

THE BLUE DIARY

A NOVEL

CHRISTOPHER FINDLAY

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THE BLUE DIARY

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*To the memory of F/O Hugh John Findlay
Killed on Active Service
June 6, 1913 – September 14, 1941*

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FOREWORD

Novels are often born out of real circumstances and are then transmuted into fiction through the alembic of time. My father, Christopher Findlay, began this story when he was in his eighties, but if you follow its antecedents back far enough, you will eventually arrive at a fateful moment in his childhood. He was nine years old, growing up in Carleton Place, Ontario, when a telegram arrived with tragic news. A beloved uncle, a pilot in the RCAF flying out of Acklington Air Base in northern England, had been killed when his plane crashed at the end of a reconnaissance mission over France. It was September 1941.

Fast forward to 1994. On a trip to Britain, my father visited the cemetery where his uncle was buried and noticed an oddity: the death dates on several of the airmen's graves indicated heavy enemy action in the months of August – September 1941. Yet the official report, as quoted in a history of the period, stated that there had been little activity in the north of England in those months. Further research did not solve the discrepancy—any clarification had been lost in the “fog of war.” And so the seed for this novel was planted.

An amateur pilot himself, Dad loved immersing himself in the aviation history of the Second World War. He worked on the book for years and shared it with his siblings, Penelope (Penny) Findlay Williams and Seaton Findlay. Sadly, Dad passed away before he had the chance to pull the book into final shape. But not long afterwards, Penny, Seaton and I decided (maybe rashly) to take up this unfinished task. We spent a number of pleasant lunches brainstorming about the project, but in the end, the bulk of the work was done by Penny and

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Seaton, who probably knew the novel better than anybody else. And now this story with its long family pedigree is finished. My heartfelt thanks go out to Seaton and Pen, who did a wonderful job of realizing Dad's vision and of capturing the drama that so captured him.

—*Jamieson Findlay*

1937

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PROLOGUE

“Do you think he’ll show?”

“Who knows? But if he doesn’t, we’ll ring that emergency number you have and see if we can shake the bloody tree a bit, eh Werner?”

Werner nodded. “If you say so.”

They fell silent, watching the room. They were in a pub called the King’s Watch just off Oxford Street near Selfridges department store. It was dark, smoky and noisy. At this time in the late afternoon after work the place was busy, and the sole barman was trying his best to keep up with demand. His regulars, lined up two deep in front of the bar, were becoming impatient but he gave back as good as he got in repartee. It was the sort of place, Werner thought, if you were looking for a place to transact the sort of business that preferred the shadows over the revealing light of day, you had probably found the right spot.

They had searched for a place in the snug, but it was nearly full and the few spaces available were too close to neighbours for the kind of conversation they anticipated. Instead, they chose a table near the back of the room, with a bit of space around it. They fetched drinks from the bar, settled at the table and waited. Waited, it turned out, for some time.

Colonel Minter’s arrival was typical: one minute he was nowhere to be seen, the next he was sliding into the chair opposite them across the table. He was angry and Werner knew why; the boys were wearing their Royal Air Force (RAF) apprentice uniforms. But ‘English’ had insisted and now they were attracting attention. The Colonel raked

the uniforms with angry eyes and launched into a lecture on the subject of spy invisibility: if everyone else is wearing, you wear; if everyone else is not wearing, you don't either. "Is that clear? I hope so because I do not wish to have to address the subject again. Ever."

Beyond this short diatribe, Colonel Minter had little to say, except that it was wet outside. He shook his folded umbrella as proof.

"Really?" sneered 'English.' His booming voice carried easily to all corners of the room.

"Make your voice lower," Minter said angrily, "or everybody in this room will know our business." Then smiled as he suddenly changed his approach.

"It is good to see you and I should tell you that my masters are very pleased. They asked that I should tell you that." He paused, looking over the room again. And then added, "and so if they are pleased then I am pleased also. Not so?"

They agreed that was probably the case. 'English' leaned across the table. "So, what now, Colonel?"

"Well, for a start I would like a brief report on your progress."

"And I think we would like some money," said 'English'.

The Colonel looked embarrassed. "Yes, I have some money for you but unfortunately not all that was promised. There have apparently been...er... complications with the budget and we have not yet received the money that we have been promised either. It is too bad, but I think next time we will have all the funds that we have asked for."

As he talked, he reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a dun-coloured envelope. It was sealed. He put it carefully on the table in front of the young men.

'English' picked up a corner of the packet, testing it for thickness, then let it drop.

"I don't like it when the money's not right." He glared at the Colonel as he spoke.

The Colonel regarded him before speaking.

"When you signed up, you swore allegiance to the Fatherland," he

said finally. “Are you having second thoughts about that?” His voice was quiet, almost gentle, but even ‘English’ was aware of the deadly turn the conversation had taken.

“I’m sure it won’t happen again,” said Werner nervously.

The Colonel smiled.

Werner thought to himself that the smile was more like the Wolf’s than Grandma’s and he suspected that it would indeed happen again.

“English” tore open the envelope and quickly ascertained that it was about 500 pounds short of the agreed payment. He shrugged, looked at his partner, then nodded.

“Good. We all must make sacrifices in times of war,” said the Colonel. “And now if you please, your report.”

“Oh aye,” said ‘English,’ “we can tell you all about that, now we have the money.” He paused. “Or, leastways most of it.” He looked at Werner and winked. “So, I guess we can give him most of the report, right?”

The Colonel smiled as if he too appreciated the joke. His muttered response “*schwachkopf*” had flown under the young Englishman’s radar judging by the idiotic smile on his face though the authentic German ears of Werner had certainly picked it up.

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I

SUNDAY, BLOODY SUNDAY

On the morning of 20 July 1941, RAF Station Acklington lay under a watery sun that eased through the thin blanket of morning mist, a residuum of the night's coastal fog. The warm, humid weather of the summer continued, and a light breeze wafted in from the sea. On the base, an uncharacteristic air of peacetime lassitude lingered. It would not last for long.

Around the perimeter of the airfield, fitters and armourers were at work in the dispersal and blast pit areas, tending to the needs of the squadrons' aircraft. In area E of 466 Squadron, work was being completed on the tail-strengthening process of Beaufighter RX 2473, or "seven three" as the ground crews referred to the machine. The tailplane's structural weakness had shown up in the early Mark IIF (Fighter) prototypes after a few hundred hours logged. Normally the machines would be flown down to the Bristol factory at Filton to have the retrofit completed, but the Squadron Commanding Officer (SCO) was reluctant to have a machine taken off line when the repairs, other things being equal, could be done just as well on the base and quicker. Earlier in the summer a half-dozen senior squadron fitters had been sent down to Filton to be instructed in the process, and they had been systematically working through 466 Squadron's aircraft

ever since. The Commanding Officer had argued about the matter with 13 Group HQ at nearby Kenton (Group had wanted, initially at least, the repairs to be done at Filton), and so far had been successful.

I guess we need the SIC,” said Leading Aircraftsman Mike Raimey; he meant the Sergeant-In-Charge. “We’re about bloody done here, what you say?”

His mate, his head and shoulders still inside the rear of the Beaufighter, agreed.

“I reckon,” came his muffled voice, “soon’s I’ve finished with the spar end here we can cover the sodder back up.”

Raimey headed off across the grass in search of the Master Fitter, Arthur Gates, whose responsibility it was to inspect and certify as correct, all repairs to the aircraft.

“Got her all done up then have you, lads?” queried Gates.

“About so,” said Raimey, “she were an easy one this time, weren’t she? Not like that sodding Beau of Flight Lieutenant Rourke’s. We had one hell of a time with that, din’t we? The sodder had bent the tailwheel attachment with one of them patented landings of his and we had to take the whole fucker out and straighten it before we could get at the tail section. And them two ijjits from the other section wasn’t no help either.”

Gates nodded impatiently.

Ideally, fighter squadrons comprised planes in four sections identified by colour, and Raimey was referring to a couple of fitters who had been “borrowed” from Blue Section to speed up the process on Rourke’s machine. Arthur Gates, who was known for playing his cards close to his chest, wasn’t about to get involved in a discussion about the pair with Raimey, a good fitter, albeit a stubborn, opinionated and argumentative man at the best of times.

They headed back to Dispersal Area E where Flight Lieutenant Calvin Rourke’s Beaufighter 73 awaited the Master Fitter’s signature confirming its airworthiness and readiness to rejoin the squadron.

Later that morning Squadron Leader Brent Taggart, Commanding Officer of 466 Squadron, had just wandered into the dispersal hut

when the 13 Fighter Group Control phone rang. Being closest, he answered.

The peaceful morning at RAF Acklington was about to be shattered.

Forty-five seconds earlier at 10:47 a call had come in to 13 Group's Operation Centre at Kenton from RAF Cresswell on the coast. Flight Lieutenant Ashley, Duty Officer Operations on that Sunday, had picked it up on the second ring. He recognized the voice of Henry Walters, the Home Guard spotter at Cresswell, the Chain Home Low Radar Station near The Scars, just north of Snab Point, one of the easternmost capes along the coast north of the Tyne Estuary.

The voice was calm but Ashley heard a clear note of urgency in it.

"Yes, Henry, what's up?"

"Bloody bombers, heading your way I believe."

"What!"

"You heard, me lad," said Walters. "Force of bandits approaching the coast from the north-east. Very low, just above wavetops. Heading for Tyneside, I reckon. But there's a small group split off and headed north-west. About course two-niner-zero. Should take them up Acklington way. Cresswell picked them up only twenty-five miles out, so if they're the usual Heinkels and Jugs, they should be over us here in about five minutes."

"Thanks, Henry, we'll get on it. Ringing off."

Flight Lieutenant Ashley hurried across the room past the big operations plotting table, which was the heart of 13 Fighter Group Control (FGC), to the large wall blackboards that showed the latest squadron readiness status. He scanned the board quickly. As the crow flies, the radar station was about eight miles south-east of Acklington and about twenty-five miles north of Tyneside. Kenton was the nearest Sector base to Tyneside, but if Henry Walter's assessment was correct, the Germans were going for the airfields as well. He thought quickly. Acklington first, he decided. If they were Heinkel 111s and JU88s they would be doing about 280 miles per hour. That would put them about two minutes to Acklington from the coast. Add Henry's five-minute radar warning and that would put them over Acklington in

seven or eight minutes. It would take the main force about five minutes from the coast to Newcastle. Plus Henry's five. Kenton would have more time. He studied the board again. As Duty Officer Operations, he had to make the decision about which fighters to send where. He hadn't many planes and he hadn't much time—bloody Chain Home Low should have picked up those raiders farther out. He turned to the plotting table and the Ground Control Interception Control officer in charge. "Nick, get on to Acklington. Tell them to scramble 702 Squadron B Flight and 466 Blue Section."

"466?" the controller repeated, some surprise in his voice.

"Yes," said Ashley, "And fast. We need everything that's able. Tell them they've got less than seven or eight minutes. If bloody Crosswell's assessment is right, that is...."

RCAF 466 Squadron, the Canadians, were currently sharing the base with RAF 702 Squadron which flew twin-engine Bristol Blenheims, the Beaufighters' immediate ancestors, and the disastrous Boulton Paul Defiants, known caustically as the 'Daffies'. The squadron had sustained heavy losses, largely because the Daffies were no match for the long-range Messerschmitt 210 fighters and even the guns of the bombers. Squadron 702 also had a flight of eight Spitfires detached from one of the 11 Group squadrons badly mauled in the Battle of Britain. The bulk of RAF 152 Squadron was now at 13 Group Kenton for some well-earned respite. Respite, though, they wouldn't see much of today.

Ashley yelled to the next GCI officer. "Get Kenton 152 Operations. Tell them what we think and to get everything they can up quick."

According to the board, 152 Operations had two sections of three Spits in readiness. But Ashley knew of the squadron's losses in the thick of the daily battles over London and was not sure how ready they would be, on this seemingly peaceful Sunday morning. "Let us hope," he said to himself, recognizing it for what it was, half-prayer.

At Acklington, amidst the noise and chatter of the dispersal hut, Squadron Leader Taggart stood motionless, concentrating on the phone call from 13 Group Control. Slamming the phone down, he

yelled, "Tannoy. Scramble 702 B Flight and 466 Blue. Plus whatever 152 Spits are available. Buster, buster lads, there's not much time."

"466?" shouted a pilot over the sudden pandemonium.

"You heard me," said Taggart. "God's sake don't waste time, lad." Already he was dialling the Base Commander.

"Hullo sir, Taggart here. Kenton's just rung down that a flock of bandits are heading our way. Cresswell radar was apparently late picking them up. Kenton thinks some of them are heading for us. We've got...uh...maybe six or seven minutes. I'm sending up 702 B Flight, 466 Blue, and the 152 Squadron Spits." He listened for a moment. "I know, sir, I'm well aware of that. But that's all we've got on the board." He listened again. "Right, sir. Base is being secured as we speak." He rang off. Of course, 466 is night fighters, he muttered to himself, but somebody has to work days.

Tannoy speakers were now squawking all over the base, and personnel and trucks were on the move everywhere. Aircrew ran toward their aircraft and in the case of machines in the further dispersal areas, crews were being dropped off by crew trucks. Before the last Tannoy exhortations had echoed away, the roar of aircraft engines permeated the base.

The Spits were first off, moving nimbly across the grass and airborne almost before their snarling Rolls Royce Merlin engines had reached takeoff boost. As they curved quickly away from the field, moving like ghosts through the mist, the Blue section leader glanced out at his wingmen and spoke briefly into his microphone: "Fireside. Abacus Leader. Airborne." Immediately the voice of the Controller at Cresswell came back. "Abacus Leader. Fireside. We make it six bandits; should be there anytime. Angels minus 500."

The four Spitfires broke through the light overcast at 800 feet. Almost immediately the leader's No. 2 off his right wing and slightly behind, shouted into his radiotelephone (R/T). "There they are, four o'clock low."

"Tallyho, breaking right, now," the leader yelled to his section. He hauled his aircraft into a right turn and the leading three Spitfires fell

to attack, the fourth machine staying above them in case of enemy escort fighters. The bombers, all JU88s, were streaking towards the north perimeter of the base, surfing along the bottom of the light overcast at barely church-spire level. They were coming line astern but staggered slightly, looking like large black locusts.

On the field, the first of the 466 Beaufighters bounced down the runway. Accustomed to operating singly at night, the Beaufighter flights normally did not take off in loose formation like the day fighters, but since most of the Beau pilots had started their fighter careers in Hurricanes or Spitfires, they knew the drill thoroughly and moved off in ragged line astern. Heavier and clumsier than the Spitfires, the Beaus needed more time and more runway to get airborne. Once up, however, their big Rolls-Royce 1400 horsepower Merlin engines drew them quickly into climb speed only slightly slower than the Spits.

Flight Lieutenant Calvin Rourke, 466 Squadron Blue Flight Leader, was last off, in keeping with the traditional tactic of having the leader (who would set the course and speed for the flight) arrive in the flight format last so that he would waste no time orbiting while the rest of the flight caught up. Halfway down the runway, Rourke realized that something was very wrong. The Beaufighter would not respond to the controls. It had reached flying speed and was airborne in short bounds, but as Rourke eased the control column back to lift off, the fighter slammed back on the tarmac with a bone-shattering jolt. He knew he had too little runway left to abort the takeoff. He reached up to the small crank that controlled the fore-and-aft trim of the aeroplane, quickly rolled in two turns of the crank and felt the control column lighten as the nose of the Beaufighter came up. Airborne and clearing the end of the field, he flicked the landing gear up and almost immediately felt the speed increase and the machine become more stable.

Rourke had little time to feel relief. He knew he must start a careful turn to the left to get back to the airfield as quickly as his skills would allow. By this time, he realized that the elevator controls on his Beaufighter had been somehow reversed. But if he was careful and

kept his head, he could control the machine by doing everything in reverse. It was imperative though to get back on the ground quickly because his Beau was in no condition for battle. As he cleared the field extremity markers and began his careful turn, he felt a sudden, violent shuddering in the port wing. Looking out, he saw a series of gaping holes marching across the wing from trailing edge towards the engine nacelle. He sensed a shadow over his aircraft and recognized the dark profile of the Junkers88 fighter-bomber as it passed overhead, just above him. The only thing that had saved them was his low airspeed. Travelling at an attack speed of about 300 miles per hour, the Junkers had only a few seconds of firing time before Rourke was past his target. Either he was an inexperienced pilot or a poor shot; he had wasted his chance and would not get another. But, unfortunately for Rourke, he would not need one.

As Rourke continued with his careful turn, a sudden loud explosion ripped the port engine, which began vibrating uncontrollably and shuddered to a stop. As he reached to feather the dead engine's propeller to reduce vibration, there was an agonizing screech and the entire engine nacelle dropped down, sagging ominously below the wing. At that point events happened so fast and so violently that Rourke's options ran out. The sudden loss of power on the port side and the increase in drag from the sagging engine nacelle caused the Beaufighter to slew violently to the left, and tilt steeply with the left wing down. Instinctively, forgetting for the moment the reversed elevator controls, Rourke pulled the control yoke to his stomach and to the right, the normal routine to correct the Beaufighter's yaw. Instantly, the machine plunged downwards, hitting the ground just behind a remote dispersal hut near the southern boundary of the field. The left wing struck first and the aircraft cartwheeled violently and flipped onto its back. Now upside down, the wreck skidded along the rough field outside the perimeter fence for a hundred yards or so, before settling into a gully, the remains of its tail sticking into the air at a steep angle.

Across the field a pair of fitters sheltering in a blast pit next to a

parked Spitfire watched the Beaufighter's death from start to finish. Though side by side they had to shout to each other over the noise.

"Did you see the number on that?"

"Don't need to."

"You mean you know?"

"We worked on that crate, idiot, 'course I know!"

"That is the Beaufighter of Rourke, then...Aw shit."

"Werner! They'll be coming back for the Spitfire!"

"Yes," shouted Werner. "I do not think we are in a good place...."

In fact, Werner realized they were in probably the worst possible place on the field during a raid. The primary target of the German fighter-bombers would be the aircraft in the air, the aircraft on the ground and runways next. Crouched by a stationary Spitfire in a blast pit near the runway was definitely not the place to be. Unfortunately, they had been finishing work on the Spitfire when the first of the raiders came thundering across the field at rooftop height. In the ensuing chaos, magnified by the horrific crash of Rourke's Beaufighter, the constant rattle of machine gun fire and the deafening explosions from the German bombs, they had been unable to leave the pit.

"I think it is better we leave here," Werner said.

"Aye, great idea, Werner. Lead the way!"

"Do not call me Werner here, I have tell you that! It's William!"

"Then don't call me 'English!' In England it's James, arschloch! James!"

But before they could move something on the runway caught their attention. One of the station's rescue trucks raced along the southern boundary of the airfield, its siren blaring.

"That is Crash," shouted Werner, "heading for Beaufighter. They are crazy."

They watched, mesmerized, as a pair of explosions shook the earth in front of the truck, sending it careening crazily to one side before it recovered and continued on its way. Flames and dense smoke now enveloped the wreck.

“No one can survive that,” said Werner mournfully.

They became aware of the sudden silence, although far above them, they could hear the snarl of aircraft engines as 152 Squadron Spitfires and the remaining 466 Squadron Beaufighters rose to engage the enemy. The two men were safe.

‘English’ said quietly, “We didn’t see this, Werner. You understand? We tell no one. Werner?”

“I know, I know. And it’s William, dammit.”