MAURICE CARVER

(Extracts from "Decades" by his brother, Humphrey Carver, 1994)

In 1917, Maurice was 18 and head boy of G.F.Bradby's house at Rugby and of an age to follow his brother into the war. I had just arrived at Rugby and was displaying my precocious talents at cricket. When the news came about Christian, Bradby sent us both home "to be a comfort to our parents".

On the staff of G.H.Bradby's house at Rugby was a young schoolmaster, E.F.Bonhote. He had been in India teaching at St. John's College in Agra and was already an Anglican parson. His role as "house tutor" was to be a friend and good mixer with the boys in contrast with the role of the house-master who remained a somewhat remote authority on the other side of a green baize door that separated his private residence from the boarding house. (It was the educational doctrine of Dr. Thomas Arnold that the senior boys should run their own affairs under the watchful eyes of a housemaster). In his role as house tutor Bonhote had become a good friend of both Christian and Maurice and the Carver family. We called him "Fido".

As the time came near for Maurice's transition from schoolboy to soldier, Bonhote and Maurice together conceived the idea that they would both enlist, side by side, as foot-slogging ordinary soldiers, rather than to enter the army as officers.. In Bonhote's case this seemed to be a reasonable course. It had been pointed out that an Army Chaplain was automatically given the rank of Captain and could not hope to win the friendship and confidence of ordinary soldiers. He would belong in the Officers' Mess, on the other side of the green baize door, as it were.

Maurice's motive to enlist was a bit different. He was a deeply religious person and believed that the outstanding quality of Christianity was the virtue of humility. He believed that the sons of the English privileged classes should not accept the benefits and comforts that money can buy. It was a matter of pride: "If the ordinary man is expected to face the horrors and humiliations of war, I can face them, too, under the same conditions." He thought of Jesus walking the dusty road to Jerusalem with a little band of humble fishermen around him. His brother, Christian, in the debris of the Ypres salient, saw issues of Christianity and loyalty in a different light.

Christian wrote to his brother Maurice on 24th June, 1917:

"You were put into this world to fill a certain purpose. You have had the best home and the best training anyone could have, and it is up to you to see that these things do not go for nothing in the hour of need."

And to his mother Christian wrote:

"It is not Maurice Carver, his particular little destiny at all. It is England and what she requires of him."

To his friend, Bonhote, Christian wrote more sternly:

"I am mystified on hearing of your suggestion to Maurice that you should enlist together. Officers are one of the nation's most vital needs, public school men above all. You will pardon my exasperation on hearing of two people who are urgently needed as officers, contemplating the idea of enlisting together, I cannot help feeling sorry that you took this step without consulting my people..."

Christian's death in July 1917 brought this discussion to an end. Maurice completed his officer training (at St. John's College in Oxford) by the end of the year and was immediately in France with the K.R.R.C. (The King's Royal Rifles). On July 15th 1918, he was in sight of Zillibeke Lake, where Christian had died the year before. Maurice led a raiding party of eight Americans and eight of his own men into the deep craters and barbed wire of No-Man's Land. He received multiple wounds in his left leg and was hospitalized.

For my brother Maurice the Second War started where the First War left off. It was a continued confrontation of good and evil, and the business had not been finished. Maurice had lost his brother Christian in the first round and he had no doubt at all that he had to go into the battle again. Maurice was a 40 - year old schoolmaster and a fervent Christian and he believed it was his responsibility to set an example, though he lived in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) far from the main theatre of war.

In 1940 Maurice told his partner and fellow headmaster at Ruzawi School that he was off to the war. He said goodbye to his wife Gwen and their two boys, aged 12 and 8, and boarded the train to Bulawayo to the nearest recruiting centre. He enlisted in the ranks of the Rhodesian Army and it took him two years to work his way up to the Mediterranean theatre of war. Here the German forces had penetrated to Egypt and were using Greece and Crete as stepping stones into the Middle East.

By subtracting ten years from his age and alleging that he learned Greek at Rugby, Maurice succeeded in being chosen to join the small British group operating behind enemy lines in Greece known as Force 133. Their task was to interrupt German use of the coastal railway route between Mount Olympus and the Aegean Sea.

Here is an excerpt from Maurice's own memoir recounting how he blew up the train on the night of October 16th, 1944:

" 'Trains', he said, looking south and, sure enough, there was a searchlight flicking to and fro. He trotted off to the rear and I moved to my white stone and the end of the primer cord to which I had attached the detonator and one inch of time fuse (taking about 2.5 seconds) and two copper tube igniters. I had put these things under a piece of sacking to conceal the flash somewhat. So I waited with the fuse in one hand and a match box in the other.

"I could now hear the noise of the train and the searchlight was sweeping the ground on each side of the track. I know that no-one on the train could possibly see a motionless man on the ground, but I had to tell myself this. The train was travelling fast and now the engine was threshing and thrusting almost on top of me. I scratched the rough surface of the match box over the copper tube igniters and was startled by what seemed a blinding flash.

"The man behind the searchlight swung it and got me in his beam as I ran away. I was wearing a Rhodesian bush-hat and I saw its elongated shadow on the ground. I threw myself down as I wanted to get out of the beam of the searchlight, but just then the beam faded out and a terrific crash occurred and the place was full of smoke and things falling. My mind was so obsessed with the feeling of being hunted that I didn't immediately recognise what the crash was but thought "Good Lord! Another shell!" I ran a bit and lay down again. The smoke was clearing off and someone was yelling. Then a machine-gun opened up from the rear of the train and I could see where its bullets were hitting the ground a bit to my left. So I trotted on and then settled down to a walk.

"I reached the road and looked back at the train and then looked around for our party. Nobody was to be seen. I walked on a bit in case I had reached the road in the wrong place. But there was no sign of anybody so I set off by myself up the hill.

"I remember being a bit surprised at my own feelings. I was extremely thankful to have got through the business and filled with a kind of wonderment that I had been able to bring it off. But there was another feeling - that feeling of something done amiss, which I have so often, but which , I told myself, I might be spared now when I had just accomplished about the only job requiring courage that I had ever done. I did not think about the death or injury inflicted for a long time afterwards. Nor had I anything but a feeling of satisfaction when I learned that six Germans in the armoured truck with the searchlight in front of the engine had been killed. I have never been a pacifist and I have never had the slightest doubt about the soldier's duty to take life when his enemies have offended against God's laws. Nevertheless, there seemed to be some remnant of conscience able to respond, though I could not understand what was troubling it."

Maurice flew into Greece on October 21, 1943. He blew up the train a year later on October 16 and on December 10, 1944 was taken off the train at Marandellas by Gwen and John and David, "yellow with jaundice."

For more than a year he disappeared behind enemy lines, into Greece, totally out of communication with his wife and two boys. It was as if he had abandoned them at a critical stage in their lives and when he returned he was a stranger. They were not particularly interested in where he had been and what he had done. But Maurice knew that his personal confrontation with evil had been the crowning achievement of his life. This separation never really ended.