

**CODE  
1990**

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# CHAPTER ONE

They had long suspected this horrible place was here, surely one of dozens similar. Yet now they had rushed to the location as liberators, it was an absolute shock to every sense the human body possessed.

First the smell hit. The whole complex was foul, with the fetid stench of decay and death all around.

‘Man, it stinks to high heaven!’ one of the first to gain access impulsively yelled out. Others nodded in agreement, blocking their nostrils against the noxious odour from decaying corpses. Cowardly Nazi guards, intent only on fleeing to save their own skins, had left them in piles, unburied. Well over ten thousand corpses, scattered around. The smell was disgusting, gut-wrenching and utterly pervasive. An affront to humanity.

‘Help us, we have no food! Please – we beg you! Please...!’ Those inmates barely clinging to life were frantic, and there were uncounted numbers of them. Their plaintive pleas echoed down the lines of the barbed-wire compounds.

Poor wretches.

Other piteous cries of the starving prisoners assaulted their ears. Nor could they look away from the sight of those desperate creatures, dressed in the filthy rags of what remained of their camp uniforms, hanging off their skeletal bodies in tatters.

Their liberators hesitated to touch anything they didn’t have

to, wary of contact with typhus, lice or other contagions. As for the final sense, taste, many incoming British soldiers from the Eleventh Armoured Division would quietly fall out to find a private spot and spit out the bile that they'd brought up in response to the ongoing horror. They'd never seen anything like it and hoped never to do so again.

Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. A monument to man's inhumanity to man.

The officer overseeing one area of the campsite's Allied occupation, First Lieutenant Benjamin Fletcher, ordered his troops to assemble for instructions and receive a careful plan of action involving bringing relief to the unfortunate inmates as soon as possible. They needed a few quiet moments to assess the situation before beginning the marathon task, and he willingly gave them exactly that. He thus had a little time to reflect on the military campaign which had brought him to this spot in Northern Germany. Yes, his initial thoughts took him back about a month, to that stage of the Nazi retreat and his exultant shout out...

'On the home stretch now – we've got Jerry on the run!'

His mates gave thumbs-ups all round. A supporting artillery salvo confirmed it.

Just past the middle of March 1945, Benjamin Fletcher felt the long campaign was at last coming to an end. The British Army's military operation to finish this drawn-out war by crossing the Rhine River in the north, heading towards the enemy capital of Berlin, had begun. They and their American allies in the US Ninth Army took the lead in this massive thrust into the heart of Germany. The US First Army was in action as well, using its firepower to great effect.

'Keep heading east, we'll wedge 'em against the Red Army. It'll soon be over!'

The young officer's optimism was justified. The British Second Army moved straight across the extent of the North German plain, reaching two rivers, the Ems and Weser, in early April.

Next task – liberate the notorious Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Lower Saxony, near the city of Celle. A blessing for the soldiers or a curse? Target date: April 15. They made it right on cue.

There it was, right ahead.

On the orders of General Montgomery, Ben and a large number of other officers and troops were detached from the Second Army, tasked with freeing the unfortunates imprisoned there, then with cleaning up, managing and eventually eliminating the camp. A challenging but essential requirement. Being a compassionate man, once he'd thought through his new mission, Ben was happy to obey.

So here he was. A veritable labour of Hercules before him. Not just huge, it was monumental. A count would give well over fifty thousand half-starved prisoners and many thousands of corpses, left in the open to rot.

Clearly, the priority in his allocated area was with the living, those poor skeletons of human beings whose meagre rations had deteriorated even further during the recent harsh winter. Finding food, decent sustenance with vitamin supplements, was absolutely urgent, so after the brief break, it was now time to thrust his troops into action. Ben set about this challenge with all the strength he could muster, using platoons of soldiers to scour nearby towns and villages for whatever could be found. They would brook no resistance from the populace.

With that effort underway, he turned to the matter of a burial for the many deceased inmates who hadn't lived to see the liberation. First, the piles of corpses. Then those unfortunate prisoners, too weak to respond to first-aid treatment, who had since died.

Ben spoke enough German to make himself understood.

'Right, Fritz – form a work detail and get ready to start the burial!' was his order to the guards who hadn't managed to escape. They complied, awaiting instructions.

Once bulldozers were available, the British soldiers dug vast holes to form mass graves and the conscripted Nazis were

ordered to dispose of the many dead. It revolted them, but their conquerors were past caring about that. It would take as long as it needed. The British would work their new captives around the clock. Union rules out the window!

An enlisted man approached Ben with a complaint. The Nazi conscripts were rough-handling the dead still in piles. Calling a meeting with the Germans, Ben emphasised '*mit Respekt*' as he pointed to the dead and with a sweep of his arm indicated the large pit before them. They got the message, and his soldiers supervised a more respectful burial.

As he turned to leave, he noticed a slight twitch in the arm of a body on top of one pile. 'What the heck?' Yes, there was another. 'He's still alive! Soldiers, come over here – call an orderly! This one's not dead yet!'

True enough, there were signs of life, but the poor man was pretty far gone.

'Get him to the infirmary!' The makeshift hospital the British troops had now set up in Ben's area of the camp site. 'And check the others for any signs of life.' They did so meticulously, but the man Ben had chanced to notice was the only one found still alive, though barely.

Later, after spending some time supervising the burial procedure was back in operation, Ben checked on the man now in the infirmary. Miraculously, he was beginning to stir. Ben wondered if one of the vicious Nazis had bashed the poor wretch to knock him out before burying him alive. Well, for now, Ben would leave him to one of the camp doctors and return when he could.

Later that day, he received a report that the man was conscious and able to speak through an interpreter so paid a visit to Moshe Horwitz, as the patient introduced himself. Qualified watchmaker, he chose to add. Emaciated as he was, he could be any age, although he was unlikely to be over thirty. Somehow or other, he had missed the transportation of Jewish prisoners to Auschwitz but ended up here – almost as bad a fate. Yet, by the merest fluke, he'd survived!

‘Lieutenant Benjamin Fletcher of the British Army. You are now my patient – although our doctor will supervise your recovery.’

‘Sir, I thank you for my life! I’ll be forever in your debt. If I can repay you in any way...’

‘Mr Horwitz, that’s completely unnecessary. We’ll give you all possible medical care to recover from your ordeal, then, along with the other survivors, you’ll be driven to the nearby displaced persons camp once it’s set up. You’ve got your life back!’

With a gentle shake of Moshe’s hand, Ben left the infirmary. He would have loved to chat more, but duty called. He’d just been briefed – they were taking over a local German Panzer army camp once the surviving prisoners were deloused and could be moved.

On a personal note, Ben wrote himself a reminder to check with the supervising doctor and be there to farewell Moshe when he left. A man snatched from the very jaws of death. That didn’t happen every day.

Yes, plenty more jobs to attend to... especially caring for other survivors. Followed by planning the move.

Ben and his fellow officers, turning to the task, did their best to comfort and organise the remaining inmates. They requisitioned basic clothes from the area, and the newly freed prisoners were able to dispose of their filthy uniforms, to be put in piles and burnt. Delousing and treating diseases such as typhus, caught in the filth of the camp, was an absolute priority. As compassionate as they could be, the British did their best with what they had or could commandeer.

One job after another... Eventually, the timetable would be met. Once vacated, the filthy disease-ridden remnant of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was to be burned to the ground by flame-throwing Bren-gun-carriers to eliminate the typhus epidemic and louse infestation. Not a moment too soon.

During the next two weeks, radio broadcasts kept the occupying British troops in touch with the progress of the war which should

surely finish anytime now. Hitler's Nazis were collapsing on all fronts, with the victorious Russians, engaged in a life-or-death struggle in Berlin, sweeping in from the east.

'Good one, chaps!' they greeted each announced step towards final victory.

It would likely all be over by the time the fiery destruction of Bergen-Belsen was completed. German Frisia fell to Canadian and Polish forces. Nazi troops were on the point of surrender in the Netherlands.

'He's topped himself!'

They cheered on hearing of Adolf Hitler's suicide on 30 April. The great dictator was dead at last. He would now face a higher judge.

British forces reached the Baltic at the start of May and halted there by agreement with the Russians. American forces met the advancing Red Army, which had finally conquered Berlin at a great cost to themselves, in Central Germany at Torgau on the Elbe River. With the surrender of all remaining Nazi forces, the war in Europe came to an end on 8 May, to the relief of all.

However, there was no time to relax. The Western Allies, along with the might of the Soviet Union, turned to a fresh task.

That of occupying Germany itself.

## CHAPTER TWO

At last, the inevitable celebrations had died down. When Benjamin Fletcher had some time to himself, he thought about how World War Two had changed his life. Mercifully, he had escaped with only one wound requiring hospitalisation, plus a short period of illness, and was very thankful to have survived. What a life he'd had so far.

Ben never knew his father. Second Lieutenant Ezra Fletcher was killed in the Great War on 1 July 1916, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. Futilely advancing against an entrenched enemy position, his poor father had stopped briefly to give aid to a stricken soldier when he was hit by a burst of machine gun fire. He was killed instantly.

Back home in Cranleigh, a picturesque village about eight miles south-east of Guildford in Surrey, Ezra's widow, Myrtle, took the devastating news with a typical British stiff upper lip even though she was three months pregnant. After all, she was only one of many bereaved that day, with over nineteen thousand men killed on 1 July alone. Hundreds of thousands were to follow in the ongoing battle. It was a bloodbath.

Of course, she continued to grieve – for years – but did so in private.

'Ben,' she urged her only child, 'try to be the man your dear dad would have wanted. God rest his soul.'

For many years, Ezra Fletcher's officer's cap lay on his favourite chair at the dining room table. She dutifully kept it there to be acknowledged at every meal. As a little man, Benjamin would often stand and salute it. Myrtle quietly wept in gratitude at the fine boy her son was becoming.

Myrtle Fletcher scarcely had time to worry about her own future, as she had to provide for Ben and herself. True, she had a meagre war-widow's pension, which helped a little. She decided to open a confectionery shop in Cranleigh's High Street once Ben was old enough to be minded or left in a back room with toys. She was soon known as the 'lolly lady' and became very popular with the local children.

'Sweets for the sweet,' she would say to the many young customers offering their pennies.

After school, young Ben was eager to help and often brought friends keen to try a selection. His popularity only increased as he encouraged his schoolmates to drop by. Fortunately, it wasn't all giveaways, as their mothers also turned up to buy the wares. The only things that suffered were Ben's teeth, which became less than perfect from the sugary treats.

Christianity was an important part of Myrtle's beliefs, and she encouraged Ben along the same path, with her son making many friends at Sunday School. She would collect him at the end of the afternoon class before a treat of 'high tea' in a local café.

Myrtle never remarried or had any prospects of doing so. Thanks to the Great War's carnage, a whole generation of British men was destroyed on the battlefield. There were far too many widows or single women and too few unmarried men still available to woo them. She seemed resigned to her widowhood and busied herself making a living. She received spiritual consolation from her attachment to her local Anglican church, St Nicolas, and in her limited free time, busied herself with social ministries to help disabled war veterans.

Ben loved Cubs, then Boy Scouts, and was as keen as mustard to bellow out his reply to the exhortation each meeting from the

group leader to 'Do your best!' Bush walks, camps and practical skills such as knot-tying were right up his alley. He revelled in the exploits of Lord Baden Powell related nightly around the campfire and worked conscientiously for his series of badges. Scouting awoke something deep within the young man.

Then, out of nowhere, an unexpected offer.

'You're so kind, but I can hardly accept your generosity.'

Still, the elderly gentleman, a long-time member of her church congregation at St Nicolas, insisted. He'd pay for Ben to attend the local Cranleigh School as a day boy.

'Don't forget our Parish Council motto, Mrs Fletcher – *Cranleigh Cares*.'

True, she knew its Latin equivalent by heart, so reluctantly agreed.

Despite Ben's prowess with scouting and good marks at school, Myrtle wondered about her only child's future. The Great Depression was in full force when he left school after his senior year. He could have taken on the confectionery business but chose not to. Perhaps he'd had enough of lollies. He took a succession of jobs with no real idea of a career. It was a case of finding whatever work was available.

Still, there were consolations. When he was nineteen, the Regal Cinema opened. 'Let's go to the flicks!' he'd call out to his mates. They were all there on opening night, skylarking around until the usher threatened to eject the lot of them. Going to the Regal became a regular Saturday night activity.

Internationally, the storm clouds began to gather, with the German and Italian dictators on the march. Would his simple life in his village be upset? He wasn't the only one to ask the same question. With each passing year, the news from Europe became grimmer.

Then, when Nazi Germany marched into Austria as the 1930s drew to a close, Hitler eyeing Czechoslovakia as the next target, Ben felt conflict would be inevitable. He was right, analysing the situation with more perceptiveness than many politicians. At a

community meeting in the village hall, he stood up and shouted, 'It's coming, you know. We mustn't appease Hitler and Mussolini. Stand up to those bullies! Britain needs to rearm! Now – not a second to lose!'

Not everyone listened. Peace in our time? Would Prime Minister Chamberlain's famous 1938 declaration be justified?

When a second war began in 1939, immediately after the Nazi attack on Poland, Benjamin Fletcher knew what his duty was. He thought of how Lord Baden Powell would have reacted and recalled his idol's spirited and successful defence of Mafeking. He felt it wouldn't be long before Britain faced an even worse and much longer siege. Spurred on by that gloomy thought, he enlisted in the British Army at once. Whatever happened, he'd do his bit.

It was an absolute roller-coaster. Forming part of the British Expeditionary Force sent to France in early 1940, he soon knew what retreat looked like. The German Blitzkrieg hit France like a whirlwind in May of that year, and he and his fellow troops were forced back to Dunkirk for a desperate evacuation. The German Army – the Wehrmacht – had completely outmanoeuvred the British-French coalition. France was about to fall!

'To the boats, you lot!' his officer bellowed. Ordered to scramble aboard a small yacht, he had to even abandon his Lee Enfield .303 rifle. By the time he was placed ashore at Dover, Ben had only the army uniform he was standing up in. He was saved by the skin of his teeth.

'Thank you, Lord!' he uttered. It was amazing that two hundred and thirty thousand British servicemen, along with over one hundred thousand French, had been evacuated. They'd live again.

Yes, an absolute miracle. Saved – but what next?

Following retraining and re-equipping, after fulfilling home-based duties during the Blitz on London and being promoted to sergeant, Ben was posted to North Africa. German general Erwin Rommel was on the attack, sweeping all before him.

There was only one defensive position before Cairo and the likely fall of the Suez Canal: El Alamein.

‘Backs to the wall, soldiers! It’s do or die!’ A new commander, Lieutenant General Sir Bernard Montgomery, assumed command of the Eighth Army. Rommel’s last thrust was stopped. Now it was the turn of the British forces.

Rommel was at the end of vastly stretched supply lines and thus vulnerable. Using clever tactics, the British threw the Germans off balance. Through a terrible battle of attrition, their attack thrust into Rommel’s Panzer army.

‘Get ’em, men!’ Ben urged.

They did. Many Nazi soldiers were rounded up at bayonet point. Losses were awful on both sides, but Montgomery’s tactics prevailed. The Suez Canal would remain in British hands, an essential supply line safeguarded. Rommel’s forces and his fabled Afrika Korps were in retreat.

‘Sergeant, time for you to enjoy some home leave!’ Ben’s officer informed him once that sector was secured. He was certainly grateful. Myrtle Fletcher was delighted to see her strapping son again and hear of his exploits. She never ceased praying for his safe homecoming.

‘Ben, I can see the army has become your home,’ she reflected. It had given her son a sense of community, with the camaraderie provided by his fellow non-commissioned officers, as well as a sense of purpose, with the war still ongoing. Just a pity about the awful danger. The irony of her late husband’s death was he had volunteered for the army, yet as a schoolmaster, he was exempt from military conscription. Ezra Fletcher was a man who felt the call of duty. As did young Ben.

‘I guess you’re right, Mother. Just as well I’ve been called back to duty. No more North Africa. Officer training for me here in Blighty and then reassignment.’

So it proved.

Graduating as a first lieutenant, Benjamin had a variety of postings and then, in early 1944, was sent to Salisbury Plain and

surrounds in south-western England. Special training. No home leave, and complete security. Beach assault operations were paramount. All hush-hush.

Something very big was on.

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Operation Overlord wasn't merely big – it was huge. The invasion of Normandy to open a second front against Hitler's Germany was meticulously planned, with all ground armies, American and British, under the command of General Montgomery. The Nazis knew it was coming, they just didn't know where. Many in the Wehrmacht expected the assault to be at the narrowest point of the Channel, near Calais. However, the Allies outfoxed them, and even though Erwin Rommel prepared extensive defences on the Normandy beaches, they weren't enough. On 6 June 1944, the massive amphibious assault was launched. Sword and Juno Beaches were allocated to the British.

Landing with his men as part of the Third Infantry Division, Lieutenant Benjamin Fletcher urged them onwards, occupying the eastern end of the beachhead. With shelling from the RAN providing covering power and RAF bomber command doing their best to take out enemy reinforcements, the British surged forward. While not all the objectives for the day were gained, the assault was a success.

'Well done, all ranks! We're on the way!' Ben showered them with well-deserved praise.

Later, with the city of Cherbourg captured, the British turned to their next objective, Caen.

'This won't be easy,' he opined. It wasn't, proving to be a prolonged battle. The city fell only in July. On the last day of the attack, a ricocheting bullet hit Ben's left arm. Suffering a significant wound, he was out of the fighting, evacuated to a hospital in Portsmouth that day on an outbound medical transport.

Ben was to spend several weeks out of action. He appreciated his

enforced holiday. The doctors and nurses were concerned about the possibility of infection, and he was one of the first to trial a new miracle drug, penicillin. It worked wonderfully. However, the bullet had damaged some of his tendons, and his lack of mobility was delaying his discharge and return to active duty.

‘How are you, old boy?’ asked his sudden visitor. ‘No need to salute, of course!’

In came his colonel, one Horace Kingsley. Ben sat to attention out of respect. He had heard the colonel was briefly out of the front line visiting wounded Third Infantry Division men.

‘On the mend, sir! However, the quacks don’t want to send me back yet. The arm tendons are still giving me a bit of gyp.’

‘Well, we need you, that’s for sure. But not till you can shoot straight. Then you can give the Hun a bit of curry! Fortunately, he’s now in retreat. We’re moving up the French coast and will be well away from where you copped it.’

‘Yes, sir, we’re right up on the news with broadcasts all the time.’ That they were.

‘Look, my young friend, I’ve been giving some thought to when Fritz runs up the white flag. It’ll be a few months off, no doubt, but after that, we could use you for something off-line, I’m sure. Interested?’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘Righto. Whitehall has various matters on the boil.’ The colonel gestured in the direction of London. ‘More on that later. Must go. Toodle-pip!’

‘Goodbye, sir. Thanks for your visit.’

Ben knew Colonel Kingsley often had meetings with Military Intelligence, confidential as they were. Officers only.

Intriguing.