V
ARMY LIFE

When I decided to join the Army I thought I should first seek guidance as to how membership of the armed forces could be squared with my parliamentary duties. So I wrote to the Lord Chancellor, Lord Simon,[273] better remembered as Foreign Secretary in the 1930's, to ask his advice. Lord Simon stated that: '[t]he same point arose, of course, in the last war and I remember the discussions about it when I was serving'; and summarised his views as follows:

> The first point is I think, that a member of either House who joins the armed forces, must in the main be his own judge as to what is proper and appropriate. No-one can restrain a member for doing his full duty as a member of the legislature, and he is under no reproach for doing so. Of course if he offers to take active military service and is accepted this must be some restraint upon his political activities, but how much is I think, for him to say.

This reply had the clarity and good sense of a great lawyer who was also a fine parliamentarian. I fear Simon has been underestimated as a person, whatever view you may take about his politics, at least that was my experience. He was extremely kind to me when I first joined the Coalition Government as a junior minister, inviting me to a simple tête-à-tête dinner at the Lord Chancellor's flat in the House of Lords with his Irish wife, who looked after us without the assistance of any servants. This letter gave me exactly the encouragement I needed to be a serving soldier without deserting the little band of Labour supporters in the House of Lords.

After offering myself as a recruit, I went to see a doctor who would report on my fitness for military service. His verdict was that my defective eyesight made me unfit for active service, so that I could only be in the army as a non-combatant. So I plumped for the Royal Army Medical Corps [RAMC], which offered me a useful humanitarian role, and possibly also exposure to the risks of active service if sent out with a Field Ambulance.

[273] 1st Viscount Simon, formerly Sir John Simon (1873–1954), Liberal and later National Liberal MP and peer; served in many high offices; foreign secretary, 1931–1935, and lord chancellor, 1940–1945.

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I joined the army as a private soldier in the RAMC, and was immediately posted to their training depot near Aldershot. I'm afraid I didn't carry a Field-Marshal's baton in my knapsack. But little did I suppose I would be the only private soldier in the Army whose subsequent incarnations would include that of Cabinet Minister and Governor-General. I had not realised that all the officers in the RAMC were doctors, so that the training of the recruits was entirely in the hands of the NCOs (Non Commissioned Officers), a very efficient but extremely tough lot of men who had risen from the ranks. I don't think I had seen an officer, and certainly had not spoken to one, until a benevolent Major gave me a lift in his car as I was walking wearily back from the railway station to the Camp. All the volunteers were allocated to 'C' Company, the other Companies being made up of conscripts, and our Company was expected to be the smartest and keenest in the Battalion. We were mainly middle class, which was not exactly a recommendation to our Company Sergeant. I really blotted my copy book with him on my first Sunday, when, being an agnostic, I refused to go on Church Parade. He hadn't of course the faintest idea about what I meant, but obviously thought I wanted to shirk the Parade. He therefore sent me with other minor delinquents to scrub the floor of the dining hall. I was obviously suspect from the moment I was given leave to travel up to London for meetings of the House. I attended when asked by my Leader for support, and there was soon friendly comment in the press about wartime democracy in the Upper House, when I appeared in my private's uniform among the elderly Field Marshals.

The daily routine was morning parade, with a great deal of shouting if buttons were not gleaming and boots shining. Then a good deal of square bashing, and long route marches around the neighbouring countryside. An unforgettable lesson I learned from my time in the RAMC Camp was the real meaning of comradeship. The extraordinary kindness and helpfulness to each other of a crowd of mainly ordinary working men, torn from their homes and struggling to cope with army discipline for the first time, was an experience of human nature at its best I had never had before.

One morning at parade our sergeant announced that anyone who could speak German should report to the Company office. There I was told that German speakers were wanted at the War Office for a language test. This seemed to offer a possible escape route, but I did not feel too sanguine as I had spoken little German since I left Eton, where we learned to read Goethe and other classics, which were splendid literature but really quite useless for the purposes of ordinary conversation. However, the intelligence officer who put me through my paces when I came up to London was I

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am afraid impressed by Eton, Cambridge, and the Lords, and rather shocked by my humble status. Anyway, I was most grateful to him for his recommendation that I should be accepted for training by the Intelligence Corps.

This resulted in instant release from the RAMC, and a posting in civilian clothing to a course at the Intelligence Corps training college at Matlock in Derbyshire. They had taken over the Hydro there, a comfortable tourist hotel at this picturesque holiday resort. The surrounding countryside was really delightful, and I enjoyed many pleasant walks up the steep hillsides and through the woods that are typical of Derbyshire, in the company of young men with a similar background and education. It was somewhat like going back to school again, with a military rather than academic choice of subjects studied in class.

I managed to survive the course, and emerged as a Second Lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps. As the Corps consisted entirely of officers, I had no further drudgery in the ranks. It was a pleasant change to eat in the Officer's Mess, and have a batman to look after me.

My first posting was to London District, located at that time in a block of modern flats off Curzon Street, a very convenient spot for me as I would be able to continue to combine my military duties with attendance at the House. I had a flat with one bedroom and sitting room in Pimlico at Dolphin Square, and it was an easy journey by bus to Victoria and then on to Piccadilly. My first job in the Map Room I found extremely dull, but things brightened up when I was moved to a large office upstairs, where I found myself in the company of a GSOIII[274] – Captain Webster, a classics Don at Oxford, a GSOII[275] – Major Villiers, who had been seconded from the Brigade of Guards, and as my fellow dogsbody, second Lieutenant Freddie Ayer,[276] another Don from Oxford. From that moment, Freddie, the founder of logical positivism, became a life-long friend whose infectious cheerfulness and wonderful sense of humour made his company an unfailing delight. He was quite the reverse of the stuffy and reclusive philosopher, having friends, male and female, old and young, and in all walks of life. As a young man he had stood as a Labour candidate for the Westminster Borough Council in Soho, but though his sympathies were always with the Left, I do not think he ventured again into active politics. But let me now go back to life at London District.

[274] General staff officer, Grade III.

[275] General staff officer, Grade II.

[276] A.J. Ayer, also known as Freddie Ayer (1910–1989), later Sir Alfred Jules Ayer, philosopher and Oxford academic.

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Our main function was to interrogate German prisoners of war, but as there were very few German prisoners at that early stage in the war, we were never fully employed. Those we captured were some pilots and crews of planes brought down over the United Kingdom, and a few sailors from a naval vessel intercepted on the high seas. I was occasionally sent to the 'cage', as it was called, in Kensington Palace Gardens,[277] where they were held. According to the Rules of War, prisoners of war, whether taken either by the Germans or the Allies, were under no obligation to answer any questions other than giving on request their name, rank, and number. So I was much astonished to find how anxious they were to talk about their homes, their work as civilians, indeed the whole of their lives before they were caught by the Wehrmacht. I never heard whether any of the background information we provided had been of military value.

Major Villiers was reluctant to use a member of the Lords for some of the morally dubious intelligence work going on in London. I told him I hoped that he would not feel any such scruples, and at last he gave me what he considered quite an important assignment. He said that a good deal of secret information was reaching the enemy from London, and it was suspected that this was due to careless talk by British officers in public places while they were back on home leave. One of the most popular places where officers spent a cheerful evening was at the Café Royal in Regent Street.[278] My assignment was to sit in civilian clothes at a table one evening, strategically placed to listen to my neighbours in uniform, so as to be able to report back on any indiscretions I might hear. I carried out my instructions to the letter, but I could only report the next morning that the noise in the supper room was so deafening that I could not overhear anything. After the complete failure of my first attempt at espionage, and the boredom of my underemployment at London District, I was quite relieved to hear from my Leader in the Lords, Lord Addison, that his Chief Whip had resigned, and I was his only supporter with the necessary experience for the Front Bench. As this would be a whole time job I would have to leave the army. Lord Addison applied to the Adjutant General for my release, and as no-one appeared anxious to keep me in my present occupation, I reverted immediately to 'civvy street' and the Opposition Front Bench in the Lords, succeeding Lord

[277] The London office of the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre, known colloquially as the London Cage, run by MI19 of the War Office to interrogate enemy prisoners of war; allegations of torture surround its existence.

[278] 68 Regent St., once a famous meeting place and restaurant, now a hotel.

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Strabolgi[279] as Chief Opposition Whip. I had already had some valuable experience of the Whip's office, as I had been an Assistant Whip in 1938.

[279] Joseph Kenworthy, 10th Baron Strabolgi (1886–1953), Labour MP and peer. Listowel succeeded Strabolgi as chief opposition whip in the Lords in 1942.

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