A Season of Remembrance

WINSTON CHURCHILL, as President John Kennedy said, “Mobilized the English language and sent it into battle.” Churchill has willed the British people through four years of struggle and suffering. The hoped-and-prayed for day has arrived. June 6, 1944, D-Day in Europe, when tens of thousands of Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen have begun the unknowable task of reopening the continent and depriving the barbaric oppressors of their stranglehold on its peoples.

Days after the initial landings, a 23-year-old man from the Midwest will take his unit of tank destroyers ashore at Utah Beach. He is already a leader, deeply conscious of his responsibility for the safety and performance of his men, joining General Patton’s Third Army, and beginning the push through France.

Across the English Channel, in the Kentish town of Bromley, a six-year-old girl, who is an early reader, has seen the newspaper headlines, and heard the solemn tones of the BBC announcers on the scratchy radio. She understands that these are momentous days. She doesn’t fully understand why, standing with her parents at their hilltop home watching the blazes over London. Her father is a fire warden. She remembers walking with her mother to the store and seeing the demolished homes from the previous night’s air raids. Many of their neighbors are gone.

The end in Europe comes, on May 8, 1945. Good Old Winnie joins the King and Queen on the balcony at Buckingham Palace as a jubilant, but weary people stream out everywhere onto the streets.

The Tank Destroyer Units are redeployed, and the young man, now a major, becomes the military governor of a seemingly dazed German town. By 1946, he returns to his Midwestern roots, the experiences of recent times deeply ingrained in him. They will be the foundation of his trajectory to the pinnacle of business, his achievements and interests bringing him acclaim and awards. He will be the center of a loving family. And he will not forget where his strength has come from.

For the six-year-old girl, the war has been a backdrop. But as she ages, she wants to know the “why” of that time. She reads, and the sheer scope of the heroism takes shape in her mind and heart. She will eventually leave her British roots, and through twists of fate and choice, find herself, in 1980, in Barrington, Illinois, as a historian and writer. From the ancient history of Britain, she is drawn to the barely two centuries old history of the pioneer town.

As writer and historian, on March 11, 2019, now 80 years old, with her editor, she meets the major, to recall those far off days of which he is one of the few surviving veterans. He is now 97. He returned to Normandy for the 70th Anniversary of D-Day. This year, he will observe the 75th Anniversary in his Barrington home. Members of his family will go to Normandy.

He speaks quietly but with infinite feeling; it is the first time that the writer hears directly from a veteran about that trek across war-torn Europe and his subsequent life. Some of that conversation is in the following pages.

Dear Mr. D,

Thank you for sharing your memories, your heart, and your wisdom with us. We salute you!

You are, quite simply, Awesome!

Barbara L. Benson, Historian