing. Alwyn kept up as best he could. He did not know what was coming, though he tried to stay ready. Outfighting them was no longer an option. The only hope lay in getting out before it was too late.

He rubbed his knuckles slowly, absently staring off, as if something troubled him but never reached the surface. He wasn't cold, not exactly, just unsettled.

Nantes and Saint-Nazaire now resembled a waiting room for the doomed. Everyone sensed it, and the ports dissolved into chaos. Thousands of soldiers jammed together, scanning the skies, flinching at every distant engine.

Waiting for the attacks had become a kind of torture. Especially the screaming bombers. If they chose to strike, there was nowhere to hide.

Alwyn huddled with the others around a radio. Then they heard Churchill's voice. Steady, and not too proud.

'The disastrous military events which have happened during the past fortnight have not come to me with any sense of surprise.'

The men looked down, not at each other. No one said anything.

They didn't have to. France had fallen. And they were still trapped there.

'During the last few days, we have successfully brought off the great majority of the troops ... about 350,000 men are safely back in our country.'

Someone looked around. None of them were safe. Far from it.

Then Churchill's voice came again, defiant, unshaken.

'We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be.'

No one moved, everyone listening intently to every word. Britain had got out, and so had many Allied troops from different countries. A chance to fight another day.

But the speech also made one thing painfully clear. For men like Alwyn, until escape came, they stood alone. Alwyn had never felt his chances of survival sink lower.

Do or Die

At last, the order to evacuate came: Operation Aerial. One final, frantic push to get out of western France. If the line held a little longer, Alwyn might make it out. Or he might vanish. Killed, captured, swept away in the collapse.

For the commanders in charge, it was like trying to scoop up the ocean with bare hands. At Dunkirk they'd funnelled men towards a single beach. Here on the west coast, nothing was as simple.

Everything seemed fractured. Tens of thousands of soldiers spread across multiple ports. Saint-Nazaire, Cherbourg, Brest, La Pallice, Bayonne, all in chaos. Everywhere was confusion. Bombs fell, refugees surged and fear thickened the air. Co-ordinating it seemed almost impossible.

To make it worse, phones lay dead, wires cut or blasted apart. Orders disappeared and updates never arrived. No one knew who stood where or what loomed next. Transport collapsed, trains were derailed or overloaded with the wounded. Roads were choked and convoys stalled beside donkey carts and wagons. Families dragged mattresses and possessions. Soldiers trudged past women clutching

infants, passing abandoned vehicles. Horses bucked free, horns screamed and dust swirled. It was utter chaos.

The RAF was a considerable asset to the evacuation, and without them it probably wouldn't have been possible. But the Luftwaffe, with far superior numbers, mostly ruled the skies. Dive-bombers could almost freely hammer ports and strafe roads.

Every pathway turned into a death trap. There was no time for order. Ships had to load in minutes. Anything that floated was pressed into service: cargo haulers, coal trawlers, ferries. At the ports, there were no roll calls. No manifests. Just climb aboard, find space, and hold tight.

Units splintered. Troops were torn from their officers and friends lost for good. No one knew a ship's destination. Only that it was leaving.

At Saint-Nazaire, bodies jammed the quays. Boots packed heel to toe. Sergeants shouted names that vanished into the noise. Boats shoved off before the gangplanks were even clear. Overloaded, unbalanced, and already moving.

Even in the peak of the chaos, Alwyn kept logging serial numbers: trucks, radios. Anything mechanical they didn't want falling into German hands was earmarked for destruction.

It was his job to keep track of the engines smashed with sledgehammers, the crates burned, the gear thrown into the sea. To keep what systems still worked alive. Most were mere fragments by now. All around him, men were barely clinging to the remains of a broken command.

Up and down the French north-west coast, the same story played out. Explosions. Dive bombers. Screams. A tide of bodies on the run. It stopped being a retreat, and became a scramble, driven by fear and exhaustion, with no clean plan left. Just grit, luck, and the hope that the sea might offer a way out.

The merchant vessel *Floristan* pulled away from the harbour in full panic, under fire from enemy aircraft. German planes strafed the deck. Against the odds, the men aboard fired back and brought down a bomber. One bright spark in the dark.

Elsewhere, others weren't nearly so lucky.

The *Lancastria*, sent as salvation, carried more than 6,000 people, mainly soldiers, with some women and children. But as they waited to sail, the Luftwaffe descended. Bombs ripped through the ship. A fireball engulfed the deck. Bodies were flung into the sea, swallowed by flame and oil. Some never reached the surface. It was over in minutes. The ship went down. Thousands perished.

Alwyn eventually boarded his escape ship on 18 June 1940, or perhaps early on the 19th. His documents cannot settle on one date and they never state the ship's name. What is clear based on his records that his unit seems to have been among the very last to get away.

The Germans entered Nantes at some time on 19 June. By then, Alwyn was already at sea, the French coast had fallen behind. The Bay of Biscay pitched and heaved. Smoke streaked the sky. No one spoke or slept. Every creak in the hull echoed like a diving Stuka.

They zigzagged the whole way, dodging what couldn't be seen under the waves. Everyone knew U-boats were out there, hunting.

RAF fighters buzzed above, shielding the convoy as best they could. Hours dragged. A full day at sea, probably more. No one was counting. They only stared ahead, and waited. Then, finally, Portsmouth and British soil again.

Somehow, Operation Aerial had worked. Almost 200,000 additional troops got out, British and French, as well as Czech and Polish units. They were lifted from ports along France's western coast while defeat snapped at their heels. There was elation in their escape but too many had been left behind to celebrate. Too much had been lost for victory parades. Relief seemed hollow.

Winston Churchill in a radio broadcast conceded. *'The Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin.'*

It didn't sound like reassurance to Alwyn. It sounded like a warning. The war had followed them home.

Within twenty fours of Alwyn's escape Nantes and St. Nazaire were in German control. Three days later on 22 June 1940, France signed an armistice to surrender control to Germany. The vast colonial empire of France, that Alwyn had known all his life, had collapsed overnight. He had seen it unravel, close up, step by step. A

centuries-old powerhouse brought to its knees in six short weeks. That had an impact on him and everyone else.

Over the coming weeks and months, the Luftwaffe lit up Britain's skies in what would become known as the Blitz. Meanwhile, the Allied troops, those who had escaped, regrouped and trained at camps across Britain.

Private Day was sent to Northern Ireland to help prepare for the counter-attack and promoted to Lance Corporal. In April 1941 he survived the Belfast Blitz by a margin that must have felt like chance, around a thousand people were killed.

He probably knew a bigger storm was brewing but he could have had no idea that he would soon be in the eye of the storm.