A Little Airplane Accident

I HAD bought a two-inch thick diary for the year 1967. This was just as well, as it would be crowded with happenings when it was [over].

It began with the arrival of another daughter, Beatrice, our fourth, at St Mary's on Wednesday, January 18; she had, regrettably, more of the Thursday's child within her. She had far to go.

I say regrettably, because she eventually settled in Queensland, married a handsome young Australian, and took up a career with the Australian government. By 1993 I had been permanently banned from the great island continent, as will be related later. I fought four legal battles to overturn the ban; Australia, defeated in two of them, changed the law each time to rob me of the fruits of victory. I was prevented by Canberra from attending her wedding, and refused permission to see the grandchildren she eventually bore me. She took Australian citizenship and this would normally furnish me with the next of kin's automatic right of entry. Questioned about this unforeseen development, the latest prime minister, John Howard, betrayed how hopelessly his party was in hock to my opponents: "In that case," he was reported as saying, "We shall

have to change the law again."

He had become mired in The Pottersman Factor; I do not believe it was just the growing hostility of governments towards the kind of history I was writing by then.

These troubles with the Establishment had their roots in 1967, the year Beatrice was born. In that year I asked out loud a blasphemous question: was Sir Winston Churchill guilty of the assassination of an inconvenient ally, the prime minister of Poland, in 1943? Forty years down the road, and over sixty from the event itself, the answer has to be that the jury is still out.

The historical background was this: Returning from an extended tour of Polish troops in the Middle East, General Wladyslaw Sikorski, his only daughter, and all his staff were killed outright when their RAF Transport Command B-24 Liberator crashed on take-off at Gibraltar at eleven p.m. on July 4, 1943. Apparently only the Czech pilot, Edward Prchal, survived; his second pilot, the British Squadron Leader "Kipper" Herring, was never seen again. Prchal maintained at the court of inquiry that his controls had jammed, but air crash investigators found no physical evidence of this.

I had not previously looked into the case, but one day early in 1967 Rolf Hochhuth told me a strange story, and asked for help. His play on Pope Pius XII and the Jews, *Der Stellvertreter* (The Representative) had made him globally famous, and it had upset the entire Catholic world. My scarcely less famous book on Dresden had moved him to start writing a play about Churchill, his sinister adviser Lord Cherwell, and the morality of the saturation bombing campaign.

That was why we had first met, in the offices of *Stern* magazine in Hamburg on January 25, 1965; as chance would have it, it was the day after Churchill died.

His message to me now, early in 1967, was simple and enigmatic: look into the Sikorski plane "accident," he said, because an accident it was not. He had met in Switzerland an Englishman who was in British Intelligence, he continued, and had revealed as much to him. Adding a touch of the melodramatic, which was quite cred-

ible in a man of Hochhuth's artistic and mildly paranoid temperament, he told me (and several others later) that he had deposited details of the man's identity and information in a Swiss bank safe, and would not reveal them until his informant's death, if then. Be that as it may, and there were many who were profoundly sceptical, I agreed as a favour to him to build up a research dossier on the whole mystery, if he met any expenses. I might even get a book out of it, we agreed.

The piece of paper in the bank, if it existed, played no further part in what happened; it had been merely a trigger and no more; I never saw it. It was said at the time that it was shown to Laurence Olivier, artistic director of the National Theatre, before he would agree to his company staging *Soldiers*. David Frost claimed on television that Olivier had denied this to him. Olivier then denied having spoken with Frost. It was that kind of controversy.

I set about the task with little enthusiasm, I admit, even as Rolf began writing his drama (which eventually became famous under its mildly ironic title, *Soldiers*). Facts were initially hard to come by, and I had other fish to fry.

Rolf phoned me many times – we were *per Du* by this time – and he badgered me to find out what the wartime Governor of Gibraltar had written in his private papers. Lieutenant-General Sir Noël Mason-Macfarlane was dead, and his estate was at Galashiels in Scotland, which did not make me any the keener to delve into things. He had been in Military Intelligence and at crucial moments an attaché in Berlin – where it turns out he toyed with the idea of personally assassinating Hitler – and in wartime Moscow.[1]

Since Rolf kept nagging, in March 1967 I finally took the overnight train to Galashiels. Mason-Mac's daughter Mrs John B. Hall had laid out the files on the long dining table in their family mansion. It was the usual lifetime collection of mementoes, mainly press clippings, and with nothing like the hoped-for file on the plane crash or war memoirs in evidence. There was one useful file on his period as military governor of Italy in 1943, which I borrowed and eventually microfilmed for my work on Churchill, and I was about to give up when I found myself looking at five pages of typescript,

paper-clipped together, headed simply: "18.7.45."

It began with the words,

> "The morning of the fateful day on which Sikorsky [*sic*] met his tragic end . . ."

For some reason, two years after the plane crash, at a time when he was so embittered with Mr Churchill that he stood as the successful Labour candidate against Winston's enfant gâté Brendan Bracken in the General Election, Mason-Mac had decided to type this personal memoir.

As I read it through it, it became clear that he for one suspected foul play. I was astounded. Apparently Rolf's anonymous friend might have been right. The governor made no secret of his concerns about the plane's Czech pilot Edward Prchal. It was known, he wrote, that Prchal never bothered to wear a Mae West lifejacket. But that night, for some reason, he had done precisely that – alone of those aboard that plane; and he alone had survived. Even odder, Prchal had flatly denied wearing the Mae West when questioned later. Here is what I read that afternoon in Edinburgh:

> The pilot . . . stuck stoutly to his story that, having, as was his habit, put his nose down to gain speed, when he tried to pull back the stick and start his climb, the stick somehow became stuck and would not move, and he thus flew straight into the sea. . .
>
> There was one very extraordinary fact. The pilot, like nearly all pilots, had his idiosyncrasies, and he never, under any circumstances, wore his Mae West, either taking off or landing. He had his Mae West hung over the back of his seat where it would be handy, if required. He stoutly maintained in evidence that he had not departed from his usual practice, and that when he started his take off run, he was not wearing his Mae West. The fact remains that when he was picked up out of the water he was found to be not only wearing his Mae West, but every tape and fastening had been properly put on and done up.

I slipped my leash; the hunt was on. Tony Geraghty, a fine journalist at *The Sunday Telegraph*, got wind of the Hochhuth contro-

versy, and located a rare copy of the top secret Air Ministry court of inquiry; it was held by the Polish Historical Institute, the Sikorski Institute – the British government had acceded to their Polish ally's request for a copy in 1943.[2]

The transcript confirmed that Prchal had denied, even under oath, that he wore that Mae West. Other discrepancies came crowding into view. The V.I.P plane had carried at least two extra passengers, from the Middle East to Gibraltar, Pinder (referred to in one of the Polish government documents as Head of the Intelligence Service in the Middle East) and W. H. Lock, who was also clearly an Intelligence agent from the cover story he gave. The body of neither was found after the crash, if indeed they did rejoin the B-24 transport plane before take-off. The second pilot, Herring, was also missing.

As I began digging deeper, a stranger supplied me with the actual fuel records of the plane, to suggest it may have been overloaded; that would have been a relatively innocent explanation. (Knowing how governments work, and having seen from official files the concerns that my inquiries were generating, I wonder now whether he had been nudged into producing such a document to me.)

A Special Operations Executive (SOE) radio operator, Douglas Martin, stationed high up on the Mediterranean side of the Rock, had seen the actual crash, and he told me after my book was published that he had witnessed a bulky figure "like the Michelin man" walking along the wing of the floating wreckage. It was not Prchal, as he had broken an ankle in the crash and he claimed was concussed.

THAT spring of 1967 the British press filled with details of the mounting Sikorski controversy. I discussed it frequently with William Kimber over tea, as a friend rather than as a publisher. As the controversy welled up, in April 1967 he invited me to use all this material that I was gathering for a book, which he would publish at the same time as Rolf Hochhuth's play *Soldiers* had its London premiere.[3]

Joyce, the widow of the second pilot, Squadron Leader Herring,

refused to believe he was dead. He had not taken his lucky flying mascot with him, she told me, nor his best flying suit; extraordinarily, she also told me that she had received a phone call from him on the day following the crash – she could not have mistaken the date, it was the day their first son Graham was born. My discreet questioning of the widow, who I realized might well have been in post-natal shock, caused outrage at the air ministry.[4]

I revert however to that polished table in Galashiels.

It often happened, I later found, that relatives warmed only belatedly to the chase. Thus the widow of one of his Afrika Korps generals, Hildegard Kirchheim, wrote me months after I published the Rommel biography, that she had news that would surely delight me – she had located her late husband's very extensive diaries, which she was now enclosing for me.

Still at the Mason-Macfarlane household in Scotland, I gathered together my meagre haul, and prepared to return by overnight train to London. It was now that the general's daughter suggested we take tea in the drawing room, and she brought in one final item – "I have found his 1943 desk diary," she said. Together we turned to July 4, 1943, the Sunday it all happened, and I could not believe my eyes. I pointed to the entry for eleven o'clock that morning (••). The general's hand was crippled by rheumatism and his handwriting difficult.

"What do you think your father wrote here?" I asked.

She peered at it. "Sweet Escot?" she ventured, and spelt it out, in the voice of one not knowing what she was saying. "That's what it looks like to me." To me too, but I had wanted her to say it first.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bickham Sweet-Escott, with two Ts, was a senior officer in the SOE, Mr Churchill's sabotage and covert operations force which had as recently as December 1942 facilitated the assassination in Algiers of Admiral Jean-Francois Darlan, Eisenhower's ally and the prime minister of Vichy France (SOE had furnished the murder pistol and the funding).

The discovery that a senior SOE officer was in Gibraltar on the morning of the B-24's crash faced me with a dilemma. Colonel

Sweet-Escott was alive and probably litigious. In a case like this, the Treasury Solicitor would fund any action in defamation. The government would certainly be behind him.

Just to be sure, I checked his recently published memoirs; they were the first by any high ranking SOE officer, entitled *Baker Street Irregular*.[1] I flipped its pages back and forth. On one page he described leaving England at the beginning of July 1943; two pages later, he mentioned arriving in Algiers on July 5. July 4 was absent. Flights to Algiers from England stopped over at RAF North Front, the airfield at Gibraltar. It certainly looked like he was there.

I passed on all this sensational Scottish material to Rolf Hochhuth in Basel. "It looks like your information may be right," I said, but I warned him explicitly of the legal risks in making any use of the "Sweet Escot" diary reference.[5]

Without mentioning that I had checked his memoirs, I wrote to Sweet-Escott and put the governor's diary entry to him. He was aware of what underlay my question. He denied in his reply that he was in Gibraltar. Roger Makins, Foreign Office advisor to Harold Macmillan in North Africa, had travelled with him, he recalled; in fact he even had Makins, now Lord Sherfield, write independently to me, supporting his denial.[6]

To me it smacked slightly of protesting too much; besides, "advisors" were usually Intelligence agents. *Faute de mieux* however Sweet-Escott's word as an officer would have to satisfy me.

Eventually he found other people to help. The actor Anthony Quayle, who had been the governor's wartime aide-de-camp, obligingly read the ominous "Sweet Escot" entry as "Swear Escort", and there was an almost perceptible sigh of relief. Swear which escort?

1 Bickham Sweet-Escott, SOE officer and banker, (1907–1981), *Baker Street Irregular* (Methuen: London, 1965) See pages 166 and 168*n*. On page 166 he wrote: "At the beginning of July Peter and I set off for Algiers. At Lyneham we were told that we would fly that evening to *somewhere in the west of England*, and then take off for Africa." RAF Lyneham, in the west of England, was of course (and still is) the major air transport hub; the words I have italicised appear to have been interpolated in place of something else, and only "Gibraltar" would make sense.

Escort for whom? It was not convincing. Besides, this phrase "Swear Escort", which one might have expected to be a regular event, occurred nowhere else in that diary – and it still left the coincidence of dates in Sweet-Escott's own memoirs unexplained.

I don't recall whether I discussed the Sweet-Escott problem with Kimber, who was understandably gun-shy when it came to libel risks. The recent Leon Uris *Exodus* case had nearly ruined him.

I eschewed all reference to the colonel-cum-banker in my book, however grudgingly. Rolf Hochhuth however ignored my warning, and named him. Sweet-Escott sued him in the London High Court; living in Switzerland, Rolf made no attempt to enter an appearance and lost by default.

That is all that it is fair to say about the governor's diary, apart from referring to another of those rather odd coincidences. Years later, researching the life of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, I found a haunting entry in the still-classified diary of his naval aide, recording a conversation on November 8, 1942, eight months before the Sikorski crash, with the Governor and his ADC, Quayle.[7]

They were talking of the highly inopportune arrival at Gibraltar of the French general Henri Giraud. Eisenhower cried out at one point, "What I need around here is a damned good assassin." So Eisenhower's own ADC recorded that night.

"All felt something had to be done with him – even a little airplane accident."

The British governor made an odd response. "Mason-Mac," the American officer recorded, "said he had a good body-disposal squad, if needed."[2]

Sweet-Escott died in 1981. His wartime papers, and his own pocket diary, may still repose somewhere and they may eventually reveal whether he was in Gibraltar on July 4, 1943, if not the actual reason why; or why he later took such pains to conceal it.

There were others passing through Gibraltar on the day Sikorski died. British war minister P J Grigg was one; so too was Soviet am-

2 See my *Churchill's War*, vol. ii: *Triumph in Adversity*, pages 612, 806 and its appendix III at pages 850 et seq.

bassador Ivan Maisky, recalled by Moscow from London in a huff over Britain's refusal to abandon Sikorski's exiled Polish government.

There was another significant transient on the Rock that night, not documented until 1972 when Wing Commander Fred Winterbotham coyly admitted in a secret document that he too was there that night. A seemingly unbalanced German had now subpoena'd him to testify in the High Court, and that is why he confidentially mentioned it. "Unfortunately," he wrote to Sir John Slessor, "I was on the Rock that night on my way back to London. . . No doubt such characters as Irvine [sic], Hochhuth, Tynan etc will be there [in court], and I don't want any mud."

That was quite understandable: people might have asked him some difficult questions. Winterbotham, a veteran MI6 figure, was normally based in Bletchley Park and London; and had not he and "C" himself, head of the British Secret Service, also been in Algiers on the day when a hired tool of the SOE assassinated Admiral Darlan barely a mile away?[8] Had we known of these coincidences in 1967 the debate might have been even more acute.

My misfortune would be that Kenneth Tynan of the National Theatre Company, casting about for a controversial play with which to upstage the rival Royal Shakespeare Company, hit upon *Soldiers*, and decided to bring it to London. He sent a memo to Laurence Olivier, the National's artistic director: "I don't know whether this is a great play, but I think it's one of the most extraordinary things that has happened to British theatre in my lifetime."

In the run-up to the board meeting which was to debate this matter on April 24, 1967, Tynan approached me for documentary support; I turned over to him my embryonic Sikorski dossier, such as it was. The National's chairman, Lord Chandos, had been a member of Churchill's war cabinet as Oliver Lyttelton. He opposed the production; the board agreed. Olivier turned to the public, and Tynan decided to stage the play himself. Now Bomber Harris objected to the Lord Chamberlain, who still controlled licences to stage plays, and a year would pass before Tynan – with the abolition

of the censorship law – could get *Soldiers* onto the London stage.

While Hochhuth completed his play, I continued researching the history. I interviewed the pilot Mr E. M. Prchal by telephone when I went to Washington that spring of 1967. It was in May.[9] [•• *check diary and telephone log*?]; I also met him on a Canadian television programme, and later on British television too, on a David Frost programme.[3] We exchanged a few terse but polite words off camera; he did not strike me as a man of great intellectual capacity, but equally he did not seem capable of having assassinated somebody a quarter century earlier. Perhaps they never do. I failed to penetrate his mask, if mask it was.

Air Ministry Accident Investigation Branch investigators who inspected the wreckage, hauled up from the sea-bed, found no evidence to support or explain his story. The B-24's control lines and surfaces were all still operating freely. In public, Prchal maintained his innocence to the end, insisting that the controls had jammed; in private he admitted to squadron comrades at least once that he had misled the inquiry.[10] He moved to California and died of cancer in Calistoga in 1984. He had arranged to leave all his papers to the Hoover Library at Stanford University – they showed me the correspondence with him – but before he died he revoked that bequest; he appears to have destroyed everything. [*check recent diaries for dates and quotes*.]

Some trails petered out; others ran into dead ends. During that week in Washington DC, I checked the State Department and other files. In the classified archives of the U.S. Navy in the Navy Yard I looked up the tidal data of the Mediterranean for the spot where the wreckage lay, trying to understand why bodies would disappear overnight in an area of little tide or current. Some of the plane's wreckage is in fact still there today.

Not all of the research was productive. A senior navy official at the archives offered to help, and asked for the Polish general's name and the precise details of the date and time of the crash. I spelled them out to him. "Date of birth?" he asked, and I furnished that as well, marveling at how many generals called Sikorski must be on

3 Page 000.

their database.

"If you can give me the precise time of birth it would help me research this accident," he continued. "Astrologically, I mean."

IT was the late spring (••) of 1967 when I heard from Wales that my father was not at all well. Nearly a year had passed since Kimber had published his *Smokescreen of Jutland*. We had driven Daddy back to North Wales and hardly heard from him since; I suppose he was just not a family man. Phyllis, his housekeeper, phoned me in Paddington about her worries – and it sounded bad. He had a large swelling on the side of his neck and the local medic did not know what to do.

"I do," I said. "Get him ready and packed for London. I will be there by midday tomorrow."

The swelling was grotesque, the size of a golf-ball. To my untrained eye it flashed one ugly word, but I wanted a doctor to say it first. I booked the old man straight into St Mary's for an examination.

"I told them I'm an old sea dog," he said, as he eased his bulk down the steps into the street after the examination. "I told them I could take whatever the bad news is, on the chin. To give it to me straight."

His eyes were full of the old fire I had seen the year before, as he refought Jutland. "They said it was nothing like that, nothing we can't beat."

I opened the car door for him. Even as I murmured congratulations and relief, I saw the house doctor behind him silently beckoning me back.

I now had to conceal the truth from my own father, although he soon realized why they were administering radiation [•• *or was it chemotherapy*?] therapy. We moved him in with us again in Paddington. The therapy was hard for him to take, and for us to see. He spent each afternoon in our drawing room doubled up with a pain that no medicine could entirely smother. Our little children could not understand what had gone wrong with grandpapa. He got to see our youngest, Beatrice, who had been born that January

in the same hospital. She had my features, like Josephine, and I had my father's, so there was some consolation for us in that. When the treatment ended I drove him back to Pwllheli again. We all knew it would soon be over.

The children would soon be of school age. That summer of 1967 we all spent many months on the northern coast of Spain. In July, I motored south with them through Madrid in our ailing Rover Three Litre, with its overdrive now permanently shot, and headed on to Gibraltar, near the southernmost point. I wanted to stand on the runway at RAF North Front, the airfield, at eleven p.m. on July 4 and look east into the Mediterranean, and see what the pilot Prchal had seen – how visible the horizon might have been. At the international border post between Spanish La Linea and the British colony, I found that I had to leave Pilar and little Paloma behind for the day, as Franco's frontier officials did not permit those with Spanish passports to cross into Gibraltar.

The present Governor, whom I had alerted to my coming, produced to me copies of the telegrams that Mason-Macfarlane had sent to London reporting the tragedy. I visited the RAF headquarters building on the airfield, and they dug out their 1943 flight movements log for me. Only one page, the one covering July 4, 1943, had been ripped out. Of 52,000 [*check*••] flights in and out of the airfield that year, their records showed, Sikorski's was the only one that crashed.

Carol, my sister, seemed destined to be the harbinger of bad news. I was back in northern Spain a few days later when a telegram came from her. Daddy had been taken to the local hospital with internal bleeding caused by the radiation therapy. I flew home alone, guiltily hoping I might be too late. He had already been transferred to Bangor General – "Not Bangor General," he had protested gruffly. "They always leave this hospital feet first."

A bus took me over there. He was getting massive transfusions and colour was flowing back in, but his hands seemed empty and bloodless, just old and wrinkled skin covering the bone beneath. I

held his hand all day, knowing he had not long.

His mind wandered. Once he asked what year it was.

"1967, Daddy," I said, and told him what I guessed he really wanted to know, how old he was when he died. "You've had a good innings," I said. There was no point dodging the issue now.

I began writing down all he said, like a reporter covering a big story, as in a way it was for both of us. This was the most important day in his life, and I was going to make a record of it:

[*Insert diary extracts*]

He gripped my hand, his face twisted into a grin. He was itching all over from loss of blood, but said he was lying absolutely still as the doctors had instructed. "I can still smile just like a little boy," he whispered, his mind fading.

A doctor took his blood pressure. "Surprising," he murmured, and told me Daddy might now hang on for weeks after all. Perhaps they always say that. I stayed a few more hours, and then told him I had to leave, adding my last white lie to my father – that the doctors had wanted visitors to go.

"Farewell," he said, holding out a hand. I squeezed it and felt rotten.

"Not farewell," I said. "I'll be back on Sunday." I said it as much to myself as to him.

"Farewell David," he teased, holding onto a little paternal cruelness to the very end.

An hour after I let myself back into our Paddington flat, a kindly voice rang from the hospital, inquired if I was alone, and suggested I sit down as she had sad news for me.

ONCE again John and Nicky flew back from their overseas postings, and we went down by train to Wales. Daddy had asked to be buried at sea, and John would take care of that. The coffin was draped with the Union flag. We sons sat dutifully in the car following the hearse as it wound its way through the lanes of North Wales; as it approached a little village, a policeman on point duty

held up the traffic, and snapped a smart salute to his helmet when he caught side of the flag. It was an unforgettable moment, and one of the most heart-rending of my life.

(Endnotes)

1 They are now housed in the Imperial War Museum.

2 Photostatic copies of the original handwritten and typed transcript of the lengthy Court of Inquiry proceedings including a marked map of the runway at Gibraltar will also be found in PRO file AIR2/15113.

3 Diary and telephone logs for April 1967.

4 See PRO file AIR../ ; the air ministry ordered Flight Lieutenant Graham Herring to have no further contact with me; his mother remarried as Mrs Joyce Robinson. [•• *perhaps suppress her surname.* R.?]

5 Churchill college archives holds in the papers of Sir Ian Jacobs a box file "Oddments" including the court action of Bickham Sweet-Escott regarding the death of General Sikorski in 1943.

6 Roger Makins, first Baron Sherfield (1904-1996). Educated at Winchester and Christ Church, he took a first in history, became a Fellow of All Souls, read for the Bar, and joined the Foreign Office at 24; Ambassador to the US 1953–6; chairman of governors at Imperial College, 1962-74.

7 Secret diary of Captain Harry C Butcher, USN, Nov 8, 1942; previously classified pages, opened at this author's request (Eisenhower Library).

8 See my *Churchill's War*, vol. ii: *Triumph in Adversity*, page 659. F W Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1974; and New York), . He later confirmed to "C's" personal assistant that they had all been in Algiers that day. – An expatriate former German, now stateless, Carl Thorne, had sub-pœna'd Winterbotham and several others in a High Court action (later dismissed) against publisher Andre Deutsch, Queen's Bench, 1970, T No. 1319; the wing commander wrote to Slessor on January 1, 1972, "Unfortunately I was on the Rock [i.e. Gibraltar] that night on my way back to London after finalising arrangements with Ramsay, Tedder and Alexander concerning supply of certain intelligence [evidently ENIGMA] for the HUSKY operation. Incidentally Grigg the Minister for War was also there, we were travelling back to London in [General Carl F] Spaatz's Liberator…. No doubt such characters as Irvine [*sic*], Hochhuth, Tynan etc., will be there [in court], and I don't want any mud." Winterbotham knew it was improper to mention the words ENIGMA or ULTRA in correspondence. As for the impor-

tunate Thorne, the Home Office knew how to deal with him. In Jun 1972 he was recommended for deportation.

9 See also interview of Prchal published in *The Sunday Express*, May 14, 1967.

10 One was Swabey, later (••) chairman of Schweppes; another was Prokop… •• CHECK THE FILES OR THE UPDATED EDITION. Both contacted me after the book was published.