

Chapter 9

Peter's army career, birth of Gale

**February 1941 –
August 1943**



A sad and sorry Peter met me at Earl Shilton station. His hair had been cut very short, badly; his battle-dress irritated his skin like crazy. About a hundred new recruits were sleeping on mattresses on the floor of a church hall. Every morning at six they had to dress and square up their kit on their beds. He knew how to do this because he had been a cadet at school. Then rifles must be cleaned and oiled and placed reverently across the bed.

Breakfast followed – porridge already over-sweetened, kippers, bacon and liver or some-such and sweet tea. They were issued with a billycan each – a metal container consisting of a top and bottom clamped together for packing but taken apart it made two receptacles. One half took the porridge and the other the tea. It became obvious that the liver or whatever had to sit on top of the porridge! There was certainly no hope of eating the porridge first – everything must be collected in one go.

Finally one queued for a turn to wash up in one of two buckets of luke warm water, all that were provided. While the men ate, two orderlies swept the floor. Then there was an inspection of kit. Of course, all the newly oiled rifles were covered in dust, so their owners were put on fatigues! Peter reasonably suggested to his sergeant that it might be more sensible to clean and oil them *after* the room had been swept and got a hail of abuse for his pains.

He had found me a little room in a local house owned by a lady who took in washing – or perhaps rented. Now in his time off he had at least somewhere to sit (on the bed) in peace and quiet. I was the only wife who had followed her man and earned brownie points by offering to mend his sergeant's socks. I was also able to buy him cotton vests and long johns to wear under his scratchy uniform, mend his socks too, and soothe his troubled mind. Already he hated the army as much as he had thought he would.

There was nothing in that little mining town but seven pubs and two fish and chip shops. One night when he was drinking in a pub with some of the other privates they began boasting about their conquests – how they had taken a young married woman into the allotments and fucked her... and Peter said "If you got an unexpected twenty-four hours' leave and went home to find your wife had been carrying on with a soldier what would you do?" Their faces changed to a grim mask. "I'd slit his bloody throat," one replied, "and hers too". A silence followed while the others nodded agreement, but no-one seemed to see the connection.

After the initial six weeks' training Peter was promoted to Corporal and sent to Leicester to instruct clerks and storemen in army rules and regulations. But already the stress of it all had caused him to develop gastric trouble.

We found a first floor flat to rent; Peter had been posted to the race-course and the flat was nearby. We sent for our bikes.

The army doctor soon decided that Peter could not cope with army food so he was allowed to sleep and eat out. I found a job nearby teaching in a small private school for a term. All I can remember about it is that the children, who were quite young, had peas on toast instead of beans on toast for lunch. Then I joined Pictorial Charts as a research assistant and general dogsbody. Peter settled down to a life of gastritis and dull acceptance of his predicament.

For something to take his mind off the war we started to collect pre-revolutionary Russian stamps, and together spent many happy evenings in our flat ruling out pages and looking up stamps in Gibbon's catalogue. Very few people collected Russian stamps so we were able very cheaply to build up quite an interesting collection. We also joined the Anglo-Czech Friendship Club. There we met a Sudetan German Czech who had escaped just as Hitler had marched his armies in. Sadly his wife and two children had been on a visit to her parents so he had had to leave them behind and didn't know whether they were alive or dead.

Peter was promoted to Sergeant. We got to know a young man, a capstan lathe operator. Originally he had lived in Wigan where he had been trained for seven years as a skilled sheet metal worker. In those days the metal sheets had to be made perfectly flat by hand. Then in the slump almost the whole town became unemployed and he soon lost his skill. One small factory was still working and the town's children would line up outside as the workers came out to beg for any crusts left over from their lunch.

His married sister lived in Leicester and invited him for a week's holiday. While he was there the dole people found him a job as a nightwatchman at ten shillings a week. He had to take it or lose his dole. So the whole family had to move to Leicester. Now he had a good job but the years of privation had ruined his digestion and if he spat into the fire he produced sheets of flame, his spit was so acid.

My Pictorial Charts job proved interesting. I did do what typing and so forth was required but mainly I had to research the statistics to produce the bar charts or pie charts to be published in newspapers to inspire people to more war effort.

Peter's job was to get batches of new recruits through a simple examination or test about army rules and regulations as they applied to clerks and storemen. When he went in to teach one new intake he found that the first man he looked at had only one eye. Hastily he shifted his gaze to another – but that man had only one eye too. Anxiously he glanced around. All the men present had lost an eye! He used to tell how once he cycled into the gates of the race course when in the distance he saw a *giant* sergeant drilling a new intake of men. But he knew all the sergeants and they were all of normal size. As he drew nearer he realised that this one was normal too – but was drilling a squad of dwarfs. They had called up all the dwarfs from the circuses.

If he could get his men through their test it meant an extra shilling a day to them, but many were illiterate including one black-jowled bruiser who had to admit to the name of Cupid Dart. In 1942 when we had just got back from leave we were posted back to London. Peter was to work in the War Office, so we could live at home.

My mother was now working from a flat in Cambridge. She had been head-hunted to take charge of Social Services for one eighth of England. So only my sister Helen, now working at the Admiralty, and my youngest brother David, waiting to join the Navy, were living at 44 Lee Park. It was very good to be home. There was a lull in the bombing and things almost seemed normal.

Peter worked in a department concerned with REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, earlier Royal Ordnance Corps) officers' records. His superior there was an ardent philatelist. He had been escaping from Dunkirk when he came across a bombed French post-office – so he stopped to empty his haversack of all his kit and filled it with sheets and sheets of French stamps. When he got back to England he sold them and with the proceeds started to go to stamp auctions. By the time Peter met him he was spending most of his time on stamps – buying up old collections in his lunch hour, taking them home for his wife to soak off in the bath and iron them flat – after which he sold them through the stamp clubs. Already he had made enough money to put his small son through public school after the war, and then to university. He was now beginning to build up a fund with which to take his wife round the world! Peter was glad to cover for him when necessary.

Together they invented an officer for whom they opened a file. Periodically they posted him and ordered kit for him, on paper only of course. When the department was checked if they couldn't quite match the officers' files to the number required they could either add their invented officer or subtract him, so he proved very useful.

I had been getting more and more broody, but felt it unfair to put pressure on Peter. He had to want a child too. Now, by autumn 1942 he had come to terms with the fact that he was never going to be posted abroad – Hitler was not going to win the war, and he – Peter – stood no more chance of dying than anyone else. He suggested that perhaps we shouldn't wait any longer for peace, but should try for a baby. Almost at once I found I was pregnant.

Perhaps we had been a little over-optimistic. The Germans stepped up their bombing of London. Already, before we got back from Leicester, the church next door but two had been demolished by a high explosive bomb, which also brought down our kitchen ceiling and broke all but one piece of my mother's marvellous blue china. Now, night after night the siren would go and Peter would bully me out of bed and down the curved wooden stairs to take shelter under the very sturdy large kitchen table. Several

times I sat down on the wedge-shaped stairs and went to sleep, to be roused again by Peter who wouldn't leave me but longed for something more sturdy above us. I wasn't worried – the calm of pregnancy protected me and my baby.

Peter was suffering all the symptoms described by old wives' tales. As I grew larger he grew iller; so at the beginning of July the army doctor at Kidbrook, where he had been transferred from the War Office, decided he must have a grumbling appendix and he was whipped into an army hospital to have it out. Army spit-and-polish demanded that the floors of the ward were like glass and all the patients held their breath as I negotiated the "ice-rink" to visit and cheer him up. Then he was moved to Army Rehabilitation in Surrey.

There were still three weeks to go before baby was due and I was missing Peter. One morning I got up early, left a note for Helen and David and caught a train. He was a bit flustered when I turned up, very large, and unannounced, and I wasn't allowed in, so we went for a walk in the July fields and forgot to keep an eye on the time. It would never do for him to be late for lunch, so we ran, leaping over the stacks of wheat, and he just made it back in time. As we had no phone then we arranged for him to phone me at my father's house at 6pm every second day. This would give me time, I thought, to have the baby before he could have a nervous breakdown with worry.

Gale was due on August 14th, a Saturday. On Thursday August 12th I was alone in the house when the door bell rang. There in the porch in full uniform stood our gallant Sudetan German Czech from Leicester. His face dropped a little when he saw my condition. I think he might have been nursing a faint hope of a farewell to a hero. He was to be dropped behind enemy lines the next day and wanted a bed for the night. *That* I could offer so he came in. Helen was at work at the Admiralty as resident mathematician to help Andrew Huxley decide what guns new ships should carry, and David was out somewhere, so we waited a bit for them and then ate what I could provide.

Eventually Helen arrived with her arm in a sling. She had gone ice skating with Andrew after work, fallen and broken her arm. No thank you, she didn't want to eat but would go straight to bed. Later still David arrived with eight sailors he had found in Greenwich Park. Could they sleep on the floor? They had nowhere else to go! Finally I got them all to bed.

Next morning, wearing Peter's dressing gown and looking like Friar Tuck I organised a ten-man removal team as Helen had been waiting several months to exchange her heavy bedroom furniture for that in our mother's room. It seemed a good time to get it done! Then Helen went off to work, broken arm notwithstanding, and I got ready for my hospital appointment that afternoon.

At Lewisham Hospital they listened and prodded. "Any time now," they said. Tomorrow if you haven't started, have a hot bath and take a tablespoon full of castor oil.

Friday was the day Peter rang me, and nothing had started so I walked up to my Dad's house through an almighty thunderstorm and, when Peter phoned, said, "They say everything is OK but it may be a week yet. Ring me on Sunday. How are you?" etc. etc. Then I went home; the rain had stopped; had my bath and castor oil and went to bed.

At about 5am I woke and began to wonder – but it was too early to do anything. At 6am I got up and went downstairs to make a cup of tea. The sink in the scullery was crawling with enormous black slugs, as big as my fingers, which had come up the plug hole. While I drank my tea I filled in the time with a slug hunt using up all the cooking salt, then cleared up the mess, made yet more tea and wrote a note for the others.

At 7am I thought it not too early to go over the road to use their phone as arranged to ring the hospital. Nurse answered the door, the children's nurse in full brown uniform who had arrived there when the twins were born, and was still in residence although they were now grown up and in the Air Force. She would never touch the phone herself as she was convinced that germs came down the wires, but I was welcome to risk it. Soon the ambulance came, and I was on my way.

"You are not quite ready," they said, "but now you are here you might as well stay."

That day I rested in a bit of discomfort, but not too much, and read a book about childbirth Peggy had lent me, so as to know what to expect. That night I slept fairly well, but on Sunday things started to happen, just as the book said. However Gale was a bit slow to face the world and when Peter phoned the hospital soon after 6pm I had to ask them to give him a message to ring back at 9pm but say I am fine.

I found the last stages of labour very hard work but I felt no pain. I think I produced my own painkiller. I heard the phone ring at 9pm. "Tell him to hang on," I shouted, "the baby is just coming." Sure enough, at 9.05 there was Gale and Peter learnt that he had a daughter.

My Dad came to see the baby next day – more than he would have done for her, my mother said, when she arrived a few days later. Then Peter came. He had a good look at Gale, "A Japanese gentleman I presume!" he said. She did look a bit Oriental at first as her head was a bit squashed and she had a lot of black hair.

In those days we had to stay in hospital for ten days. All day we had to sit bolt upright in bed except for an hour after lunch when

we were made to lie on our tummies. As my mattress was a bit short I often found I was sitting on the springs of the bed, and as I had stitches it was not exactly comfortable. The ward was a Florence Nightingale type holding fifty mothers. The babies were kept elsewhere and brought to us only for feeding. We could often hear them crying and longed to cuddle our own but were not allowed out of bed for the first week.

Each evening, before they went off duty, the day nurses insisted that we drank senna. The night nurses, who always seemed to be well out of call delivering babies, locked up all the bedpans! No-one in that ward gave a thought to air-raids and bombs falling near! We had more important things to concern us. After the first night I led a strike. All fifty of us refused to take our senna unless bedpans were left out for our use. Matron was adamant. She would not have her ward looking untidy, even at night. But we still refused. Finally she had to allow the bedpan cupboard to be left unlocked at night. Those nearly ready to go home and so allowed to get out of bed took it in turns to fetch what we needed. We had won.

We had little else to do but talk. Of the fifty of us it turned out only three missed our husbands. The rest only wanted their mothers and boasted of their own frigidity. "Turn over iceberg," my husband says; and "Look what you've got me into, you bastard," to an embarrassed husband brave enough to visit.

When Gale and I got out of hospital, as Peter was still being rehabilitated and the bombs were getting worse it seemed wise to take her out of London. I learnt of a wonderful woman doctor, Doctor Sutherland, who had taken over a large farmhouse in Privet where she now lived with her two children and her husband, recently invalided out of the Navy after drifting for three days around the Atlantic in a rubber dinghy, his ship having been torpedoed. Dr Sutherland made it her war work to take in young mothers whose husbands were in the Forces and their newborn babies for a few weeks, to set them up and keep them safe. At that time there were seventeen of us, with seventeen tiny babies.

It was an experience every new mother should have. She taught us by example to enjoy our babies. Wonderful meals were brought to us wherever we happened to be. There were no clocks. She started with some but when they were stolen she didn't replace them as she wanted us to respond to the needs of our babies, not a clock. If they cried Dr Sutherland would drift past saying, "I should feed her if I were you. I expect she's hungry"but "Babies are tough but perhaps you shouldn't lay her down lengthways on the bed. If she *should* happen to roll off and if in a later life she should turn out a bit odd you would think it was your fault." She believed very strongly that "A happy mother makes a happy baby." Whenever the sun shone she would send some of us out with a picnic – a very large, hot casserole well lagged in blankets and settled in a

pushchair while we carried our babies. "Feed them under a hedge," she advised.

When Gale was three weeks old I was sent with another mother whose little boy was exactly the same age by bus all the way to Winchester to have their photographs taken. Inspired by her we walked a couple of miles pushing a bottomless pram to support the carrycots to a garage where we could leave it and catch a bus. Photographs duly taken we marched into Winchester Cathedral and demanded to be taken somewhere to feed our babies. Politely they showed us into the Bishop's Chapel where we satisfied the children in comfort and changed them on the Bishop's blotting paper.

Peter got a day's leave and came to visit. When he had to leave Dr Sutherland advised "Go part of the way with him on the train. Go as far as Reading" – so Gale had her first train ride and I took her to show her off to my grandmother – my father's mother.

That night, tired out, I slept through everything but Dr Sutherland lay outside my bedroom door. When Gale woke and cried she crept in to fetch, fed her and soothed her back to sleep, to make quite sure I didn't lose confidence in her adage that life needn't stop because one had a child.

Peter was relocated in Taunton for more rehabilitation and arranged for us to lodge with a delightful elderly couple. The wife taught me a great deal. "When we were first married," she said, "I had ten shillings a week housekeeping money each week. I managed on nine shillings – an enamel bowl here, a pot there. We furnished our house on that shilling."

After some weeks of peace Peter was well enough to rejoin the War Office, so we went back to the bombs.

On the whole we had got used to the Incendiary and ordinary High Explosive Bombs – but now the Doodlebugs (the VIs) started coming over the house. These pilotless planes flew slowly and low. When you heard the engine cut out you were in trouble. I had been taught that babies needed fresh air, but no sooner was Gale settled in her pram in the garden than I heard the ominous hum of an approaching Doodlebug, so would rush out to rescue her. It was no life for a baby.

Peter had been posted to a base at Kidbrook nearby but he was not at all well. The army is not a suitable institution in which to suffer clinical depression.

He was still suffering a lot of stomach pain even though he no longer had an appendix to grumble, and he alternated between being sure he had stomach cancer, and being equally sure he had an ulcer and was soon to die.

He ate less and less.

He cycled back home from the army for lunch but would put his hand on his folded arms and sleep on the table throughout his lunch hour. Of course he wasn't sleeping at night. Sometimes he wouldn't or couldn't speak to me for all of twenty-four hours. The only way, I found, to get through to him was to make him angry, which took days of work!

Obviously we were doing each other no good, and Gale was suffering. Reluctantly I took her to stay with my sister-in-law in Coventry, which was now bomb-free, and Peter went into hospital again. There he was injected with insulin, to put him to sleep, into a coma, and they roused him on alternate days to eat mounds of mashed potato. This dangerous treatment was used as an alternative to electric shock treatment, which would have been even worse. He also had sessions with a psychiatrist, a female, but never told me what went on, afterwards. Then they invalided him out of the army and Gale and I returned to be with him. He went back to teaching at Stratford Grammar School. As far as we were concerned the worst was over.