

THE NARROW ESCAPE

It was getting hot and all that digging is thirsty work, so we stopped for a break. There was a little orchard just next to where we were working so we parked the truck in there and sorted out the tea things. The lads were all gassing away about this and that but it was difficult to hold a decent conversation, to be honest, because of all the noise going on around us. You get used to that after a while, of course. We'd been here for three months this time, although some of us, me included, had been here the first time around – well, a few miles to the north, I suppose.

We thought the trees in the orchard would give us some useful shade, but they were a sorry lot. It didn't look as though anybody had been seriously tending them for ages. This was September so you'd have expected a load of fruit but there was just a handful of feeble looking bits and pieces, some still hanging on the trees but mostly scattered on the ground.

I was leaning on the truck, nattering with my mate Bill, when it happened. We didn't have any warning, you see – well, not about this one, anyway. There were so many of the damned things. The first I knew about it was this enormous great flash. I don't remember the noise – although it must have been deafening – just the great orange flash and then dust suddenly everywhere.

The dust was so thick, you couldn't see anything else at all. I couldn't even see Bill, who'd been standing right next to me. And I couldn't hear anything either. Perhaps I had gone deaf for a bit. Makes sense now I think about it.

Anyway, eventually the dust started to thin out and I could begin to get my bearings. I called out for Bill.

“Bill? Where are you? Are you all right?”

I could hear a bit by then, because I could make out somebody muttering, but I couldn't tell who or where they were exactly. I started to pick my way to where I thought the sound was coming from. As I went, I was beginning to see things around me more clearly, but it didn't stop me tripping over something. I just managed to save myself from falling right over and then checked what I had tripped on.

You've probably guessed it. It was Bill.

He was just lying there, looking sort of peaceful, a silly grin on his face like he usually had. But his chest and belly were completely caved in – smashed to pieces. I don't think he can have had the faintest idea what had happened to him. At least, that's what they told his Mum.

I looked around for the others. I was the only one on my feet, but I could see Eric waving his arm so I went over to him. He was groaning a bit and he was covered in blood but he didn't seem to be in too much pain.

“Are you all right, lad?” he asked me through clenched teeth. I nodded. I couldn't speak just then.

“How are the others?” he said, gripping my trouser leg so tight I couldn't move.

Standing there, I took a deep breath and had a proper look around me, but I already knew what I would find. Eight sappers had knocked off for a quick cup of tea on a sunny September morning in Normandy. One of who knows how many German shells they'd chucked off today happened to come our way and, just like that, Eric and I were the only ones left.

The truck was all right, though.