THE CRICKETERS OF 1945

Rising from the Ashes of World War Two

CHRISTOPHER SANDFORD

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1.

'Every Landing was a Close Shave'

HE WAS a rather unlikely-looking hero. In April 1945, Bill Edrich of Middlesex and England had just turned 29, but seemed about ten years older. Edrich was only 5ft 6in, with prematurely receding hair and an upturned nose that gave him a vaguely mischievous, feral air – 'like a randy mole', as one woman put it. He also had false teeth and spoke in a high, chirpy voice. Despite these shortcomings, Edrich exuded an infectious self-confidence, not least when it came to his relations with the opposite sex. His basic courtship method was direct: he hugged, and then started undoing buttons. Although spurned as often as not, the sheer volume of his efforts brought him some success. By 1945, Edrich was on the second of what would become a total of five marriages. An incurable romantic, one of his later wives was to complain that at parties 'Bill never stopped checking the room for a pretty face, even when we were dancing together.' Edrich's son Justin remarked that his father had often inspired affection, among men as well as women, but that he wasn't well suited to dealing with the practical aspects of life. 'I think it's sad he spent so much time battling with various demons and never reached the stage where he was truly contented,' he told a biographer. 'Dad got his pleasure from short-term highs rather than overall fulfilment or peace.'

As a cricketer, Edrich's shining moment had come in March 1939, at Durban, when England were left a seemingly impossible target of 696 to win the final, and timeless, Test of their tour of South Africa. The batsman had managed only one run in the first innings, but he followed this with a knock of 219, made in seven-and-a-quarter hours, in the second. During the mid-afternoon break, Flt. Lt. Albert Holmes, the superbly pukka English tour manager, had

poured the not out double centurion a large glass of champagne with the words, 'I hear you train on the stuff.' Edrich downed a second and a third glass as well but was then out in the first over after tea – if it could fairly be called that – having seen England through to 447/3. The match was eventually abandoned on the tenth day when the visitors' score stood at 654/5; the rain came down, everyone had had enough, and the Englishmen left to catch their boat home. Just as he was settling in for the train journey to Cape Town, where the mail steamer *Athlone Castle* awaited them, Edrich glanced out of the window of his compartment and saw a newspaper vendor's stand on the platform with a headline announcing that German troops had entered Czechoslovakia and that Hitler himself was now installed in the Royal Palace at Prague. 'At that moment, I knew that the world was fucked,' he later recalled with some emphasis.

To while away the sea journey back to Southampton, Edrich decided to throw himself a 23rd birthday party, even though this was at least a week early. He would remember 40 years later:

> There was a raging storm outside, and the heating broke down in the ship's restaurant, but that didn't bother me at all. I drank toasts with the manager and toasts with the players, and somehow I managed to notice that the skipper [Walter Hammond] had for company a well-upholstered young American lady who was wearing a low-cut frock and a diamond tiara, and telling him how much she wanted him to bowl a maiden over. I think we'd earned our night out, because it wasn't as if any of us got rich from the tour. When everything was added up, I put about 200 quid [roughly £4,000 in today's money] in the bank for my five months' work, so no wonder everyone enjoyed a lark when they could.

It's fitting to linger for a moment on Edrich as the English tour party crossed the South Atlantic, if only because he generally played his cricket like a sailor with a 24-hour pass. His drinking exploits were

legendary, and he was judged even by Lionel Tennyson, famously able to hold his own in that area, to have 'overdone the Bacchic rites' while playing in a side Tennyson led to India in the winter of 1937/38. In time Edrich's England career would be rudely interrupted when he returned to the team hotel in the early hours of an ongoing Test match at Old Trafford and had to be helped to bed by the night porter. Unfortunately, his arrival there had woken the occupant of the next room, who happened to be the chairman of selectors.

When you add the fact that Edrich played pre-war football on the wing for Spurs, impressed no less than Ben Hogan with his golf swing when they played a round together, could bowl as well as bat on the cricket field with a furious, slinging action that brought him a total of 479 first-class wickets, held 527 catches typically standing close in, and later captained Middlesex with uncompromising belligerence, if only fitful psychological acumen (in an act of near-suicidal chutzpah, once informing his opponents' Fred Trueman that he was a nance, the signal for a terrifyingly fast delivery that bounced only once on its way to the sightscreen), it's possible to see how he was widely regarded as one of the renaissance men of English sport, and a bit of a lad to boot.

Perhaps under all the surface bravado Edrich concealed the soul of an ugly duckling, a boisterous and insecure perpetual adolescent eager to be liked. One or two of his discarded wives certainly thought so. But whatever the key to Edrich's character in civilian life, he proved an outstandingly brave man when the time came to fight. In early August 1941, a combined Middlesex and Essex side hosted one from Surrey and Kent at Lord's, in a match played in aid of the King George's Fund for Sailors. Thanks to the rain, there was only time for a single innings each. Batting at number five, Edrich scored 102 between lunch and tea on the first afternoon, at one point lofting a ball from the admittedly 54-year-old Test all-rounder Frank Woolley out of the ground and through a vent of the brick cooling-tower that then stood on St John's Wood Road, a carry of some 120 yards. Aiming to repeat the blow off the next ball he was

stumped, retiring to the pavilion, said *The Times*, with a 'smile of unfeigned merriment on his face'.

Just six days later, Edrich, now in his wartime role as an RAF Bomber Command pilot, was at the controls of a twin-engine Bristol Blenheim on an 800-mile round trip, sometimes flying only 50 feet above the ground to avoid enemy radar, to attack the heavily defended German power station at Knapsack, near Cologne, a raid from which 12 of the total of 54 British planes failed to return. A crew of four sat within touching distance of each other in the domed glasshouse of a cockpit canopy at the front of the Blenheim, sometimes shouting to make themselves heard above the roar of the plane's engines, with one colleague, unable to wear a parachute because of his cramped conditions, crouched over a retractable Lewis gun in the rear turret. RAF bomber crews as a whole had a lower life expectancy than even an infantryman in the trenches of World War One. Historians have since competed to write more dramatic descriptions than each other of the obvious perils of such missions, but Edrich himself was more succinct.

'It was the bollocks,' he said simply.

'Flattened over the water, tucked in as close as I dared to the leader, I felt an exhilaration that swamped all other emotions. Low flying did not bother me a bit. I loved it.'[1]

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1 The British government took a more hard-headed view of the events around Cologne. In a report to the Cabinet of 19 August 1941, 'the Chief of the Air Staff explained that the losses sustained by the bomber force in the recent and sustained attacks on Germany (107 machines lost since the beginning of the month) had been partly due to treacherous weather … our pilots had nonetheless shown extreme gallantry.' For his part, Hermann Göring, Reich minister for aviation (although he collected offices of state almost at will) was not pleased to be informed of the RAF's success both at Knapsack and the nearby power plant at Quadrath. He read the report of the twin raids while on board his private train, which, among other amenities, boasted two dining cars, a swimming pool, and a special compartment for the minister's pet lion. He, Göring, was visibly distressed by the news. In fact, his staff thought he might be suffering a heart attack as he embarked on a violent denunciation of his subordinate officers. The air force commander Ritter von Greim was one of those present and feared his chief 'might physically blow apart as his face and body swelled with rage, his cheeks a ghastly blue'. In the end Göring sank into a sort of torpor, and for some time after that the entire train was silent but for the muffled sounds of the hungry lion pacing back and forth in the next compartment. Bill Edrich was awarded the DFC for his role in the successful mission over Cologne.

Unsurprisingly, Edrich's front-line experience changed him, or at least served to reinforce his already strong belief that life was there to be lived. Among other things, the war left him with a strong impatience for delay and routine, a healthy disregard for most forms of officialdom, and a recurrent nightmare in which he would be back on the airfield waiting to take off in his Blenheim, only to look across to see another pilot as he stepped into his own plane, the man's face momentarily becoming a skull until it suddenly changed back again. 'He was always one of my pals who didn't make it home,' Edrich recalled. Perhaps it was no surprise that he seemed to be in a race with life or made no secret of his opinion of people. Even then blunt with an earthy vocabulary, Edrich had been both a popular and a slightly feared young man while growing up on his father's farm at Lingwood in Norfolk, where he prowled the nearby fields with a double-barrelled shotgun looking for rats, 'but also for trouble, too', a friend said.

In later life, Edrich developed a pronounced distaste for stuffy social protocol. One afternoon in 1945 he found himself wandering around Baker Street in central London with a pretty girl he had met only minutes earlier, 'longing to make love but unable to afford a decent room'. Like many people's, Edrich's basic courtship technique, impressively brisk at the best of times, had been charged with new urgency once the prospect of death had stalked the scene. In the end, he improvised with his new friend. 'There were fireworks up against a tree in Regent's Park.'

Plainly spoken and exuding strong Australian values, Keith Ross Miller was in some ways Edrich's natural counterpart. Born in the western Melbourne suburb of Sunshine, Miller was a versatile sportsman with matinee-idol looks and an innate aversion to authority. Like Edrich, he was mercurial and easily bored, with his performance on the field often depending on how hard he had partied the night before. He eventually scored over 14,000 first-class runs at an average of nearly 50 and took 497 wickets at 22 each, 170 of them in Tests, during an 11-year career, although

it's absurd to judge such a player by mere statistics: you might as well review a book by counting the number of words in it. As a bowler, Miller could hurl it down at a distinctly lively pace off only a cursory run, gaining movement both ways. As a batsman he was essentially correct if tending to eschew the defensive in favour of the big hit. It was sometimes said that he struggled in England, where his commitment to the front foot could make him vulnerable to spin, although this failing does not seem to have been in evidence on his first-class debut in the country, at Lord's in May 1945, when he scored 105 in just over three hours at the crease in the first innings, and then characteristically ran himself out for a single in the second so that he could spend the late afternoon at the racecourse.

Miller was eventually appointed captain of New South Wales and, like Edrich, proved a modestly successful if unorthodox skipper with little time for the tactical nuances of the game. Once, on discovering that he had led an extra man on to the park at Sydney, his reported response was, 'One of you buggers clear off, and the rest scatter.' In later years it was thought that Don Bradman's more measured approach both as a player and subsequently a Test selector had thwarted Miller's seemingly inevitable appointment to lead Australia. It was possibly tactless of the latter to have once turned up for a meeting with the national board of control dressed in a white polo-neck jumper, ragged khaki shorts and a pair of wooden clogs. As Miller himself later put it, 'I was never Don's pin-up, and he rated only slightly below God when it came to Australian cricket.'

In August 1940, Miller, aged 20, enlisted in the army reserve before switching to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as Intake Number 410608. He served for a further five years before being honourably discharged with the rank of flying officer. In January 1943, Miller embarked on the USS *West Point* at Melbourne, which was to take him to Europe in readiness for combat duty. The journey included a stopover in Boston, Massachusetts, where he met a 25-year-old brunette from a wealthy stockbroking family

named Peg Wagner, whom he took dancing. Relationships tended to progress quickly under the stress of war. The couple were engaged before Miller left three weeks later for the United Kingdom, a departure he described in almost lyrical terms:

> All the boats in line blew out this long mournful wail of their horns. They were the parting salutes of the doomed – of men who were going off to a foreign land to fight for their people's future, many of them never to return.

More prosaically, Miller, whose engagement to Peg perhaps strayed from the traditional monogamous ideal, wrote privately of one of the gratifying number of female Australian nurses on board the same vessel. 'Enormous honkers – like being smothered between two great pillows.'

Sent for flight training to the seaside town of Bournemouth, Miller had the first of several brushes with death that April when he was invited to play weekend cricket for an RAAF team in Dulwich, south London. While he was away a German bomb struck a local Bournemouth church spire, which then toppled over on to the pub where he typically propped up the bar each Saturday night, killing everyone inside. Later that year there was a characteristic difference of opinion concerning the correct form of address between Miller and his commanding officer, and the former spent three weeks in the brig as a result. In September 1944, a night on the town led to property damage and a black eye for a fellow airman. The following month, Miller, whose love of classical music matched that he displayed for fast women and slow horses, went AWOL to see Yehudi Menuhin perform in London. There was talk of a court-martial, although in the end his CO relented on the condition that he (Miller, not Menuhin) play for his unit's cricket team. Despite his various run-ins with authority, Miller was promoted to the rank of flying officer in November 1944. His new status did little to dampen his pervasive sense of contempt for the governing rules of

military life. Described as the 'golden boy' of cricket, prompting the nickname of Nugget which stayed with him for the rest of his life, Miller was not one for the textbook approach to his duties. One of his biographers quotes a flying colleague as calling him brave but haphazard in his technique while at an aircraft's controls: 'Every landing was a close shave.'

In March 1945, Miller was deployed to the RAF base at Great Massingham in Norfolk, about a half an hour's drive from Bill Edrich's family farm. While there he continued to treat both the Axis forces and his own senior command structure with equal disdain. On 19 April, Miller's Mosquito squadron took part in a raid on a German V-2 rocket installation at Flensburg in Denmark, flying at treetop level for much of the three-hour outward journey. There were few casualties, mainly because the Luftwaffe was a spent force by that stage of the war and offered only token opposition, but it still took guts to fly a small, wooden-framed plane with 2,000 pounds of high explosive strapped underneath it over water in the dark. Some men in his position just accepted the risks as a necessary part of their job. Some rose to the occasion. Some lost their minds.

No one ever doubted Miller's essential courage, nor his lifelong propensity for insubordination. He was 'not infrequently impudent, with a strong – more accurately unorganised – will', one report noted. It was also said that Miller was given to unauthorised sightseeing tours while flying if he thought a particular part of the nearby scenery of sufficient interest, that he 'occasionally reports unshaven for duty', and 'reacts poorly to snafus in flight'. Despite his casual appearance, one RAAF colleague said of him that 'all kinds of admirers, and especially women, clung to him like bees to honey'.

As everyone knows, cricket is a reflection of life, and by and large cricketers answered the call of war in much the same spirit as everyone else. The records show that they volunteered at the same rate as other young men, and they died, too, in equal proportion. In all, some ten teams' worth of first-class cricketers were lost in the years 1939–45. Some, like Edrich and Miller, put their lives on the

line, while others worked long hours in munitions factories or served in an administrative capacity. The two greatest Test players of the 1930s were among those thought to have had what was perhaps unjustly called a 'cushy' war. Born in 1903, England's incumbent captain Walter Hammond had joined the RAF at the outset, wanting to do his bit, but over the next five years found himself playing a good deal of sport, occasionally training new recruits, and coming to resolve a complicated home life that led to the terse Press Association report: 'A decree was granted to Mrs Dorothy Hammond, wife of the England star. Misconduct was alleged with a woman named Harvey.'

Like Hammond's, the war record of the peerless Don Bradman failed to win universal admiration in later years, when he was sometimes met by the taunt of being 'Last in, first out' of uniform. Even the greatest cricketer of his time – possibly of all time – had his critics. Initially joining the RAAF before transferring to the army, Bradman was invalided out again in June 1941. Then aged 32, the master batsman was suffering from a case of fibrositis, a nervous muscular complaint, while, to general amazement, a routine army medical revealed that he had 'distinctly sub-par' eyesight. The greatest athlete in Australian history was officially deemed physically unfit to serve his country. Later in the war, Bradman was further embarrassed when the Adelaide stockbroking firm he represented crashed due to fraud and embezzlement. Although there was no suggestion of any wrongdoing on his part, the scandal left what he called a 'rank smell of impropriety' clinging to him for years to come. Like many top sportsmen, of all nationalities, the Australian batting genius possessed an uncongenial personality. Monastically dedicated to the scoring of runs, he sometimes seemed oblivious of the disdain - if always tinged with professional respect – he inspired among his peers.

In a match later in the 1940s, it was said that Bradman threw Miller the ball, only for Miller to throw it back, refusing to bowl. 'I don't know what's wrong with you,' Bradman supposedly said. 'I'm almost 40, and I can do my full day's work in the field.' To which Miller replied: 'So could I, if I'd sat on my arse during the war.'

The protracted bloodbath of 1939–45 claimed its victims in the cricket world with the same callous indifference it showed elsewhere. Some of those brave individuals fell in front-line combat, others in a variety of war-related accidents. Chronologically the first Test-playing casualty, 37-year-old Geoffrey Legge of Kent and England, perished in November 1940 when the light training aircraft he was flying in his role as an officer in the Fleet Air Arm crashed in stormy weather into a field near Brampford Speke in Devon, killing him and his passenger. Eleven months later, a similar fate befell the 30-year-old Ken Farnes of Essex and England. Farnes was that unusual cricketer of his time who combined the attributes of a terrifyingly fast bowler with an interest in oriental philosophy, and more particularly the work of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.

As a result, Farnes lived by a different value system than that adopted by the typical English player of the 1930s, or for that matter of any other era of the game. Rather than go into a syncopated frenzy on taking a wicket, for instance, he often had some consoling words for the departing batsman. Len Hutton remembered that he had once had his middle stump uprooted by Farnes, and then been informed by the bowler on his way back to the pavilion that the names and distinctions that human beings apply to their earthly triumphs and disasters were merely an illusion. ('I thought he'd been drinking,' Hutton once told me.) Farnes died when, after joining the RAF, he went up in a Wellington bomber on his first unsupervised night flight from a blacked-out airfield near Banbury in Oxfordshire. Possibly disorientated by the absence of lights to act as a reference point on the ground, he crash-landed shortly after take-off. Farnes, who played 15 Tests for England, and who serves as a genetic fast bowling link between Harold Larwood and Fred Trueman, was buried at Brookwood military cemetery in Surrey. His headstone reads: 'He died as he lived, Playing the Game.'

George Macaulay of Yorkshire and England, who could boast the rare feat of taking a wicket with his first ball in Test cricket, was another impressively quick bowler (though he could cut his pace to off-

spin if the conditions required) destined not to return from the war. Macaulay had immediately volunteered on the outbreak of hostilities, by which time he was nearing his 42nd birthday, and been sent as an orderly to a remote RAF base in the Shetland Islands. On 9 December 1940, he was admitted to the camp infirmary, where it was recorded that 'there was an alcoholic history for several years, that he had been drinking heavily during the past ten days, that he retired to his room in a comatose state and was moved to sick quarters at the request of the OC Station'. Macaulay died in his sleep on 13 December. *Wisden*'s obituary paid due credit to this versatile and relentlessly competitive player, who helped Yorkshire win no fewer than eight County Championships between 1922 and 1935, listing him as having fallen 'on active service'. Macaulay's death certificate put it more starkly: 'Cardiac failure three months. Chronic alcoholism, ten years.'

Perhaps the best-known of English cricket's wartime losses was that of Hedley Verity, the Yorkshire slow left-armer who had taken match figures of 15-104 bowling for England against Australia on a sticky wicket at Lord's in June 1934. As *Wisden* wrote, 'This amazing achievement could have been only possible for a man possessed of such length and finger-spin as Verity … the majority of the batsmen had no experience of such a pitch, and their efforts of dealing with it were, to say the least, immature.' It was the only occasion in the 20th century when England beat Australia at Lord's.

In the early hours of 20 July 1943, Captain Verity was at the head of the men of B Company of the Green Howards infantry regiment as they began their assault on the heavily defended plains of Catania, a normally placid resort overlooking the Ionian Sea. They were there as part of the multinational force spearheading the Allied invasion of Sicily, codenamed Operation Husky. Before dawn, Verity led his men up from their landing position, working his way with difficulty along an ill-lit, clammy dirt track until, panting from exertion, he reached level ground. A sign there emblazoned with a skull and crossbones told him he had just passed through a minefield. There were chaotic scenes as the remaining soldiers

struggled uphill in the moonlight under attack from both German artillery and small-arms fire.

'We were more or less surrounded by the enemy,' one of the enlisted men reported. 'They were in front and on either side of us.' As a result, it was 'thunderously loud', and 'star-shells regularly burst overhead', momentarily turning the scene from night to day. The strobe-like flashes of light allowed the German defenders to open up at point-blank range, some of the British soldiers mown down as they advanced in columns, falling side by side, their uniforms cut to shreds. There were accidental clashes in the darkened intervals in between, and one soldier had crept forward to what he assumed was a group of his comrades crouched in a foxhole immediately in front of him only to retreat smartly on hearing German voices. Attempting to secure their position, Verity himself stood up again, signalling to his troops with his right arm, only to be hit in the chest by a burst of shrapnel. There was no practical way to help him as the rest of B Company withdrew. The last order he gave his men was 'Keep going.'

Although Verity was well enough treated by his German captors, his medical care was primitive. On 21 July there was an initial operation carried out in a tented Sicilian field hospital which stank of 'gore and sweat and human excretions'. The prisoner was then taken by slow boat across the Strait of Messina, and by train to a German military infirmary near Naples. There were some 400 casualties piled up in two rooms there, including men who had lost their arms or legs, and others whose stomachs were ripped open and who lay begging for death. Another hot train journey followed the next morning, when Verity was sent on to an Italian hospital at Caserta. A surgeon there operated on the victim's chest, removing part of his rib. Only a local anesthetic was used. On the Friday night of 30 July, Verity weakly signed a form presented to him by the Italian authorities in order to conform to Red Cross regulations. 'I am all right. I have only been slightly hurt,' it read, over the printed message *Saluti affettuosi*, or 'Affectionate greetings.'

That night Verity suffered the first of three successive haemorrhages. Some of his fellow British patients desperately looted the hospital kitchen and brought back ice cubes to try and staunch the bleeding. Their efforts were in vain. Verity died later in the afternoon of 31 July. He was aged 38 and was buried in Caserta with full military honours.

A gifted top-order batsman for whom cricket was all an adventure, Major Maurice Turnbull, also 38, was at the head of the men of the First Battalion of the Welsh Guards on the night of 4–5 August 1944 as they advanced on the small French village of Montchamp in the continuing Allied breakout following D-Day. With daylight there was fierce house-to-house fighting, and some of the troops became pinned down at the end of a narrow lane shrouded in a drifting, waist-high mist. With a hail of intense fire directed at them, they could only burrow deeper into the rubble. 'Resistance never let up,' wrote one of the Welsh officers, 'and we were soon faced by a line of Panzers grinding towards us.' When the moment came for the British forces to break cover, a sniper's bullet instantly felled Major Turnbull. In civilian life he had been the wavy-haired, blue-eyed, somehow quintessentially British all-round sportsman who captained Glamorgan from 1930 to 1939 and had the unusual distinction of playing nine cricket Tests for England and two rugby internationals for Wales. A short time later, a fellow serviceman was able to crawl forward to recover Turnbull's body and drag it away from the front line. He found a photograph of the deceased man's wife and three young children in his wallet and made sure it was returned to the family.

Perhaps the most poignant case among the 72 English first-class cricketers who lost their lives – among them no fewer than five former captains of Oxford University – was that of 32-year-old Flt. Lt. Gerry Chalk of Kent. Chalk had led his county to an eminently respectable fifth position in the last pre-war Championship table, an improvement of four places on the previous year. In the final fixture of the 1939 season, Kent, after being 80 behind on first

innings, were left 382 to win on the last day of the match against Lancashire at Dover. The home team knocked off the runs in just over four hours. Chalk (94) and Arthur Fagg (138) put on 181 for the first wicket, the former, according to *The Times*, batting with 'a felicity that displayed savagery to the bowler but made no demands on the spectator, whom he charmed and beguiled'. This was to prove Chalk's last ever first-class innings. The newspapers had widely tipped him for England honours in 1940.

On 17 February 1943, Flt. Lt. Chalk took off with his fellow Spitfire pilots of 124 Squadron to provide cover for an Allied bombing raid on German shipping at Dunkirk. A high wind blew up as they approached their target, causing some of the planes to become separated from the main force. A group of 30 Luftwaffe Focke-Wolf 190 fighters then appeared in the skies above Ardres, a few miles south of Calais, where a British Wellington had just mistakenly dropped its load of bombs. As shells began exploding all around, a local farmer named Guy Haultcoeur hurriedly glanced up as he ran for cover. He remembered being both 'thrilled and appalled [*consterné*]' to see 'the long red and white trails spinning and looping and rolling, in a colourful and macabre dance' that ended only when the numerically superior Germans broke off and circled back to Dunkirk. Gerry Chalk was one of four British pilots who were officially listed as missing, presumed dead.

Forty-six years after these events, one of Guy Haultcoeur's successors on the farm at Calais came upon the partial wreckage of a long-buried British plane. The authorities were called, and in time the fragments were identified as Chalk's Spitfire. Word of the find reached the ground at Canterbury, and an honour party including the surviving members of Kent's last pre-war side went to France to pay their final respects. After the simple rustic funeral, the wicketkeeper Godfrey Evans, whom Chalk had brought into the team in 1939, was characteristically the first to offer a toast to his fallen skipper. Despite the solemnity of the occasion, the mood was essentially light-hearted. 'After all,' said Evans, 'that's the way we played it.'

This list of cricket's sacrifices is far from exhaustive, and no slight is intended on the names of the many players who are missing. It's enough only to add that for the years 1940–46 *Wisden* contained fewer than half the usual number of pages, and that a large proportion of these consisted of obituaries. They ranged alphabetically from Gunner Sidney Adams, Royal Artillery, who was 'killed, aged 40, with Allied forces – he was a council clerk and leg-spinner who took wickets with his first two balls in cricket [including that of Samuel Beckett], playing for Northamptonshire against Dublin University in 1926', to 'Mr Denys Witherington, killed while serving as a private in the Loyal Regiment – he captained the Leys School, and showed such capital form as a batsman and wicketkeeper that he played in the Public Schools match at Lord's.' The fast-rolling phrases, so compelling in their simplicity and repetition, could only hint at the individual scenes of horror and sacrifice: 'Died of wounds received … Killed in France … Perished at sea … Fell in fighting in North Africa … Downed on air operations … Previously reported missing, officially stated dead.'

No less grim, perhaps, was the fate of those cricketers condemned to spend what might otherwise have been the most productive years of their lives as enemy prisoners of war. On the same day in June 1942, the Test players Bill Bowes of Yorkshire and Freddie Brown of Surrey, the latter a future England captain, were among some 30,000 troops captured following the Allied surrender at Tobruk. Tall and bespectacled, with a shock of wavy blond hair, the fast-bowling Bowes looked more like a gangling Nordic university professor (and, it was unkindly said, sometimes batted like one) than a professional sportsman. He represented his country 14 times before the war and just once afterwards, having lost over four stone in weight in the meantime. Brown similarly reported that he felt 'graver and more decrepit' by the time he was liberated three years later by American troops advancing on Oflag 79, a camp located in a former German army barracks near Brunswick. 'My old cricket clothes hung off me like a sack,' he noted.

The 29-year-old Wilf Wooller, a Welsh cricketer and rugby all-rounder serving with the Royal Engineers, was one of those unfortunate enough to be taken by the Japanese. This was widely considered a fate as dire as anything the war had to offer. Wooller entered captivity as a strapping 6ft 2in, 14-stone athlete and eventually went home again 60 pounds lighter and suffering from crippling stomach pains. The Welshman was physically ill the first time he tried to play rugby on his return, and rarely did so again, although his first-class cricket career lasted until 1962. It was said that in later years he consistently declined to use Japanese-made calculators due to his treatment as a POW.

Wooller shared some of his detention with Acting Major E.W. 'Jim' Swanton of the *Daily Telegraph* and Bedfordshire Yeomanry, who later spoke of a daily routine characterised at least at first by boredom and hunger as much as by the psychotic cruelty we tend to associate with the Japanese camp system. 'The guards weren't always brutal or sadistic, but they were invariably stupid,' he told me. Swanton had to wait until August 1945 for his own release, and, like Wooller, maintained a robust attitude towards the Japanese race for the rest of his long life, during which he found religion, married, and gradually came to wield as much influence on the game as any cricket pundit before or since. Perhaps only a thundering W.G. Grace in his prime carried as much clout at Lord's as Swanton did in the second half of the 20th century. In general, he wasn't a man given to excessive self-doubt. Writing of his eventual liberation, Swanton said:

> The allied invasions [of Japan] were planned for early September, so our expectation of life was roughly a month when the atom bombs fell on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Any [delay] must have cost many more thousand allied lives, including in all probability our own, so in the arguments on the moral side of dropping the bomb some of us find objectivity difficult.

When Swanton finally returned to England from the war, his father walked past him at the station, having failed to recognise his own son.

The Australian cricketers Keith Carmody and Graham Williams were similarly held in German POW camps and resumed their playing careers after the war. Carmody developed claustrophobia, and Williams reported feeling 'a heightened fear of crowds' and a dislike of whistling, as 'everyone had done this in the camp, and it [brought] back painful memories'. We will return to both these players later. For sheer drama, though, neither man's experience could top that of their 19-year-old future Sheffield Shield colleague Ernest Toovey, of Queensland, whose ship HMAS *Perth* was torpedoed during the Battle of Sunda Strait, off Java, in the early hours of 1 March 1942, with the loss of over half her 682-strong crew. Toovey later left a diary account of the event:

> As I hit the oily water I felt a sharp pain to my right knee. I had hit some very hard object in the sea. This was to plague me for years to come. As I had left the ship right aft I may have just touched a part of the stern or some heavy object wrenched loose.
>
> The sea seemed bottomless. Then suddenly I shot to the surface with lungs ready to burst.
>
> It was all over, except to stay alive and try to make the shore. Peering into the starlit sky – oddly, a really beautiful night – the land appeared to be not too far off, probably three or four miles.
>
> Floating around in no particular direction I spied a 44-gallon drum, with a large plank attached. It must have been some sort of raft, originally, but had been smashed. Soon there were about a dozen sailors clinging to it, and we were exchanging names and making enquiries about our mates. They were from various parts of the ship; some were hurt but none too badly. My leg ached considerably,

> but the oil in my eyes was the major worry, as it was with all of the men.
>
> Strange situations cause strange things. Silly as it seems to have had an argument about sport while floating around amidst the blood and wreckage of the *Perth*, that was what happened. My ship mate Keith was a disputatious bloke, and I guess he being from the south and me from Queensland, this had formed the basis of a difference of opinion. The subject of the dispute was the choice of our Test team's stumper. I firmly told him that Don Tallon was the best man for the job.
>
> At least this discussion kept us awake, as it was so easy to just close the eyes and slip beneath the unfriendly water. Many men did.

The three subsequent years in captivity were to be a harrowing enough ordeal for Toovey. He spent them in a series of Japanese camps where, among other things, he was forced to resist a surgeon's repeated proposal to amputate his injured right leg. ('I have to play cricket for Queensland,' he told the doctor.) Toovey admitted that he never really recovered from the experience, in body or mind, but in later years he was always most struck by how it had all begun: floating half-choked with oil amongst the shipwrecked flotsam of the Java Sea, while debating the merits of the ideal candidate to be his nation's Test wicketkeeper.

* * *

Another of those players to swap their whites for a soldier's uniform was Stewart 'Billy' Griffith of Surrey, Sussex and ultimately England. Griffith served as a decorated officer in the Glider Pilot Regiment at the 1944 Battle of Arnhem, where he fought alongside his county colleague at Hove, Hugh Bartlett. Bartlett was an attacking batsman whose stays at the crease tended to be brief but often memorable affairs, but whose Test career was thought to have

suffered after he had fallen out with his captain Walter Hammond over a woman in whom both were interested. Bartlett saw action as a pilot successively at Normandy, Arnhem and in the Rhine crossings, and like Edrich was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). Legend has it that his hair turned grey in a single night after he flew his sortie into Arnhem. Certainly, he was never the same strokeplayer again after the war.

Twenty-three-year-old Len Hutton, already a cricket world record holder for his Test innings of 364 against Australia at the Oval, had promptly signed up to fight in 1939. Like a number of peacetime sportsmen, he was assigned to the army physical training corps. Fifty years later, Hutton remembered that he had wanted to be 'in the heat of it, [but] instead spent most of my time sitting around in barracks with a lot of rather gloomy buggers drinking tea and listening to the war news on the radio'. One day in March 1941 the now unhappy warrior was exercising in an army gym in York when a mat slipped under him and he fell heavily on his left side. X-rays revealed a severe fracture just above the wrist. Hutton's active war, such as it was, was over. He underwent three operations before the end of 1941, separated from the service the following summer, and eventually emerged with a left arm almost two inches shorter than the right one. Forced to use a schoolboy-sized cricket bat for the remainder of his career, Hutton played a further 66 Tests for England, twice leading the side to series wins against Australia in the process.

The fates of other English cricketers ranged from those who fought, or fell, in action, to others whose job was to keep the bureaucratic machinery ticking over rather than to kill Germans. Many of these same players later remarked that it had helped that 'everyone was in it together'. The entry of the Somerset and England batsman Harold Gimblett into first-class cricket at the age of barely 20 in May 1935 had been the stuff of legend. He was already on his way home from an unsuccessful trial at Taunton when the home county found themselves a man short for the match that started the following day, with Essex at the Agricultural Showgrounds in Frome.

Gimblett was hurriedly sent for, hitchhiking the last part of the way in a passing lorry. He went out to bat shortly after lunch on the first day, with Somerset on 107/6 and pondering the advice of his captain to 'watch Peter Smith – he's bound to slip you a googly first ball'.

Gimblett had never actually encountered a googly in his limited experience of school or club cricket, and had only heard the term spoken of in the haziest terms. Nonetheless, he successfully blocked two balls from Smith, himself a future veteran of the desert campaign, and England Test spinner, and hit the third one for a single. All three deliveries had indeed been googlies. A few minutes later, Gimblett smashed Smith for 15 runs in an over and from then on raced to his fifty in just 28 minutes, bringing it up with a six. He required only 35 more minutes to complete his century. Gimblett had by then faced 71 balls and he made his runs out of 130 scored while at the crease, where his partner for much of the time was Arthur Wellard, one of the biggest hitters in the game. The debutant eventually made 123 in 79 minutes, including three sixes and 17 fours, playing throughout with a borrowed bat. Somerset beat Essex by an innings.

The question everyone asked – including Gimblett – was whether it had all somehow been an aberration, or a kind of glorious fluke? The player seemed to settle the issue beyond doubt when he top-scored with 53 in his second Championship match, against Middlesex on a turning wicket at Lord's. Just over a year after appearing in the middle order for Watchet in the Somerset leagues Gimblett found himself opening the innings for England in the first Test against India at Lord's in June 1936, where he scored 11 and 67 not out. It proved to be the most numerically successful match of his brief international tenure, during which he steadily lost ground to Hutton in the pecking order as England's first-choice opening batsman. He finished with an aggregate of just 129 Test runs at an average of 32. Over time, Gimblett's Somerset career similarly became one of fits and starts, with long stretches of relative anonymity punctuated by a furious eruption – a reflection,

some believed, of his inner personality – rather than any pretence of Hutton-like consistency. At his best, he batted as if he was the ringmaster of a show that would be brought to an end only at his, not the bowler's, discretion. When the moment came Gimblett volunteered for the RAF, but was posted instead to the fire service, where he saw duty in badly blitzed towns such as Plymouth and Bristol. His county colleague Frank Lee became an umpire after the war and occasionally stood in matches where a 'very changed' Gimblett appeared.

'Harold looked just like a scarecrow. He must have lost 20 pounds since I'd last seen him … he told me about being on duty in Bristol one night and described a row of houses with a little park in front of them, and every time a bomb fell there was a lovely, pink glow and it blew up a piece of someone.'

Gimblett continued to play first-class cricket until May 1954, when, after scoring 0 and 5 and complaining bitterly of being poorly treated by his county committee over his request that they send him on a therapeutic ocean cruise, he stormed out of the Taunton ground forever. In its way it was as dramatic a farewell to cricket as his arrival on the scene 19 years earlier. Professional English sports clubs at that time tended not to have the large and imaginative public relations staff they enjoy today, and the Somerset authorities limited themselves to a statement noting that 'We shall not be calling on Gimblett's services again.' Unlike them, we will return to the player later.

Denis Compton of Middlesex and England, who shared Edrich's and Miller's second-star-to-the-right-and-straight-on-til-morning credo even before the war, signed on as a special constable, among other things responsible for evicting over-indulging drinkers from London pubs ('a case of poacher turned gamekeeper', Compton himself genially allowed) before being commissioned as a sergeant in the Royal Artillery and sent to India. In general he enjoyed life on the subcontinent, 'where you played a bit of cricket and then went up into someone's palatial estate in the hills for the

weekend'. Before shipping out, Compton was based in the less exotic surroundings of an army barracks outside Chichester in West Sussex, where one night he went out drinking with a young serviceman named Ernest Ridgers. Ridgers has left a diary account of what followed:

> When we were in the pub Sgt. Compton wouldn't let me pay for anything, and after a while one or two of our other chaps came in and he bought them all drinks, too. One boy was black, and there were some Americans in the place as well. Well, two of the Americans went up to this black boy and told him to clear out as they didn't want to drink with blacks, so Compton said to him, 'Stay put, son.' Then the two Americans came back across and walked the black boy outside and the sarge and our chaps followed, and they caught hold of the Yanks and whacked them.

While some critics later found fault with Compton's outspoken views on the racial divisions in South Africa, there's no reason to doubt Private Ridgers's account that he was genuinely offended by this treatment of a fellow British serviceman at the hands of some boorish Americans, nor that he waded in to 'whack' them in the soldier's defence.

Godfrey Evans, arguably England's greatest wicketkeeper, also joined up early in 1940, despite being just 19 years old at the time. He spent most of the next 12 months square-bashing at an army Service Corps barracks in Ossett, West Yorkshire. One wet night in September his platoon was on a 24-hour exercise under 'actual battlefield conditions', which meant sleeping as best they could in a waterlogged ditch, when a stricken German aircraft came screaming out of the sky to drop its high-explosive bombs on a nearby poultry farm, killing some chickens, before crashing a few miles away from their position. Evans and his unit were hurriedly deployed to the scene, where they found the enemy pilot still strapped into

his cockpit, 'burned to a complete crisp … the flesh was bubbling on what remained of his face'. The young Kent stumper would remember how quiet the other men in the group had become at the sight, and the sergeant who then spoke up: 'Now you buggers will believe you're in a war.'

Nearly 50 years later, reminiscing on the cricket scene of 1945, Evans, on the surface the least introspective of all sportsmen, chiefly remembered two things. First, the collective spirit of army life had understandably been strong for several years to come, 'meaning that in most county dressing rooms players still addressed each other as Major, or Corporal, or Sergeant, etc, while the clubs themselves were run exactly as if you were back in uniform. It didn't really matter how good you were at batting or bowling. What counted was whether or not you had that air of authority that came from being an officer.' Laudable as this last attribute was, it was not necessarily the best qualification for the crucial work of restoring English county and Test cricket after its six-year hiatus.

The second thing to which Evans drew people's attention was that 'All of us went a bit potty, one way or another, after the war was over. Some people seemed to have a double charge of life to them, like Bill Edrich, and others shrank back like poor Harold Gimblett. I'll tell you this, though,' Evans added, often tapping his listener's chest for emphasis – 'most of us were almost mad with impatience to start again.'

* * *

Daily life during the war began early for the young Cambridge University and Hampshire batsman John Blake, who had joined the Royal Marines at the age of 21. In September 1940, Blake had taken part in a joint services operation codenamed Operation Menace. This was a scheme to land a force of 8,000 marines and infantry troops under cover of darkness at Dakar on the coast of French West Africa (today's Senegal), then somehow to rouse the native population to overthrow the pro-Nazi Vichy French administration

in the colony, replacing it with a more congenial one led by General Charles de Gaulle, before liberating the locally stored gold reserves of the Banque de France to London. That done, the raiders would take their leave of the area as swiftly as they had come, while several specially equipped Lancaster bombers circled overhead and dropped smoke bombs to mask their departure. If it all sounds like a luridly melodramatic James Bond plot, that may in part be because Ian Fleming, Bond's creator, had interested himself in Operation Menace while serving as an operative with British naval intelligence, and later used some of its broad detail in *Goldfinger*.

It was a fantastic scenario, which to succeed would have required outstanding organisation and phenomenal good luck on the part of the raiders, and extraordinary incompetence on that of the enemy, none of which had been much in evidence in the general drift of the war to that point. Sure enough, the ensuing mission did not go smoothly for the British. The 8,000 men duly went ashore, but were unable to locate the French gold, let alone to harangue the indigenous population sufficiently for them to depose the municipal government. The British armed trawler HMT *Stella Sirius* was sunk as she lay off waiting to receive the returning troops in Dakar harbour, and several other vessels came under sustained attack from the shore batteries before withdrawing into the night. 'A total shambles,' Blake was left to rue of the affair, remembering how he and his men had run for the gangway of their departing ship under heavy small-arms fire, while the sound of explosions had boomed towards them. The reports came from across the bay, in the general direction of the *Maison des Esclaves* (House of Slaves), a former island prison since refurbished into an armoury and gun emplacement that lay just outside the mouth of the harbour, on a direct line of retreat for the Allied convoy. 'They were throwing everything they had at us as we hared for the ship,' Blake later wrote. 'One of the aft magazines was hit by a burst from the shore, and flames immediately shot up and lit the dark sky like a ghastly Bonfire Night. The crew were yelling at us to run faster as the gangway was

being lifted back to the deck. It was a vision from a nightmare. In the bedlam I heard one Irish voice shout out, "Everything's going to blow up. We're *fooked*."'

Nonetheless, Blake somehow emerged from the chaos of Dakar, and by early 1941 was back training at a barracks in Eastney, near Portsmouth, where he typically rose following reveille at five each morning for a full day of drilling, marching and 'mind-numbing' lectures on the theory and practice of a conflict he had already seen at close quarters for himself. For many recruits, the combination of tedium mingled with occasional terror of warfare destroyed their initial enthusiasm for the life, but not in Blake's case. He remained a super-patriot, never complaining aloud of the boredom and danger, and displaying an almost excessive sense of duty, so much so that some of his fellow marines good-naturedly ribbed him for sounding like a recruiting poster. 'I still thought the whole exercise worthwhile,' he wrote. For at least some volunteers, it had taken the war for their country to give them the opportunity to show what they were worth.

When the training regimen allowed, Blake was sometimes able to drive the 20 miles to the cricket ground at Southampton. It was here, one day in April 1941, that the young soldier-sportsman experienced what he called a 'startling bolt of truth, los[ing] at least some of my more innocent feelings about the war', when he called in to collect some post the Hampshire club was keeping for him. Although it was a sunny spring afternoon, with no blackout provisions in effect until later in the day, Blake noticed on entering that all the blinds were pulled down in the county secretary's office.

> It was a very gloomy atmosphere, like stepping into an undertakers, and Mr MacLeod, the secretary, was sitting there at his desk with a single candle burning. He had a black armband on. A few days earlier his friend John Butterworth, a good opening bat, had been killed flying for the RAF somewhere near London. I later found out

> that Butterworth's younger brother had also died in the Dunkirk affair. Now I knew Alister MacLeod. He was a tough old bird who had fought in the first war. But he was really broken up on account of that family. And in those early days of the war the way you dealt with something like that was by drawing the curtains and sitting there with a solitary candle and a black armband. And so every time you went in to talk to him the whole idea of death was somehow brought home to you in a quiet cricket pavilion in Hampshire even more powerfully than when you were running for your life amidst the smoke of shellfire in Dakar.

Alister MacLeod was obliged to put on his black armband several more times before it was all over. On the night of 17 June 1941 his county's prolific left-handed batsman and occasional wicketkeeper Don Walker was shot down over Best in the Netherlands while on his way with the RAF to bomb a target in Germany. He was just 28 at the time of his death, and widely tipped for future England honours at both cricket and rugby union. Following that, MacLeod's family friend Gerald Seeley, who played a single first-class game for Worcestershire while still a teenager before becoming one of the many young cricketers to join the RAF, was shot down and killed in a raid over the Belgian coast. MacLeod wrote in his diary late that July: 'Here are the first terrible fruits of this war with the Germans, and the prospects seem every bit as dreadful as the great bloodbaths of the last one.'

In time, the Hampshire players Francis Arkwright and Norman Bowell both fell on duty, the latter while a Japanese POW, aged 37 and 39 respectively. *Wisden* had remarked of the county's only mixed playing record in 1939, 'Unpalatable as it may be, the truth is that the team lacked real fighting spirit.' It is not a judgement that would seem to apply to those same individuals over the six years that followed. As MacLeod later wrote of the steadily accumulating losses he was forced to record in his club's book of remembrance:

'Nowadays the ring of the young messenger on his bicycle is to be confronted by the angel of death.'

In the end even John Blake himself, the dashing young soldier-cricketer who had called in to collect his mail at the county ground that sunny spring afternoon in 1941, would fall while fighting with the Marines in Croatia. The citation for the Military Cross he won shortly beforehand read:

> For outstanding gallantry and leadership while serving with the 43rd R.M. commando in the attack which led to the capture of Mt. Ortino on 3rd February 1944. On reaching the top of the Mount through heavy machine gun fire, without hesitation and heedless of the danger from grenades, he led the forward section of his Troop in a bayonet charge on the enemy and captured 20 prisoners. Later in the day during a strong enemy counter attack, this gallant Officer moved from position to position, encouraging his men and directing their fire.

John Blake was aged just 26 at the time of his death.

* * *

Before moving on, it's worth remembering that few of these individuals, while all undeniably heroic, were entirely free of humanising contradictions. Keith Miller, as we've seen, was supremely brave in his own right, able to inspire others to feats of courage they never dreamed possible, and also engagingly blunt when it came to dealing with life's pompous authority figures. But like most of us, on occasion he could be domineering, selfish and plain rude, particularly to those he thought guilty of wasting his time or paying insufficient heed to his service both in and out of uniform. Although there's not the least suggestion that Miller ever boasted about, let alone embellished, his impressive war record – and we should always bear in mind his deathless remark when asked to

compare them: ‘Pressure is a Messerschmitt up your arse, playing cricket is not’ – it’s fair to say that a certain amount of hyperbole later attached itself to his time stationed at the RAF’s 169 Squadron (motto: ‘Hunt and Destroy’) in Great Massingham. Miller’s total of 600 hours at the controls of a combination of so-called ‘nuisance raider’ Mosquitos and Beauforts were spent in cramped, poorly heated aircraft that lacked all but the most basic defences, on the sort of missions that were often likely to end in disaster through bad weather, mechanical failure or both, quite apart from the prospect of enemy fire. The fact remains that relatively few of the sorties Miller flew while based in Norfolk in the spring of 1945 brought him into direct contact with the Luftwaffe. The official RAAF archive summarises his time as follows:

* 19 April 1945: Mosquito VI 626 – Bomber support – Patrol in target area, uneventful.
* 23 April 1945: Mosquito XIX 676 – Bomber support – Spoof patrol Travenuinde 15,000ft, uneventful.
* 2 May 1945: Mosquito VI 626 – Bomber support – Low level attack Schileswig-Jagel airfield, carrying two 100 gal Napalm drop tanks. One tank hung up and brought back to base – otherwise uneventful.

There were no further combat missions after that, although Miller did continue to fly occasional sorties over western Germany in order to inspect bomb damage in the area, and once to detour over Bonn so that he could look down on Beethoven’s birthplace, breezily whistling the *Eroica* symphony as he steered the plane through a sudden thunderstorm. None of these excursions, even those primarily for sightseeing purposes, was for the faint-hearted. Taken as a whole, the prospects of survival for most night-flying wartime pilots were matched only by those of submarine crews. But perhaps it’s fair to say that in Miller’s case at least some of the dangers were mechanical, or self-imposed, rather than enemy-related, such as the affair, mentioned above, of the malfunctioning

napalm tank which had jolted loose on his plane's landing at Great Massingham, then rolled 100 yards off the end of the runway and come to a stop in an adjacent field, where it miraculously failed to explode. None of this exactly qualified as a 'cushy' time in uniform. Even when strained through the sieve of nostalgia, Miller's war record remains that of an outstandingly brave young man who consistently put his own comfort second to serving in a cramped, smelly workplace operating in a larger environment that remained pitch-black unless or until it erupted in flames, at an age in life when his modern-day equivalent might be more concerned with his social media posts than in doing anything positively constructive, let alone dangerous, for humanity.

In short, Miller was one of nature's born scrappers, whom the actual war made into a hero; and it does nothing to diminish the fact to say that, like many of us, he could also be short-tempered, overbearing and on occasion insufferable; that he came to take an increasingly flexible view of his wedding vows; and that he perhaps masked his constant belief that something bad was always about to happen with a certain amount of bluster, aggression and exhibitionism. If it's true that he fought gallantly for the Allied cause, it's also true that his fellow airmen, alluding to their colleague's tendency to emerge unscathed from his various clashes both with authority and the enemy, referred widely, and sometimes satirically, to 'Miller's Luck'.

Similarly, it's not in any way to belittle the obvious horrors of life as a guest of the Japanese state from 1942–45 to quote E.W. Swanton's own account of an existence characterised by extreme tedium, but leavened by moments of absurd humour.

'About three one morning,' Swanton writes, 'some Jap guards were surprised to hear raucous noises coming from one of the nearby houses, and on entering found a British soldier in fine fettle. Next morning he was brought before the commandant [and] after a long lecture the sentence was pronounced. A board was hung round his neck with the legend: "I took whisky. This very bad thing." Then

the POW band – an accordion and a trumpet – was called out, and ordered to play the prisoner round the yard.'

In broadly the same spirit, a torn scrap of scorecard records that on 6 February 1945 a 'hearty' cricket match was played between two sides of prisoners on the grounds of the Mulo camp at Palembang, 300 miles south of Singapore, with an Australian and an American standing as umpires, and an RAF mechanic named James Pennock, from Streatham in south London, keeping score. Or that a Royal Artillery officer named William Bompas, captured by the Germans early in 1943 and locked up in Oflag 79, wrote of his experience there:

> Cricket was played on four or five afternoons each week in the summer on the asphalt down the centre of the yard, with 6 and more or less out when the ball was hit onto one of the flat roofs. Bill Bowes (Yorkshire), Freddie Brown (Surrey) and John Bowley (MCC) and a lot of club cricketers regularly took part, and the standard was really very good.

Cricket in these surroundings was not only an important way to keep fit, but also a means of preserving one's identity, for men to remember the lives they had led and might hopefully lead again. It was a widespread practice throughout the German and Japanese camp systems, and right to the end of the war the Red Cross regularly included supplies of bats and balls alongside such commodities as tea, cocoa, butter, fresh socks and, above all, cigarettes in their care packages to inmates. In 1940, a 26-year-old Anglo-Irish writer-turned-soldier named Terrence Prittie was captured by the Germans in the retreat from France, and while in captivity smuggled out essays on cricket, later composing an entire waste-paper manuscript called *Mainly Middlesex*, about his favourite first-class county, which was published to acclaim after the war.

Keith Miller was in some ways the incarnation of classic Australian values as they were tested by war, and exemplified by

men known for their raw courage, selflessness, loyalty, bluntness of speech and a lack of deference – almost a point of Antipodean honour – that could grate with the traditional British officer class. It must have been an almost surreal experience for such men, and their like-minded allies, to go overnight, as some of them did in 1945, from flying combat missions over enemy territory to playing a leisurely afternoon's cricket for their local team. Bill Edrich would never forget the incongruity of being stationed back in Great Massingham, where he and his colleagues sometimes unwound in between bombing raids with a spirited limited-overs match staged on the baize-like lawns of the nearby manor hall. 'Every now and then would come the old accustomed cry: "Owzatt?"' Edrich recalled. 'And then one's mind would flicker off to the briefing room, to joking with a pal … and one saw again his machine cartwheeling down, flaming from nose to tail.'

Keith Miller was later accorded the status of an Olympian god among mortals, whom no less a judge than Neville Cardus once called, a little breathlessly, 'as masculine as Tarzan, a young eagle among crows and daws … the supreme champion every boy would want to be'. In 1945, men like Miller and Edrich seemed to be constantly pushing at a revolving door between relative tranquillity and mortal peril. In later years, Cardus continued to believe that such individuals had possessed 'heroic, almost semi-divine' qualities. But he admitted that the thought had also crossed his mind that 'they were fully human, too, with all that implies, and that was what made them so interesting'.