

THE HEROES OF
SAINTE-MÈRE-
ÉGLISE

A Novel

J. D. Keene

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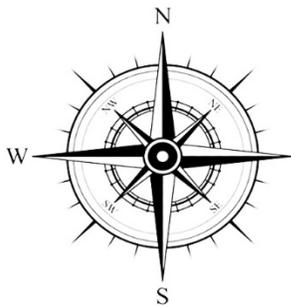
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This is a work of historical fiction. It contains the use of historical characters. Some of the events or conversations involving those historical characters have been well documented and duplicated when possible. Other times, the author has confirmed the events or conversations took place, however the details of those events or conversations are unknown. In those cases, the scenes are the result of the author's imagination, and based on what may have happened.

The fictional characters are the product of the authors imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.



ENGLISH CHANNEL



St. Anne

Guernsey Island

Saint Peter Port
Jerbourg
Pleinmont

Jersey



NOT TO SCALE

To Katie, who has always believed.

Cast of Characters

American

Fictional

Jack Wakefield, captain, 82nd Airborne, U.S. Army
Baldwin Hicks, staff sergeant, 82nd Airborne, U.S. Army

Historical

Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander, Allied Expeditionary Force
James (Jumpin Jim) Gavin, general, 82nd Airborne, U. S. Army
William Lee, major general, 101st Airborne, U.S. Army
Jim Ewens, captain, U. S. Army Air Corps
William Surratt, first lieutenant, 4th Infantry Division, U. S. Army
Wallace Strobel, first lieutenant, 101st Airborne, U.S. Army
John Steele, corporal, 82nd Airborne, U. S. Army
William Shirer, reporter, CBS News

British

Fictional

Quinn Family
Oliver Quinn, resident of the island of Guernsey, farmer
Margaret Quinn, wife
Claire Quinn, daughter

Mack McVie, sergeant, 51st Highlander Division, BEF
Colin Fradd, sergeant, 51st Highlander Division, BEF
Simon Hancock, sergeant, medic, 51st Highlander Division, BEF
Virgil Pierpont, squadron leader, RAF
Kingsley Dalton, flight lieutenant, RAF

Historical

Winston Churchill, prime minister
Bertram Ramsey, vice Admiral, Royal Navy
William Wharton, captain, Royal Navy
William Tennant, captain, Royal Navy
Alan Brooke, chief of the imperial general staff.
Charles Lightoller, captain of the yacht, *Sundowner*
Alastair Denniston, commander, Bletchley Park
Stuart Milner-Berry, champion chess player, code breaker

Gordan Welchman, mathematician, code breaker
Frank Nelson, chief, SOE
Kathleen Summersby, General Eisenhower's driver, BMTC

French

Fictional (* *Member of the French Resistance*)

Legrand Family

René Legrand, farmer*
Cécile Legrand, wife
Philippe Legrand, oldest son
Jean-Pierre, youngest son*

Ganier Family

Pascal Ganier, farmer*
Luke Ganier, son*
Madeleine Ganier, grandmother

Lapierre Family

Brigitte Lapierre, widow
Armand Lapierre, son
Angélique Lapierre, daughter*

Hall Family

Arthur Hall, American/French citizen, thoroughbred horse farmer*
Gabrielle Hall, French wife*

Laurent Family

Martin Laurent, lieutenant, 21st Infantry Division, French Army
Margot Laurent, wife, schoolteacher

Marchand Brothers

André Marchand, grocer
François Marchand, older brother

Garcia Family

Salvador Garcia, hotel owner
Maximina (Max) Garcia, son

Daniel Girard, owner of tugboat company, resident of Cherbourg*
Antoine Devaux, owner of marine electrical shop, resident of Cherbourg*

Julien DuBois, dock supervisor*
Domingo Barojas, guide
Maurice Fuquay, student
Marcel Bordeur, corporal, 21st Infantry Division, French Army
Ismaela Abraham, nursing home resident
Hyam Rubin, nursing home resident
Netta Rubin, nursing home resident

Historical

Alexandre Renaud, mayor Sainte-Mère-Église
Charles de Gaulle, General, French Army
Doctor Pelletier

German

Fictional

Shapiro Family
Joseph Shapiro, living in France, banker
Ingrid Shapiro, wife
Alfred Shapiro, oldest son
Dreyfus Shapiro, youngest son

German Military

Gunther Dettmer, *sturmbannführer*, *Waffen-SS*
Helmut Volk, *oberst*, *Wehrmacht*
Wilhelm Ziegler, major, *Wehrmacht*
Wolfgang Beck, corporal, *Wehrmacht*
Claus Muller, corporal, *Wehrmacht*

Historical

Adolf Hitler, chancellor/*führer*
Hermann Göring, supreme commander of the *Luftwaffe*
Erwin Rommel, *Generalfeldmarschall*

Polish

Fictional

Edelman Family
Uri Edelman, professor of music
Miriam Edelman, wife, professor of language
Esther Edelman, daughter

Spanish

Fictional

Uncle Marcos, Spanish revolutionary.

Welsh

Historical

Frederick Riddle, seaman, Royal Navy

Contributing Characters**

Colin Fradd

Elizabeth Gassoway

Joe Alvarez

Katie Keene

Kimberly Morrison

*** Contributing characters are neither fictional nor historical. They are actual individuals who made significant contributions to this novel in the form of editing or advanced reading. If you are interested in being a contributor in a future publication, email me at jdkeene@ww2author.com. An additional list of contributors can be found in the acknowledgments at the back of this book.*

PART I

INVASION

Soon they will come.
First, we will hear the sound of their boots approaching at dawn.
Then they'll appear through the mist.
In their death-bringing uniforms they will march toward our homes,
Their guns and tanks pointing forward.
They will be confronted by young men...

Choman Hardi

CHAPTER 1

May 10, 1940
Tünsdorf, Germany

SS-Sturmbannführer Gunther Dettmer had been dreaming of this day since his childhood. When he was seven, his father died in the Great War. He never knew how, only that it happened in a battle against the French army—a thought that never escaped him.

Now, with the early morning sun rising behind him, the tall, broad shouldered SS officer stood in knee-high grass on top of a small hill. He represented the classic Nazis image of the master race with his blue eyes and blond hair.

Through his binoculars he looked west at a column of *Panzer* tanks—their gun turrets pointing toward the French village of Étain. Surrounding him were hundreds of lorry troop carriers, each with sixteen members of the elite *Waffen-SS*, a unit created to intimidate and control its victims by any means necessary.

“I find the sound of those idling engines exhilarating,” he said to a low-ranking foot soldier standing next to him. “What a beautiful sight. There are more than seven hundred *Panzers* just in this column alone. To the north—two thousand more on the borders of the Netherlands and Belgium.”

The Great War ended in 1918, with the surrender of Germany and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty forced Germany to pay large reparations to the victors, including the French and British. This became burdensome for the German people, who already struggled in an economic depression.

To pay the obligations forced upon them by the treaty, Germany printed massive amounts of currency. This created inflated prices, causing food, housing, coal, and heating oil to become unaffordable for most Germans. Rampant unemployment left a feeling of helplessness throughout the country.

Now, Gunther Dettmer stands proudly. He is dressed in his green, SS battle uniform, with the *Totenkopf* skull and crossbones emblem on his cap—his thoughts are focused on his father and mother. His father whom he barely knew, and his mother who had been forced to do unspeakable things to support him and his sister due to the collapse of the German economy.

Not realizing the foot soldier couldn’t hear him over the rumble of the engines, Dettmer continued, “Those bastards treated us like common rodents after the war. The day of sweet revenge has arrived. I am proud to be standing here as a witness to history. In just a few moments, our *Führer* will give the order, and the *Blitzkrieg* will begin.” *I wish you were here, Mother*, he said to himself. *You deserve to experience this as much as I do.*

In the sky above, the sounds of airplanes roared from behind him. Looking up, he saw the beautiful sight of hundreds of *Luftwaffe* Ju 87 dive bombers headed into France, followed by the accelerated roar of the seven hundred *Panzer* engines that ceased being idle.

“Es hat begonnen—It has started!” Gunther Dettmer whispered to himself.

May 10, 1940
Sainte-Mère-Église, France

Through the poppy fields. That was their favorite path home from school. Their footprints left a wake of red and gold as they leisurely made the journey.

Their friendship, now in its third year, started when Jean-Pierre came to the rescue of Alfred, who was being bullied at school. Several of the other boys, led by the pudgy, Maurice Fuquay, had pushed Alfred to the ground, causing him to lose his wire-rimmed glasses. Then they spit on him and shouted “Jew Boy” over and over, while kicking dirt in his face.

Jean-Pierre, standing several meters away, got a running start, tackled Maurice, and punched him. He landed several blows to his head. After multiple punches to his face, his nose bled, and his lip became cut. With Maurice pleading for him to stop, Jean-Pierre climbed off the defeated tyrant. He then helped Alfred to his feet and handed him his glasses as Maurice and the other boys ran away.

Even though they initially had little in common, Jean-Pierre Legrand and Alfred Shapiro had become best of friends since Alfred and his family moved to Sainte-Mère-Église from northern France.

Jean-Pierre was Catholic, and Alfred was Jewish. Alfred stood slightly shorter than Jean-Pierre and had black hair. Jean-Pierre, although only average height, he carried himself with a quiet confidence that made him appear taller than he was. He had blue eyes and dark brown hair that he wore a little longer than his parents would have liked. Jean-Pierre’s father made his living as a farmer, while Alfred’s father was a teller at the only bank in Sainte-Mère-Église.

“You were the best violinist in the recital today, Alfred,” Jean-Pierre said.

“Do you really think so or are you just saying that?”

“Why do you doubt me? Have I ever lied to you before?”

“Only when you think I will get my feelings hurt?”

“What is wrong with that? You’re my best friend.”

“You treat me like a child sometimes, even though we are both thirteen.”

Jean-Pierre was getting bored with the conversation. “Did you invite Angélique to your birthday party tomorrow?”

"I was waiting for you to ask me that. Yes, I did, but she has to work at Brécourt Manor."

"Your party isn't until noon. Maybe I'll go help her so she can finish her chores early and come to your party."

"Jean-Pierre, she barely knows who you are. She is fourteen. She will have nothing to do with you."

"Maybe after your party, you and I can go fishing at Le Grand Vey."

"And to get to Le Grand Vey, we have to ride our bicycles past her farmhouse. You are always working a plan, Jean-Pierre."

"Your Bar Mitzvah is the following week. You should invite her to that."

"She's Catholic. She won't want to come to my Bar Mitzvah."

"I'm Catholic, and I'm going. So are my parents. My brother will still be home on military leave. He will come too, and he is Catholic."

"Okay, I'll ask her. Now stop using the celebrations in my life to spend time with someone who has no interest in you."

"I will marry her one day, Alfred. You will be my best man. The whole town will be there. We are getting married in Notre-dame-de-l'Assomption."

"Okay, Jean-Pierre. Whatever you say."

Home on leave from northern France, Jean-Pierre's brother Philippe was a machine gunner on the Maginot Line.

Philippe had explained to Jean-Pierre that the Maginot Line was a long, underground fortress on the border between northern France and southern Germany. It comprised many kilometers of corridors, ammunition storage rooms, and living spaces for French troops. It had large cannons mounted in bunkers pointed toward Germany. The French government built them as a deterrent to prevent Germany from invading France as they had done twenty-four years earlier during the Great War.

Whenever Philippe discussed his military duties at the family dinner table, Jean-Pierre could see how his father swelled with pride that his oldest son was defending France today, as he himself had done during the Great War. Jean-Pierre's mother did not approve of such talk at the dinner table.

"Prideful tough talk only brings about more war," she would say.

Like every French citizen over the age of thirty, Cécile Legrand had experienced war, and she didn't want her children to live through what she had.

As Jean-Pierre and Alfred stepped out of the poppy field and onto the unpaved road, they looked off into the distance and could see dirt being stirred by a car moving in their direction.

"That is Armand's car," said Jean-Pierre.

"He is really driving fast," replied Alfred.

"I think my brother Philippe is with him."

Armand Lapierre was Philippe's best friend and Angélique's older brother. He too was home on leave. Philippe and Armand were both part of the French 3rd Army Division. They were stationed on the Western Flank of the Maginot Line at Fort Jeanne d'Arc at Metz; they were home for the first time in several months.

Jean-Pierre liked it when Armand was around. He would often bring Angélique when he came to visit Philippe. Armand and Angélique lived a few villages to the south-east, in Saint Marie-Du-Mont, with their mother, Brigitte.

Angélique had brown eyes and dark brown hair she wore pulled back with a ribbon that matched one of the two dresses she owned. Jean-Pierre thought it was cute that a few strands of her bangs would always hang down over her beautiful face. Whenever Jean-Pierre was near her, he would get nervous and his mouth would get dry. But he always found the courage to say hello and make her laugh with some silly antic.

Armand's car approached and slowed. Dressed in his battle uniform, Philippe got out and ran up to Jean-Pierre. Philippe, standing much taller than Jean-Pierre, had a strong build and chiseled face like their father. Jean-Pierre could see by Philippe's expression that something was wrong.

"Jean-Pierre," he said. "You need to listen. I must go now. They have called Armand and me back to our garrison. The Germans have moved into France. There are reports of thousands of tanks and infantry troops. Their planes are bombing villages in the Netherlands, Belgium, and northern France. They have already taken control of several villages in the lowlands. We have got to get back. I'm counting on you to take care of mama and papa. You will be safe. We won't let them get here. We will fight them off, just like papa did before."

"When will you be back, Philippe?"

"Only after we have driven them back. But it will be soon. I promise."

He then embraced his little brother, got back into the car with Armand, and off they went at breakneck speed, dirt flying under their tires.

Alfred said, "I'm scared, Jean-Pierre. My father told me the reason we moved from northern France to Sainte-Mère-Église was because he had heard from relatives in Germany that it was no longer safe to be Jewish and anywhere near Germany. The Nazis were rounding up Jews, taking them away, and they were not returning."

"Don't be afraid, Alfred. You heard my brother. They will never get this far south. Our army is tough and strong and brave. You will see."

Jean-Pierre, looking at Alfred with frustration, said, "I wish I were older. I would go fight with my brother. Together we would fight side by side and push the Germans back."

Alfred said, "I need to get home. I need to tell papa that the Germans are trying to cross into France."

The boys realized that they still had two kilometers to get home. The walk to and from school every day usually took them an hour. Anxious to see their parents, they both

ran. As they did once again, they looked up and saw the dirt from another speeding vehicle coming in their direction. This time, it was a truck. Alfred recognized it as his papa's truck. In it he saw his papa, his mama, and his five-year-old brother, Dreyfus. Behind the truck was the same trailer they used to move all the way from Verdun, France, near the German border, three years earlier.

Just as when they moved to Sainte-Mère-Église, all their belongings, what little they had, were loaded up in the truck and the trailer. When the old truck got closer, Alfred's papa pumped the brakes hard, causing them to squeak and squeal. Alfred's mother leaped out of the truck and ran to Alfred.

"Alfred, get in the truck. We are leaving for Spain. We have packed all of your things in the trailer."

Alfred looked at his best friend. "I have to go now, Jean-Pierre."

Jean-Pierre tried to be brave and shook Alfred's hand. "You will be back soon—I know you will. I have your birthday present at my house. I will give it to you when you return."

The handshake between the two boys turned into an embrace, because both boys sensed that something evil was happening, and they would probably never see each other again.

As Jean-Pierre made his way through the narrow streets of Sainte-Mère-Église, he approached the centerpiece of the village, the courtyard of the Catholic church, Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption. Several shops such as Le café Du Quartier, the DuBost bakery, and the pharmacy, owned by the town mayor, Alexandre Renaud, surrounded it.

At the other end of the courtyard lived the town doctor, Dr. Pelletier. His house was next to the village park, the Park of La Haule. Next to the park was a large barn that stored hay.

Jean-Pierre, crossing the courtyard on his way home, saw many of the townspeople gathering there. This was not unusual. The ancient Roman road marker in the church courtyard established itself as a frequent gathering place for impromptu meetings to discuss events, both important and unimportant. Every Thursday since 1889, cattlemen and farmers from all over the region sold their livestock and produce in the courtyard. However, this time their purpose for a meeting was different. This time Jean-Pierre heard both anger and fear in the voices of those who gathered. Some men were carrying shotguns. Those who had fought in the Great War carried Berthiers, the standard issue rifle used by the French army.

Even though it was Friday, a line of people filed into the Catholic Church. Some were weeping. All stopped and spoke to Father Rousseau as they entered.

In a hurry to get home, Jean-Pierre didn't stop to listen to the details of the discussions. He crossed through the courtyard as he and Alfred had done so many times before. However, he overheard the men planning a strategy to defend Sainte-Mère-Église from the Germans if they ever made it this far south.

He heard Dr. Pelletier ask, "What if Paris falls?"

Mayor Renaud was more optimistic. "The Maginot Line will stop the Germans in their tracks."

This made Jean-Pierre think of his brother Philippe, who would soon arrive at his garrison that may already be under attack, even before Philippe and Armand got there.

Jean-Pierre tried to fight back his emotions, but at that moment he couldn't. He ran home with tears rolling down his cheeks. He was concerned for everyone he cared about. His brother Philippe, his mama and papa, and his beautiful Angélique. He also worried about his closest friend in the world, Alfred.

He asked himself, *What will happen to Alfred? Why do so many people hate the Jews? Why do the Germans treat the Jews so horribly?*

He had overheard conversations between Alfred's parents while visiting Alfred's house. He didn't understand the seriousness of their words. He recalled how upset Alfred's mother was after receiving a letter from her sister in Germany, telling of the arrest of Alfred's uncle.

"They took him away two weeks earlier," her sister wrote, "and nobody would say where he was, or when he would be home."

She added, "This had been happening to Jewish men for weeks and nobody had been heard from since."

Jean-Pierre hoped that Alfred's family would make it safely to Spain and that Philippe, Armand, and the rest of the French army could push the Germans back into the Rhineland.

Jean-Pierre's family owned a small farm just north of Sainte-Mère-Église. When Jean-Pierre got to the front porch of his farmhouse, he stopped to wipe the tears from his eyes. He wanted his papa to be as proud of him as he was of Philippe. He didn't want either of his parents to see he had been crying. He also knew the time for boyish tears had passed today. He had to stay strong. He had to be brave because he sensed that soon, many people would be counting on him.

May 10, 1940
Courtils, France

It had been four hours since Alfred and his family drove away from Sainte-Mère-Église. The rain was coming down hard, and the windshield wipers on the old truck only moved at one speed and that was slow.

"Joseph, please pull over. It isn't safe driving in this rain. We can't even see the road. The rain will subside. Just give it a chance."

Joseph gripped the steering wheel tightly as he tried to find the road through the pouring rain, "Ingrid, you heard the radio broadcast. The Germans are slicing through Belgium, the Netherlands, and northern France. It is only a matter of time before they're at the base of the Pyrénées. We need to get over those mountains and into Spain before they arrive. We have no time to pull over."

As Alfred and Dreyfus were sitting quietly yet uncomfortably between their parents on the single bench seat of the old truck, Alfred was thinking of his friend Jean-Pierre.

He felt regret that in the three years since he had become friends with Jean-Pierre, he had not been honest with him. Alfred's father, Joseph Shapiro, had insisted that the family's enormous wealth remain a secret. As an additional precautionary measure, they told everyone they met that they were originally from Verdun, France. Although they lived there for a short time after fleeing Germany, they were in fact German citizens. Also, Mr. Shapiro wasn't just a bank teller, which was his trade in Sainte-Mère-Église, but the president of the largest bank in Berlin.

Joseph and Ingrid Shapiro were only in their early forties, but at first glance, appeared much older. They were both overweight, though they had lost some body mass since their exodus from Germany. Joseph was mostly bald on top with a thick band of black hair that wrapped around the back of his head. He always wore a baggy black suit black tie and white shirt. He stood slightly shorter than the average man.

Ingrid could best be described as frumpy. Like Joseph, her wardrobe was sparse, and she could usually be seen in one of four tattered dresses she wore regularly. Her short dark hair revealed hints of gray, and was often slightly messy, as if she attempted to comb it in the morning, but never got around to finishing. Their disheveled appearance was due in part to their desire to conceal their wealth, and also because the stress of living in hiding had caused the pride they once valued to diminish. Ingrid said, "Joseph, we will never make it to Spain if we drive over the side of a bridge or hit a tree. Besides, the boys need to stretch their legs."

"Yes, I have to pee, Papa." Said Dreyfus.

"You always have to pee, Dreyfus. You must have a bladder the size of a horsefly," said Joseph. "Listen, all of you. We will stop soon, but I will remind you of what I have

been telling you since we left Germany. I am a marked man. You know that. Adolf Hitler himself has put a bounty on my head. That means you, my family, have a price on your head too."

During the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, Joseph Shapiro was the leader of a strong and vocal opposition to Hitler. He also gave large sums of money to any organization that opposed the Nazi Party. Once Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, those who had been vocally against the Nazis were being rounded up by Hitler's "Brown Shirts" and publicly beaten and imprisoned. Sometimes, they would go missing, taken away in the middle of the night, and never seen again. Mr. Shapiro knew if he stayed in Germany long enough, he too, along with his entire family, would be among the missing.

Although it had been four years since he spoke to any of his neighbors in Berlin, the last time he did, they informed him that the Brown Shirts had come by his home and were looking for him. They even had a substantial reward waiting for anyone who could tell them of Mr. Shapiro's whereabouts. They also informed him that the Nazis had raided his home and loaded up trucks with valuable paintings, silver, and furniture. This, Mr. Shapiro had never shared with his wife Ingrid.

Because he knew the Nazi philosophy was gaining strength throughout the entire European continent, Mr. Shapiro didn't feel his family would be safe if they made it known who they were. So, they used various false names, and everyone thought they were a poor family from northern France who moved to Sainte-Mère-Église because of the Nazi uprising in neighboring Germany.

"It looks like the rain is coming down even harder," said Joseph. "I think now is a good time to pull over until the rain lets up."

As he looked to the right for a safe place to pull over, he didn't notice the large hole on the side of the road where the road bank had been washed away from the rain.

When his left front tire hit the hole, it became submerged below the deep puddle and blew out when it hit the sharp edge on the other side of the hole. As the front wheel hopped out of the deep rift with a violent leap high into the air, slamming down on the asphalt, the rear wheel hit the same hole and suffered an identical fate, causing another violent blowout.

Joseph tried to maintain control of the truck and trailer, but the two blowouts caused the top-heavy vehicle to lean hard to the left and roll over on its side and down the small embankment. The truck turned over multiple times before finally coming to rest on its driver's side, as the wheels of the truck continued to spin freely. The multiple rolls caused their belongings to get scattered for hundreds of meters throughout the wet field.

Mr. Shapiro lay on his left side pressed against his door, his family resting on top of him, pinning him to the broken glass of his door.

"Is everyone okay?" Asked Joseph.

"I think I am, Joseph. Just a little banged up and sore," replied Ingrid.

"I'm fine, Papa," said Alfred.

"Dreyfus?" Asked Joseph, not hearing a response.

"Dreyfus?" shouted Ingrid. "Oh Dreyfus!"

Ingrid lifted her left arm to find Dreyfus unconscious and bleeding profusely from a severe gash across the left side of his head.

May 10, 1940
Northern France

Philippe and Armand were just north of Reims when in the distance they saw a French military train headed north-east from Paris. Seeing it gave them a sense of pride and confidence. The steam from the stack blew high in the air as the engine pulled flatbed train cars carrying tanks and anti-aircraft guns.

Trailing behind the flatbeds were several passenger cars loaded with hundreds of French soldiers heading to the front lines.

"That's right, boys," shouted Philippe. "Those Germans are about to learn their lesson for a second time. We defeated them in the Great War, and we will defeat them again."

In Armand's excitement, he increased the pressure on the accelerator causing his 1932 Peugeot to rattle like an empty oil can filled with bolts.

"We are getting close to Metz, Philippe. God, I hope the Maginot Line holds."

"It will, Armand. Our boys have been training for this moment for years."

Looking in his rearview mirror, Armand noticed three planes approaching from behind. "We have company, Philippe."

Philippe turned his head around and glanced through the rear window. Approaching them rapidly, staying low and parallel to the road, were three planes, and with a loud roar and lightning speed flew right over their car before gaining altitude.

"Did you see the black crosses on the fuselage?" asked Philippe. "Those are German planes."

They continued to watch them as they headed toward the supply train in the distance. In single file, all three planes quickly gained altitude. They made an abrupt turn to the left and then dove in the train's direction, following a path directly over the tracks.

As they zeroed in on the train, the first plane, a Messerschmitt 109, opened fire on the passenger cars, spraying a ray of bullets into the roof of each car, penetrating the wooden roofs. Philippe and Armand watched as some of the windows were shattered by the strafing bullets and others were sprayed with the blood of French soldiers.

After the first plane veered to the right, the second plane, a Junkers Ju 87, dove sharply over the flatbed train car that was carrying the tanks. It dropped a large bomb directly on the first tank, causing it to explode into a massive fireball. That plane also veered, following the Messerschmitt into the horizon.

Finally, the last plane, also a Junkers Ju 87, followed the same path as the previous two. It flew directly over the steam engine itself. Once again, another massive bomb was released from the bottom of the plane, scoring a direct hit, creating an explosion that was larger than the last.

The train continued to stay on the tracks for several seconds before it tipped over on its right side. A violent shrieking noise could be heard over a kilometer away. Dirt and smoke rose high in the air as the remaining cars slammed together like an accordion, resulting in a third massive explosion.

Armand pulled the car over to the side of the road and slammed on the brakes, causing the car to skid through the dirt.

They sat quietly in the car in disbelief at what they had just witnessed. Philippe felt sick to his stomach as a rush of emotions overcame him. He considered opening the door to vomit but fought the urge. Armand broke the silence. "They didn't stand a chance, Philippe. What the hell are we up against?"

May 10, 1940
Étain, France

"Don't let them escape" shouted *SS Sturmbannführer* Gunther Dettmer. "Kill them!"

The small squad receiving the order from Dettmer hesitated. *Did they hear his instructions correctly? Why is he ordering the cold-blooded execution of innocent women and children?*

"What are you waiting for? Did you not hear me? Take them out—now!"

The group of villagers was exiting the little village of Étain, which had the misfortune of being in the path of the advancing German army. It had been set ablaze by air strikes, mortar rounds, and the firepower of dozens of *Panzer* tanks.

The fleeing villagers watched as *SS* soldiers approached and forced them to halt on the edge of the road. Mothers held their crying children closely. The elderly made the sign of the cross and whispered prayers. Moments later—machine gun fire. Then—silence.

May 10, 1940
Northern France

Though many meters away, the smell of the burning train was pungent—a mixture of wood, oil, and burning flesh.

Armand opened his trunk and removed their weapons. He was slightly shorter than the Philippe and looked up as he handed him his MAS-38 submachine gun.

As Philippe inserted the only ammunition clip, he had with him, Armand grabbed an ammo box and loaded his bolt-action MAS-36 carbine rifle, “How much petrol do we have, Armand?”

“Not enough. And with all hell breaking loose, it will not be easy to find any.”

“Let’s find a farm. If we tell the farmer we need to return to the front, he’ll give us what we need.”

“That’s if the Germans haven’t already raided all the farms.”

After they had traveled another twenty kilometers, cars heading south passed them at speeds that were far too fast for the narrow dirt roads. Tied to their roofs were suitcases and furniture.

Later, they met large numbers of refugees. They were on foot. Some with nothing but the clothes on their backs, others with ox carts loaded with valuables. Their faces reflected exhaustion and defeat. Many had no place to go. They knew from living through the last war that their farms and villages in Belgium and northern France were no places to be during a German assault.

With little room between the two sides of the road, the travelers eased their way to the side to make room for Armand’s car. He slowed the vehicle to a crawl, watching each side carefully so he wouldn’t hit any of them. There appeared to be few men younger than sixty. The refugees were mainly small children, women, and the elderly. The younger men were already at the front or headed in that direction.

Uncertain of their current location, Armand stopped the vehicle to speak to a man and his wife.

“*Bonjour, monsieur.* We need to get back to our garrison. How far are we from Metz?”

“Metz? Metz is sixty kilometers to the east. You are getting ready to enter Étain. You aren’t far from Luxembourg.”

Philippe and Armand realized they had taken a wrong turn at Verdun.

“What do you think we should do, Phillippe? We are nowhere near our garrison, and we are almost out of fuel.”

“Just keep driving. That’s all we can do.”

Looking past the open fields they saw more refugees on the roads. German planes were buzzing overhead and would occasionally spray the civilians with machine gun fire, forcing them to dive out of the way.

The sounds of mortar explosions in the distance were getting louder and more frequent. Some were close enough that the concussions caused the ground to shake beneath the car. Puffs of dirt and debris were thrown into the air as the bombs hit the ground. Every village in sight was ablaze.

"Where is our army?" asked Armand. "The only French troops we have seen were on that train."

"Most are manning the Maginot Line east of here. The Germans have outsmarted us. They bypassed the Maginot Line and are making their way through Belgium."

"This is crap, Phillippe. We are screwed. France is screwed."

"You and I have been through many difficulties together, old friend. We have always gotten through them. Just keep driving. If the only thing between France and the German army is Armand Lapierre and Phillippe Legrand, then at least we will give them one hell of a fight. Let's go find some Germans."

As they approached Étain, Philippe saw the carnage and said, "My God, what is that?"

Several meters ahead were bodies lying on the side of the road. Armand pulled over so they could get a closer look. In front of them was the sickening sight of young children mowed down by machine gun fire. Their mothers lay on top of them, the result of a futile attempt to shield them from the spray of bullets. Flies were buzzing over the bodies, landing on the dried blood. Philippe and Armand both looked away. After Philippe turned his back to the gruesome sight, he leaned forward, placing his hands on his knees, and vomited from the emotions of the past few hours.

Enraged, Armand said, "I don't know when and I don't know where, but one day the bastards who did this will pay."

The sun was setting and turning the sky a bright orange. Armand looked at his fuel gauge and it was nearly empty. He knew it would not be long before he and Philippe would be on foot. Several kilometers further, they saw a sign for Valleroy.

Armand turned down a side road and headed toward the town to find fuel. After a short distance, they realized that was no longer a possibility. The Peugeot sputtered and choked as the engine rotated its last few turns before completely stalling. Armand tried to start the car, but to no avail.

"Time to walk," said Philippe.

Walking toward Valleroy, they still hoped to find fuel. The sun continued to set, but there was still enough light to see for many kilometers.

Over the hill they heard several vehicles headed in their direction.

"Do you hear that, Armand? Quick! Over this hedgerow."

The hedgerows stood five meters tall and were mounds of mud and rock. Farmers used them as borders for their property and to fence in their livestock. Over the centuries they had become overgrown with shrubbery. The roots made the hedgerows firm like concrete.

The engines of the vehicles got louder as they approached the peak of the hill. To their relief, when the vehicles appeared over the horizon, they recognized them as a French artillery unit.

Phillipe and Armand leaped over the hedgerow and into the middle of the road, waving their arms and motioning for them to stop.

The convoy of vehicles applied their brakes, and a lieutenant colonel stuck his head out of the passenger side of the lead vehicle "Who are you, and what unit do you belong to?"

Philippe spoke first, "*Bonsoir, sir.* I am Sergeant Philippe Legrand, Machine Gunner, 3rd Army Division, stationed at the Garrison in Metz."

"I am Sergeant Armand Lapierre, Artillery Specialist, 3rd Army Division, also stationed at the Garrison in Metz."

"What are you doing here?" shouted the gruff lieutenant colonel.

Philippe said, "We were home on leave in Sainte-Mère-Église when we heard of the invasion. We have been driving for hours trying to get back to our garrison when we ran out of petrol. Now we find ourselves lost, sir."

The lieutenant colonel barked, "Well, you aren't lost anymore. We came from Metz. There are no Germans anywhere near there. We need you more than the 3rd Army. I will contact your command to let them know you have officially transferred to the 7th Army. Get in."

As Philippe and Armand climbed into the back of the first troop carrier, several hands reached out and pulled them into the canvas-covered seating area just as the wheels turned. After a few brief introductions, Armand asked, "Where are we going?"

A voice from the front shouted, "Dunkirk! We will reinforce the Brits. They are getting crushed."