

A HOUSE AT WAR

Dedication

This true story is dedicated both to my late dear friend Christopher Prance, who introduced me to the initial military role of our family home in Rudgwick during WW2, and to those brave souls who trained here before "taking the fight" to Axis forces behind enemy lines, many never to return.

Out of respect for all concerned I have used my best endeavours to ensure factual accuracy and out of respect for Christopher's widow Shirley I have redacted her address from the reproduction of my correspondence with them both.

Craig Thomson, Woodthorpe, Rudgwick. March 2025.

The Story

My story begins with a modest envelope delivered to our postbox in December 2015 and addressed to "The owner of Woodthorpe".

Normally such packages contain junk mail and are immediately consigned to the recycling bin, but this one was different. It was addressed in copperplate handwriting and for that reason alone commanded my immediate attention.

How right I was!

It contained a letter from a Mr. Christopher Prance of Bideford in Devon, introducing himself and making one of the most compelling offers I have ever received.

Details are reproduced below and, having at that time lived at Woodthorpe for 24 years, my wife and I could scarcely believe that such a treasure trove might possibly be available to our family.

[REDACTED]
Bideford,
N.Devon.
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

2nd December 2015

Dear Owner of Woodthorpe

My name is Christopher Prance, the son of Bertram Prance who was the designer and builder of Woodthorpe in 1928. (Originally known as Chudleigh)

I have collected all the documents I have concerning the planning and construction of 'Chudleigh' and put together a file of about thirty good quality photographs taken in and around the property by my father in the pre war years. He was an artist, a regular contributor to Punch and a keen photographer. The specifications and costings are very detailed even down to the taps and size of nails! I write to ask whether you would be interested in acquiring these items from me. The two detailed coloured architect's drawings are well preserved and either would look very attractive mounted and framed. I have taken considerable care in rescuing and digitizing the photographs from the negatives which would be contained on a disk. Should you be interested to receive the package I shall need to make a charge by mutual agreement.

Enclosed is a list of the documents I have put together with a few 'thumbnail' prints of the photos. I shall be interested to hear from you and pleased to answer any queries you may have.

Yours sincerely,

Christopher Prance

Christopher Prance

I am now in my eighty-ninth year and would be pleased to have the history of 'chudleigh' where it belongs.

DOCUMENTS

Pertaining to Chudleigh, Rudgwick, Sussex

Construction.

2 Detailed and coloured architect's drawings. (21" X 28")

- a. Alternative slightly smaller property.
- b. The final larger property signed Prance/Tate.

Complete specification and undertakings for the building and equipping of the property in Baynards Road. (28 typewritten pages).

Estimates from W.Farley, & W.Port

Sheets of costings for materials, interior fittings etc.etc.

Purchase of Land. Baynards Road

Conditions of Sale. Aungier/Prance 1926

Conveyance Aungier/Swain for purchase of land 1925 for "Lynwood"

Various Abstracts of Title Aungier/others

Photographs

A CD containing the following....

About thirty photographs to include those of the house interior 1930's furnished as lived in. The exterior in various stages of completion. A group photo of B.Prance with Harold Tate and all the workmen employed. The mature house and gardens.

(emailed if preferred or as well as)

A Short account

The occupation and requisitioning in 1940.

As I discovered through our subsequent friendship, Christopher's sole motivation in making contact was to ensure the reunion of these important historical records with the home he had known and loved in the pre-war years. This explained the modest sum which he proposed as "a charge by mutual agreement" for us to acquire the materials. Although I am a true Scot I was not inclined to take advantage of Christopher's generosity so we agreed upon a somewhat greater sum with which both parties felt comfortable.

Within a few days, a further and much larger package arrived, this time addressed personally to yours truly and containing every item listed in Christopher's original letter, and more!

My passionate interest in the history of Woodthorpe (formerly "Chudleigh") had begun!

Over the ensuing years Christopher and I communicated regularly by telephone, letter and email.

Due to the frailty that tends to accompany advancing years, he had to decline our several invitations for him and Shirley to visit us at Woodthorpe and, for the same reason, we did not consider it appropriate to impose upon their privacy in Bideford.

Our relationship therefore turned out to be one of ageing "pen-pals" and, strange as it may sound, this added an extra dimension to our very deep friendship and ensured that every conversation, letter or email between us was sharply focussed, interesting and informative. That said, it is my abiding regret that we never met face to face.

My early exchanges with Christopher focussed on his childhood at Chudleigh.

The inter-war years were a time of growing commercial success for his father Bertram as a cartoonist and artist and this was reflected in his ability to purchase a large plot of land on the crest of the ridge at Cox Green, Rudgwick and to commission the building of Chudleigh, a fine country house, as a new home for himself and his family. The house was built by Harold Tate of Rudgwick and his team of craftsmen and was completed in 1927.

Christopher shared with me his early memories of being taken outside by his parents to watch the "Northern lights" in the night sky over the North Downs and, on one particular occasion, to watch in awe as the glow of the intense fire which completely destroyed London's famous Crystal Palace on the top of Sydenham Hill, near Dulwich, in November 1936 became clearly visible to the north east.

He also recounted the remarkable sight of the Graf Zeppelin, a hydrogen-filled German rigid airship, slowly traversing the horizon above Pitch Hill, no doubt using the claimed international passenger test flights from Berlin to London and back as cover for military surveying of potential targets in the capital and in the surrounding home counties in the terrible war that was to follow some three years later.

Bertram and his wife Kate (nee Macfarlane) became central characters in a bohemian "set" of artists, writers and performers who frequently assembled at Chudleigh for social events and to play tennis on the grass court which is still clearly identifiable in the grounds of Woodthorpe today. Among this group was Bertram's very close friend Heath Robinson, the famous cartoon humorist, whose elaborate contraptions and witty tag lines have amused successive generations of his admirers and whose name is firmly established in common English parlance.

Another two characters of note were Bentley Collingwood (B.C.) Hilliam (Flotsam) and Malcolm McEachern (Jetsam), the latter's ultra deep bass voice being the unique signature of the delightful singing duo of the 20s and 30s, "Flotsam and Jetsam". If you would care to listen to some of their humorous songs you can still find them on YouTube.

As we all know, the carefree days of the inter-war years were not set to last and on the 3rd of September 1939 Great Britain declared war on Germany, two days after Germany's unprovoked invasion of Poland and less than 21 years after the German surrender which had marked the end of the "War that will end war" [*H.G. Wells*] on 11 November 1918.

It's almost impossible to imagine the thoughts that must have crossed the minds of service personnel who had survived the horrors of WW1 only to now face a second conflict with the same enemy just two decades later. Many of our country's leading military officers and other senior ranks of the "professional" armed services in place in 1939 went on to serve King and country in the second World War of their lifetime. Mercifully this "double duty" burden fell less heavily on enlisted men due to the WW2 upper age limit of 41 years. However, in 1941 this upper age limit was raised to 60 and conscription was extended to specific categories of women.

Fearing a German invasion in 1940 the British Government initiated a programme of evacuation of children to overseas territories. The programme was operated by the newly formed Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) and in total 2,664 children were successfully evacuated, mostly to Commonwealth countries.

Christopher became one of the last of these children to be despatched to Canada (on The SS *Monarch of Bermuda*) before such transatlantic evacuation sailings were stopped following the sinking of several westbound evacuation ships by enemy U-boats, most notably the heinous torpedoing of the SS *City of Benares*, bound from Liverpool to Canada, by U-48 on 17 September 1940.

The U-boat was commanded by Kapitänleutnant Heinrich Bleichrodt who fired a total of three torpedoes at what was clearly a non-military vessel steaming westward away from the European conflict. By a cruel twist of fate, the *Benares* was temporarily unescorted at the time of the U-48 encounter, making her a "sitting duck".

The first two torpedoes missed their target but the third struck the *Benares* in the stern, causing her to sink within 31 minutes, with the tragic loss of 98 of the 123 children and the majority of the adults on board including evacuee mothers accompanying their children.

This event led to outcry among the British public, enabling Churchill to cancel the CORB programme which he had never fully supported due to the diversion of critical warships away from their primary war role to escort military supply convoys bound for the UK.

After the war, Bleichrodt was held by the Allies on war crimes charges, accused of sinking the ship with the full knowledge that it had been transporting evacuees. He reaffirmed the German position that there was no way that he or the crew of the submarine could have known who was on board. His defence was upheld and he was acquitted.

Bleichrodt refused to apologise to the survivors, despite several crew members of *U-48* expressing their shock and regret once the facts became known.

Meanwhile Christopher spent the next three years safely sheltered by his Canadian hosts in Ottawa, blissfully unaware of what a "close shave" his evacuation had been until his return to the UK in 1943.

Early in the WW2 conflict Chudleigh was requisitioned by the Ministry of Defence and Bertram, his wife Kate, their already evacuated son Christopher and their daughter Barbara, who was serving with British forces in the far east, were forbidden to live there until further notice.

This coincided with the completion of the (then) new Dunsfold Aerodrome, located roughly two miles from the house, by Canadian sappers in preparation for the aerodrome becoming a front line operational base for the Royal Canadian Airforce.

Having been little more than a child at the time, Christopher was not able to give me detailed information on the active service activities of the Canadian forces, other than to tell me that Chudleigh was assigned as the RCAF Officers' Mess. This fitted with the presence of a derelict shower block constructed in the garden although, at the time we purchased the property (by then known as Woodthorpe) in 1990, this structure had become completely overgrown.

Christopher was able to further inform me that the house was returned to the family in 1945 after the end of WW2 but that his father Bertram was so saddened by its dilapidated state arising from over 5 years of military use that he vowed he and his family would never live there again. He was true to his word and the family duly moved to alternative short term accommodation in the area before taking up permanent residence at West Campfield Place, Leith Hill.

Until the first signs of the Covid 19 pandemic, Christopher and I stayed in regular contact and from time to time exchanged gifts - an "original" of one of Bertram's cartoons featured in Punch magazine, some beautiful greetings card prints originally painted by him, an oil landscape of a woodland copse at the north west corner of our garden (still there) which Bertram had cleverly painted on the wooden doors of a serving hatchway between the kitchen and the dining room - he liked it so much that he took it with him when Chudleigh was requisitioned by the MOD, and now it was to be ours!

These items now feature in what I like to refer to as The Chudleigh Gallery (aka our Family Room) alongside the original and perfectly preserved full watercolour plans of Chudleigh, prepared by Bertram's architect in 1927 and now professionally framed and hung as the centrepiece of the room.

As quid pro quo, I established Christopher and Shirley's taste in fine wines and took steps to ensure their cellar was regularly topped up with something I knew they would enjoy. We also kept them both well informed on our programme to restore the grounds of Woodthorpe (Chudleigh) to their former glory, which I knew would give Christopher great pleasure after the rough treatment of his former home during the war years.

And I made it clear to Christopher that I had every intention to further research the wartime history of the property to add flesh to the bones he had already provided.

Little did I know then the extent of what I would uncover!

Then Covid 19 arrived - and changed all of our lives!

In common with so many others, my health was affected for an extended period and my further researches on the Chudleigh story had to be put on ice for 18 months. Thankfully I made a full recovery and emerged from that dark time re-energised and more determined than ever to complete my investigations.

Within a few months I had built up a number of extremely well informed connections, both at local level and in the academic world, and I was also able to access substantial factual information from public records.

By mid 2024 I was satisfied that I had a sufficiently clear and comprehensive view of the whole Chudleigh story to confidently share my findings with others.

Christopher Prance was clearly top of my list of contacts but, in a cruel twist of fate, I learned that he had passed away peacefully in October 2022, shortly after his 95th birthday.

Conscious of my undertaking to Christopher to get to the bottom of The Chudleigh Story, I decided to write to his widow Shirley with a "report card" on my findings, sharing the facts of which Christopher was totally unaware.

My letter is focussed on conclusions rather than process and is therefore an ideal medium through which to share this information with the readers of this story.

I therefore reproduce it below in full, save for the redaction of Shirley's address which I trust you will agree is an appropriate courtesy.

I hope you find it interesting!

Woodthorpe
Baynards Lane
Rudgwick
West Sussex
RH12 3AB
18 September, 2024

Mrs. S Prance

XXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXX

Dear Shirley.

It was a pleasure to talk with you by telephone the other day and to hear you are keeping well.

I promised to follow-up with some more detailed information on the WW2 role of Chudleigh/Woodthorpe so here's a brief summary, starting with what we learned from Christopher.

Chudleigh was indeed requisitioned by the UK Ministry of Defence towards the end of 1942, following completion of the new Dunsfold Aerodrome in record time by the sappers of The Royal Canadian Engineers. The aerodrome is located about two miles from here.

By early January 1943, three squadrons (400, 414 and 430) of the Royal Canadian Airforce were flying Curtiss Tomahawk fighter and North American Mustang fighter/bomber aircraft from the base, quickly followed by the arrival of several squadrons of North American Mitchel medium bombers.

Chudleigh was initially used for Officers' Mess purposes by the Canadians based at the aerodrome. We have been unable to determine if it was the only Officers' Mess accommodation outside the aerodrome perimeter although we believe that several other private properties in the area were also requisitioned by the M.O.D. at around the same time.

Concurrently, and as the tide of the conflict began to turn against Germany, members of the Free Polish military were being assembled in the Surrey Hills to be organised and trained to fight alongside the Allies in the various planned offensives in occupied Europe. Few, if any, would have had any inkling of Stalin's perfidious plans to completely subsume Poland as part of the USSR following the German surrender in 1945.

Although he talked little of the horrors of war, my own late father flew in Bomber Command and spoke highly of the Free Polish airmen who served with distinction alongside him and his R.A.F. colleagues.

Meanwhile the Special Operations Executive (S.O.E), formed by Cabinet Minister Hugh Dalton on Churchill's explicit orders after the fall of France in 1940, had become a highly effective volunteer "secret army" of men and women who were generally dropped behind enemy lines to wreak havoc and mayhem in accordance with Churchill's now famous edict to "Set Europe ablaze".

Here I should acknowledge the little-known fact that the S.O.E. also operated in Asia.

Sadly, many of these brave souls who fought the loneliest and most dangerous of wars against brutal Axis forces in both theatres of conflict never returned.

We turned up circumstantial evidence indicating that there may have been an S.O.E. connection with Chudleigh. However some "red herring" information (such as the incorrect naming of another large house in Rudgwick) threw us "off the scent" for a while.

Earlier this year, all was revealed when we came across documentary evidence published by Paul McCue, Executive Trustee of The Secret WW2 Learning Network charity. Conveniently Paul is a leading authority on the SOE and other Allied WW2 spy networks.

It so happened that the charity had contributed materials to a historical exhibition held in nearby Cranleigh village and that a vigilant local resident had taken a photograph of a display featuring Chudleigh/Woodthorpe. This was passed on to me by another local resident, Rosemary Townsend, who has a passionate interest in the wartime "goings on" in and around Rudgwick and Dunsfold. Rosemary tracked me down via Roger Nash, Chairman of The Rudgwick Preservation Society. You may recall that Roger and I sought Christopher's permission to feature material from the Chudleigh archives, which you and Christopher kindly passed to us for safekeeping, in the book on Rudgwick which he was writing at the time. I sent a copy of that book, "Lynwick Through Time - A Farm, a House and an Estate in Rudgwick", to you in February last year and you kindly acknowledged receipt and justifiably heaped praise on Roger for his "Herculean effort", a tribute he greatly appreciated!

I attach a copy of the documentary evidence for your interest. It shows that after the initial period of service as the Canadian Officers' Mess, Chudleigh became a "spy school" for members of the Free Polish military who had trained locally and now wished to take the fight to the Germans as members of the S.O.E. The codename of the new Chudleigh S.O.E. training school was STS64.

In addition to the Chudleigh/S.O.E. story the material includes interesting references to the American O.S.S spy school (TS-7) for French and US Special Forces based at nearby Drungewick Manor, to the Winterfold House spy school (STS4/7) for Dutch and Belgian forces, to Dunsfold Aerodrome and to the Warnham Court Polish military training school (STS63). All of this bears out the research undertaken by me and by Roger Nash with the welcome support of Dr. Steven Kippax, an internationally respected historian specialising in all aspects of S.O.E history. Steven kindly introduced me to Paul McCue and provided me with additional background on the Surrey based military training schools.

Through a remarkable co-incidence I was talking some time ago to my close friend Jan Kesek, who was born to Polish parents and grew up in the Tweedsmuir Military Camp at Thursley (Surrey) which served as a temporary wartime home for Polish refugees. We discussed the fascinating discoveries we had made about Chudleigh/Woodthorpe and he informed me that one of his relatives (author Sonia Purnell) had published a book titled "A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE" and sub-titled "WW2's Most Dangerous Spy" about the American spy Virginia Hall. She became a highly effective S.O.E. operative for British Intelligence and ultimately the Allied spy most wanted by the Germans.

This spellbinding New York Times best seller, now the subject of a feature film, is a compelling book and when I read the credits I was delighted to find that my friend Dr. Kippax was the primary source of the author's research information on the S.O.E.

A small world indeed!

Virginia Hall was a brave, independent and highly driven woman who was certainly not without her flaws but made a very significant contribution to the Allied war effort in occupied France. I think you would enjoy reading this excellent book so I have taken the liberty of asking Amazon to delivery a copy to your home as a small gift from me and my wife Sue.

This short letter clearly doesn't do full justice to the efforts my friends and associates have put into adding "flesh to the bones" of the Chudleigh legacy but I wanted you to know that I have fulfilled my personal commitment to complete the fascinating story which Christopher started several years ago.

I do hope that you enjoy the book when it arrives and that the little bit of additional history set out in this letter is something that you and your family will be happy to add to your treasured memories of my dear friend.

Sue and I both send you our love and best wishes.

Craig

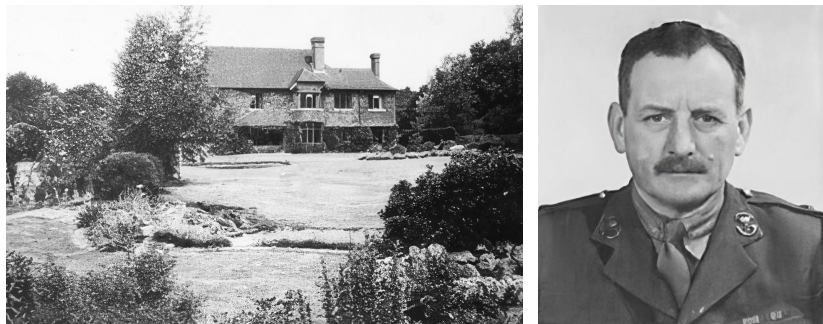
Chudleigh

Special Training School (STS 64) for Polish Secret Agents

Chudleigh was a large house outside the village of Rudgwick. It was taken over by SOE's EU/P Section in early 1945 to train Polish agents (circuit organisers and radio operators) to be parachuted into Germany. STS 64 was overseen by the Commandant of STS 63 at Warnham Court which was only six miles away.

It accommodated over 30 trainees at a time, suggesting that Nissen huts were placed in the grounds to ease pressure on the house's bedrooms.

STS 64 closed in May 1945 at which time the Commandant, covering both STS 63 and STS 64, was Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Harper, pictured below. The remaining trainees were sent to the Polish 4th Division.



Photos: Prance family and National Archives

When the owner of Chudleigh, Bertram Prance, returned to his house at the end of the war he was deeply unhappy at the condition in which it had been left by SOE.

There is no public access to the (since renamed) property.

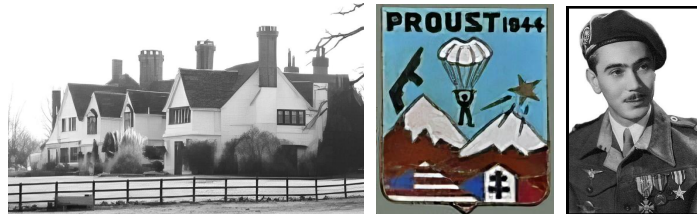
Drungewick Manor

Training School (TS-7, Area B) for French and US Special Forces

Drungewick Manor, an 11-bedroom property in 70 acres between Loxwood and Rudgwick, was bought in 1935 by Gilbert Miller, a successful theatre impresario of London and New York. Miller had been a military intelligence officer in the US Army during the First World War and it is probable that this was the connection which prompted making his home available to the US forces in 1944.

The Manor offered training for the little-known special forces of the PROUST Plan. This training was provided with the agreement of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6) and delivered by their American counterparts in the Secret Intelligence (SI) branch of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS – the US equivalent to both SIS and SOE). The Plan was to infiltrate personnel of the French intelligence service, the *Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action* (BCRA), together with some OSS personnel, behind the enemy's lines in northern France. Their role was to radio back intelligence on the Germans' strength, Order of Battle and movements following the Allied invasion of France on 6th June 1944.

Training began in April 1944 and by the following month trainees numbered 65. Most were sent to France by parachute, a few were landed by aircraft or by sea.



Left to right – Drungewick Manor, the PROUST pin badge; Lt Jacques Suissa of the MIDIRON mission of PROUST.

Photos: McCue Collection and <http://www.plan-sussex-1944.net/>

The PROUST Plan completed its role in mid-September 1944 when the last agents from Drungewick Manor were sent to France and the house returned to Gilbert Miller. The latter was a qualified pilot and had an airstrip in the Manor's grounds, it is not known if this was ever used by the OSS. The Manor is private property, there is no public access.

Dunsfold aerodrome

During the Second World War the aerodrome at Dunsfold (officially titled as both RAF Dunsfold and, under Canadian command, as RCAF Dunsfold) hosted at least two visits by Lysander aircraft. These were from 161 (Special Duties) Squadron RAF, returning from clandestinely picking up people being exfiltrated from Nazi-occupied France. Dunsfold was used when bad weather on the English south coast prevented Lysanders from landing at their Forward Operating Base of RAF Tangmere, near Chichester.

Two agents known to have been brought back to Dunsfold were Lieutenant Jacqueline Nearne and Captain William Savy, both of F (French) Section, SOE, who were flown in on 10th April 1944.



Left to right - Jacqueline Nearne; a Lysander in the colours of 161 (Special Duties) Sqn; William Savy. Photos: Louis-Alexis de Gemini, Ian Titman, National Archives

Jacqueline, who had parachuted into enemy-held France in January 1943, was in poor health following 14 months of nerve-wracking duty on behalf of SOE's STATIONER circuit. In 2018 a plaque was installed on the aerodrome by Secret WW2 to commemorate Jacqueline's service and return via Dunsfold.



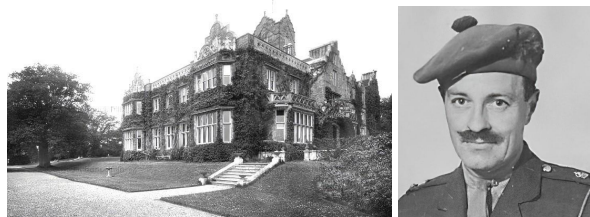
Photos: McCue collection

Warnham Court

Special Training School (STS 63) for Polish Secret Agents and Special Forces

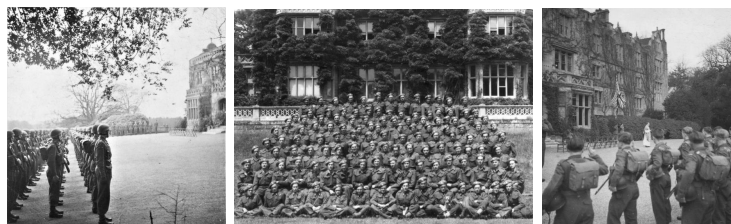
Warnham Court, now developed into a multi-unit residential site near Horsham, was originally one large property which still remains.

It was requisitioned in May 1943 as STS 63, a school for the E/UP Polish Minorities Section of SOE. The first Commandant was Lt-Colonel Charles Hudson. The school trained secret agents to be sent to occupied Europe, chiefly France, where sizeable Polish minority communities were engaged in resistance against the Nazis. Important results were achieved in respect of identifying, and reporting back to England, secret launch sites for German V-1 flying bombs - known as 'buzz bombs' or 'doodlebugs'.



*Prewar Warnham Court and Lt-Col Hudson. Photos: **SECRET WW2** and National Archives.*

Later trainees in 1944 and 1945 were Polish special forces paratroopers, termed the '*Cichociemni*', the 'Silent and Unseen' – pictured below at Warnham Court. Their operations on the continent were largely overtaken as the Allied armies advanced rapidly across Europe. STS 63 closed in May 1945.



Photos: Rafal Niedziela

Epilogue

My work on this project has rekindled my childhood interest in the fascinating history of WW2 and the events that led up to this cataclysmic global conflict.

Having been born in Glasgow less than 48 hours after VE Day in May 1945, my early years were spent among the bomb-sites and other detritus of all-out war that littered every industrial city, port and strategically important location across the UK in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Boys of my age grew up on a literary diet of comic book war heroes such as "Matt Braddock, VC and Bar", who first appeared in prose in "The Rover" in 1952 and later in comic strip format in The "Victor" and "Warlord" publications.

Although "Skipper Matt" mainly flew in Lancasters, in my childhood imagination he flew alongside my late father, Flight Sergeant John McManus Thomson, in the draughty and dangerous Wellington Bombers in which my real life personal hero served in his dual roles as radio operator and mid-upper gunner, unplugging his oxygen line and clambering back and forth through the complex geodetic fuselage construction of this strong, lightweight but extremely vulnerable aircraft between his action stations on every sortie.

Dad paid the price of oxygen starvation by being invalided out of the war and being hospitalised with a surgically collapsed lung for over a year while he recovered from tuberculosis.

His close friends paid an even higher price when his squadron was re-assigned from RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland to the Far East. Not a single one of them survived to experience the joys of V-J Day on the 15th of August 1945 which finally signalled the end of WW2.

In the 10 years since I was first contacted by Christopher Prance, I have become an avid student of European war history from 1936 to 1945 and I have assembled and read a fascinating collection of relevant books by several leading WW2 writers.

I commend the following reading list to those of you who may wish to learn more about this formative period in the geo-political evolution of 20th and 21st century Europe

By Antony Beevor

- "The Battle for Spain" which chronicles the brutal "brother against brother" Spanish Civil War during which Adolf Hitler used his close relationship with fellow fascist and Spanish Nationalist leader General Francisco Franco to perfect the military techniques, particularly *Blitzkrieg*, which he planned to use during his future domination of continental Europe. It was the HE-111 and JU-52 bombers of the special Luftwaffe unit the Condor Legion, under Hermann Goring's direct command, which laid waste to the small and virtually defenceless Republican town of Guernica in the Basque region of northern Spain, a ruthless carpet bombing attack vividly portrayed in Pablo Picasso's renowned work, simply titled "Guernica", which now hangs in pride of place in the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid as a chilling reminder of man's inhumanity to man and possibly the darkest period in Spain's chequered history. The stark canvass, painted in sombre black, white and grey, is 3.5 metres tall and almost 8 metres wide.

- "Stalingrad" which must surely rank as "the book most likely to end all wars". It chronicles in forensic detail the heroic defence of the motherland by the Red Army against the German invasion which Hitler foolishly launched against the advice of many of his generals and clearly explains how the resulting massive diversion of Germany's military effort and resources contributed every bit as decisively to victory in Europe as the United States' late entry into the war against Germany in December 1941.

European and US military casualties in WW2 were horrendous. Russia's losses were existential in scale.

By Max Hastings

- Too many to mention, Hastings' meticulously researched and documented accounts of WW2 campaigns and individual operations have long been the amateur historian's military reference books. I have particularly enjoyed "The Secret War" (subtitled "Spies, Codes and Guerrillas 1939-45"), "Operation Biting" and "Operation Pedestal" but these three titles represent a mere fraction of his prolific literary output on WW2 and other conflicts such as The Falklands War. A former military correspondent and highly respected newspaper editor, Max Hastings was knighted in 2002 for his services to journalism.

By James Holland

- Considered by The Times Literary Supplement to be "The best of the new generation of WW2 historians", James Holland strikes me as having all the research and documentary skills of Max Hastings plus the ability to draw his readers deep into the personal experience of his characters to the extent that you almost feel you are there on the battlefield.

I base this statement on my first experience of his prolific WW2 works, "The Savage Storm", which chronicles the Allied invasion of Italy, from the defeat of Rommel in North Africa, through the securing of the strategic North African ports, the successful defence of Malta, the critical invasion of Sicily, the mainland landings on the "toe" and "shin" of Italy and the subsequent hill by hill, valley by valley, advance on Rome.

I finished this lengthy but gripping tome a couple of weeks ago and immediately mailed it to a close friend who shares my passion for WW2 history. I am sure he will enjoy it as much as I did.

- I am now part-way through one of James Holland's ten published works of fiction. "Alvesdon" is an imagined quintessential Wiltshire farming village located between Shaftsbury and Salisbury and the book chronicles how the build-up and subsequent British declaration of war on Germany affects the local community. Thus far I have found it to be every bit as compelling and involving as "The Savage Storm" and I swear you can virtually hear the beat of the "drums of war" as the tension rises with every new page.

In many ways this excellent book evokes the sense of foreboding that Christopher Prance experienced as a child in Rudgwick before his evacuation to Canada and I for that reason I find it exceptionally relevant.

By Sonia Purnell

- Last, but by no means least, I refer you to my description of Sonia Purnell's gripping "A Woman of no Importance" in my main text.

This true story has many of the characteristics of a highly imaginative wartime thriller novel and I highly recommend reading it before viewing the movie of the same name.

Both the book and the movie have received wide acclaim and are well worthy of your interest.

