

ENGUIN BOOKS

# The Patriots



JAMES BARLOW

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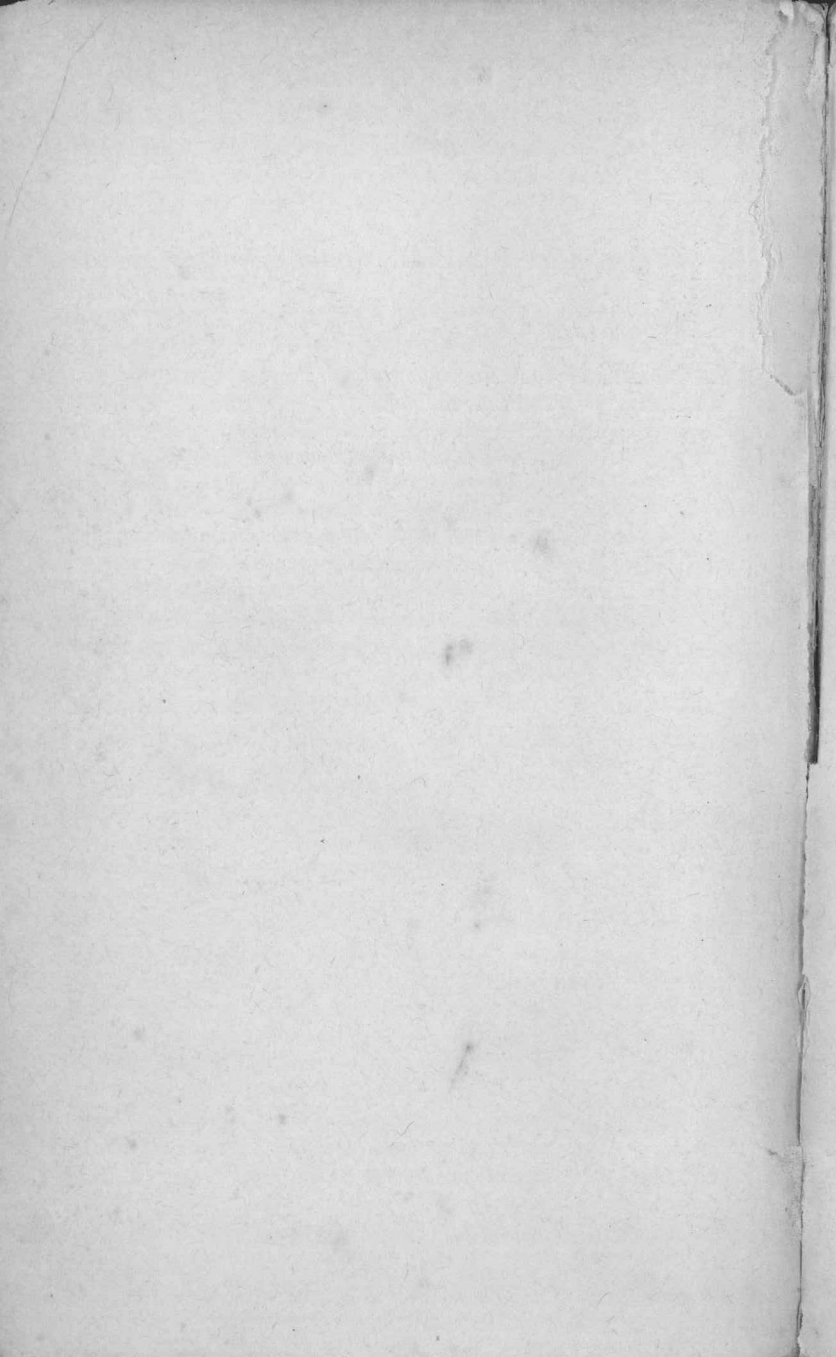
PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN BOOKS  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
HAMISH HAMILTON

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex  
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,  
Mitcham, Victoria

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First published by Hamish Hamilton 1960  
Published in Penguin Books 1962

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters are of my invention. Since it would be pointless - indeed, it would be ungrateful - to pretend that any but the 1st Airborne Division fought in Tunisia, Sicily, and Holland, this Division is mentioned by name, as are some of the places it fought in.

I would like to express my thanks to John and Hans, who so readily helped me with the novel, and it is to them that I dedicate it.

J. B.



## Part One

### THE ARTILLERY OF WORDS

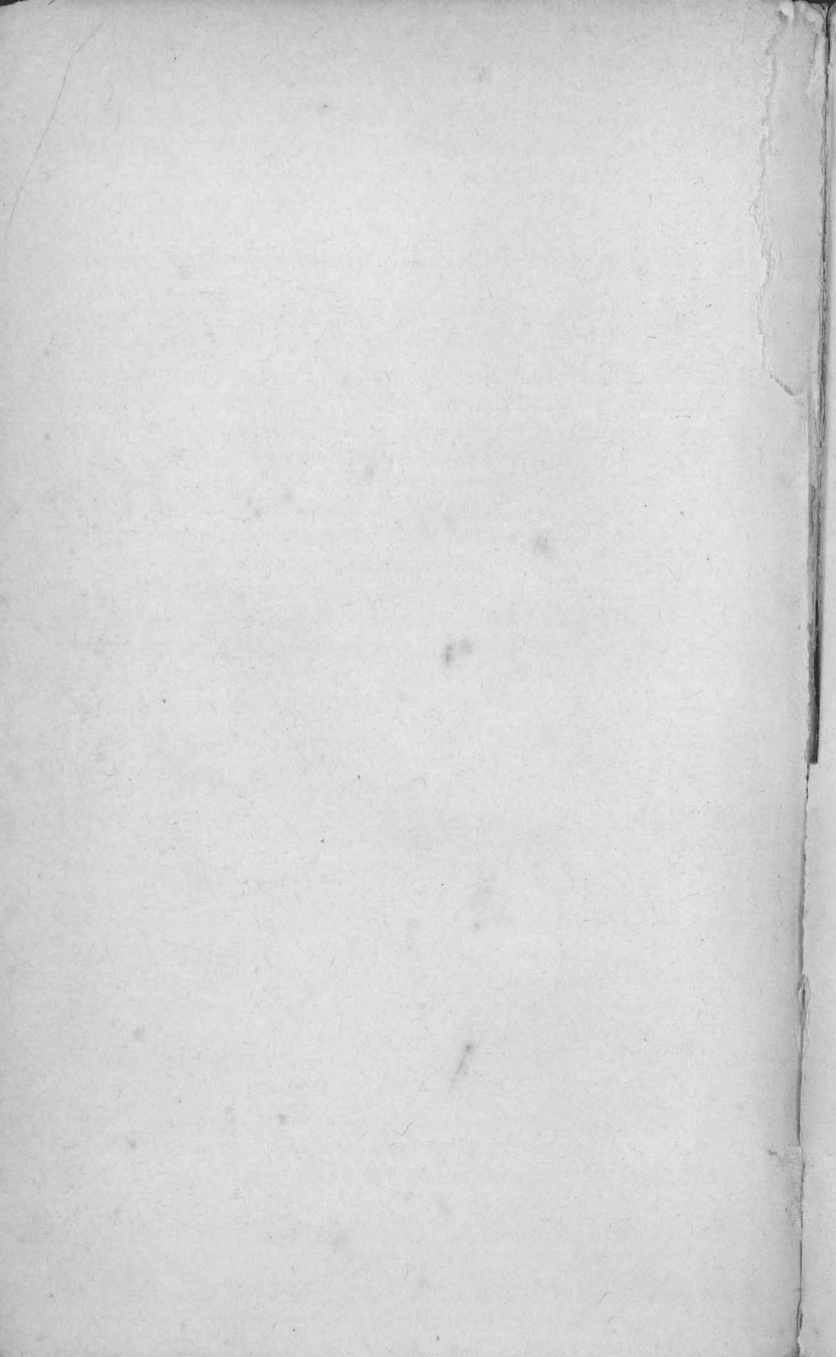
*The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,  
And the flesh'd soldier, rough and hard of heart,  
In liberty of bloody hand shall range,  
With conscience wide as hell.*

SHAKESPEARE (*Henry V*)

*Do you ask me in general what will be the end of the conflict?  
I answer, Victory. But if you ask me in particular, I  
answer, Death.*

SAVONAROLA





# I

MILLS, Reginald Mills, walked up the slight incline of the empty city street of Wicester at six-thirty on a morning near the end of August with the intention of going to Holland for a week. Just ahead of him were two middle-aged women whose luggage indicated that they, too, would be flying that day. He heard their refined accents prospecting in terms of Venice, and wondered why they hadn't come in a taxi. The white stone buildings had a sculptured magnificence unnoticed in the impatience of industrial day. Now, near the air terminal, he viewed with interest two girls whose high-heeled tread tapped the silent pavements in the flawless morning. They laughed, were without concern; their pivoting eyes observed him, tough and uncompromising in his every attitude; they were very young and he found it slightly remarkable that two children should be flying somewhere alone, anywhere, forgetting that in his early twenties he had flown in many aircraft over several countries.

Under the glass dome of the terminal he sat and watched; he was not the sort of man who read brochures or flicked the pages of *The Field*. The people were typed, not of his world; the loneliness of it ate at him for a moment until he saw that the more talkative of the two women already noticed was just making her third trip to the toilet. Then he knew they were all scared a bit and inside himself he grinned, remembering things.

The loudspeaker blared and eight people strolled self-consciously towards the exit. From the bus Mills saw that the city was coming to life: traffic was now thick, people filled the wide pavements, the silence had gone. A girl was weeping outside the bus. Five or six persons were seeing her off; they talked animatedly to each other, two laughed, but the girl wept. She sat alone just in front of Mills, shaking with it.

Twenty minutes later he was one of an immense crowd in the airport lounge. He had forgotten that it was still holiday time: the enormous surf of voices filled him with something: resentment, boredom, the very English anxiety to know the drill: *they* all seemed to know it, but he was making his first

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air journey for eight years. Their voices were precious, arrogant, confident, English on tour; they belonged to words and money; he felt remotely the irony that he had gone through the fury of war so that they could do this, talk, theorize, patronize. Mills was tough, awkward, difficult to live with, although he could be recklessly generous if he liked your face. His friendships were few and limited, had to be earned, kept dangerously, must include humour and exclude anything that reeked of pomposity, self-importance. He hated charm because it was based on deception: he could stand face to face with any truth: things like noise, pain, blood, fire, and speed which, beyond a point, alarmed others, simply meant nothing to him. Money he held in contempt, alongside words. The one thing he owned with pride was his motor-bike. On this he would, when unbearable restlessness overcame him, as it sometimes did, roar off for hundreds of miles to get away from – well, he didn't know quite what. On a main road he would work up an easy eighty and swing right out and face the traffic and charge at some speeding Jaguar until terror gleamed in the oncoming eyes and they were instants away from a panic turn into a telegraph pole or dangerous clutch-and-brakes stop-everything that would send something cartwheeling. He'd feel satisfied then: one pompous bastard who wouldn't feel so hot for a while. . . . The bike was as powerful as a family saloon. One day when he had money – he knew the day would never arrive, but he didn't care, he held money in such derision: God, how they crawled for it, sold their guts for it – but if that day did come he'd have a Jensen or an Alfa-Romeo or an Abarth and really move. . . .

A voice was bleating: 'The plen for Menchestah . . .' And, outside the glass and the cacophony of voices was reality, the clean air flicking the grass and a Dakota – they called them Pionairs now, but everyone who'd survived World War II would always know them as Daks. The eight of them became human beings, alone, without the protection of words, climbing into the aircraft. The girl's sadness was bludgeoned by the thrash of airscrews. She turned a wan face to Mills, who grinned at her and made a small gesture of the body: what the hell?

Mills sat by the starboard engine and looked along that wing, all dull silver and little rivets and stains of oil. The machine

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vibrated gently and then the two engines blared in mechanical ecstasy and the airport buildings had gone and the grass was blasted sideways and the steward was offering a tray of sweets and Mills's left hand, outstretched, suddenly flicked in rejection because he sensed the sweets were to moisten the dry mouth of fear and he never admitted fear; and the returning eyes stared at hedges and a scattering of birds and the magnificence of early morning sun and there was a solitary magpie, and the mind's eye saw the exploding mortar bombs and the sack-like dead and he was afraid -

Dawn, Sunday morning, 17 September 1944. Inside the stables in which they lived the quiet, desynchronized breathing of men asleep, the separate ticks of two tinny clocks, and the noise of one's own clothes, varied breathing during the activities of putting shirt over head and trousers up legs, rendered louder, ridiculous, as if one was out of breath in the tremendous silence. Reginald Mills, twenty-five, five-foot nine, twelve stone one, eyes blue, hair brown, moles on left chin, shrapnel scars on right corner of mouth, left wrist, left leg, I.Q. adequate, religion nil, politics nil, hobbies drinking, conversation, fighting, and fornication, health excellent, next-of-kin parents, qualifications good soldier, medals, clasps, decorations, mentions in despatches one, rank Private (promotions refused), went outside to gather mushrooms. With his boots tied round his neck he enjoyed the cold clean wet touch of grass on his bare feet and the spatial silence of the dawn, when not a thing stirred, not even colours, not even the air: it lay about in ribbons of grey in the hollows. The acoustics of the air and ground were excellent: he could hear the flap of a crow's wings beating slowly on the viscosity of the air. Then Private Mills who did not fear battle proved how absurd the animal man is, how human and therefore fallible, only an imitation of God. In the presence of the lone magpie the perfection of the day lost identity in the grip of terror in his stomach, and because this bird had flown into the angle of his vision, and the retina of his eyes had conveyed a coloured picture along nerves to his brain, the anticipation of the day was altered, from what *he* would do to what would be done unto him. Hours later he had jumped from the Dak into the air over Wolfheze, *knowing* his parachute wouldn't open, and relieved when he heard the smack of a

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stray bullet through a panel and the panel ripping. The panel was cross-stitched anyway and in thirteen seconds he was down, with his Bren, himself again, ready to march the seven or eight miles to the bridge at Arnhem –

Now, eight years later, he saw a second magpie and knew it would be all right. The Dak took off, entered the air easily, and climbed to four thousand feet. In the early morning sun the stretches of cloud were magnificent and in the still air smoke from trains and chimneys stretched in a stationary perfection. Distance was purple, gold, misty, unbearable, merging into a grey opaque horizon. The climbing sun gleamed on even the smallest zig-zagging waterway. The steward's pink, handsome face smiled under gold braid and Mills read the Flight Bulletin. Twenty minutes later they descended into rain and skimmed over wet roofs into the airport at Manchester. At this airport Mills had made his first parachute jumps – he remembered now the terror of the second descent from a balloon. No subsequent drop had had quite the same quality of alarming gravity. Somewhere here – or was it at Bulwick? – he'd seen the first dead body: little Jim Watson lying on the grass after dropping eight hundred feet, his flesh a mass of splits, his parachute unopened.

Mills waited two hours, passed time eating biscuits and drinking coffee. Outside, it poured, buses arrived with passengers for Brussels, London, Norway, the Isle of Man, but, inside, the buffet remained empty. Then he moved into a waiting hall, full of people talking, talking, hands flicked, their noise was tremendous; for Christ's sake, he thought, what is there to talk about? There were some Army officers, a number of the bulky men with briefcases, children, a few women. Again he was a little worried: *they* knew the drill, he didn't. Now a voice talked of the Flight Number and they moved like sheep through Customs and Passports, and in the final departure hall he grinned again to himself: the wet air flowed in and even the Army officers stamped about in slight nervousness, and nobody talked at all...

The rain poured on them as they went out to the Viscount. An Irish stewardess, slender, pretty, calm, smiled a mechanical welcome, took the boarding tickets, and in the aircraft it was like a bus, a crowd sorting itself out, grabbing the seats by windows.

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A chunky little Irish priest, already seated, half rose and said to Mills, 'Would you like to? I always go to sleep.' He yawned to prove it.

Mills agreed, 'I always used to - ' but choked off the rest of it, not wishing by the merest implication to seem boastful.

He sat, again on the starboard side, watching the dull, wet runways and saturated grass; the Viscount was big, heavy, and rolled on three wheels without any sensation of movement: there was just the visual appearance of things displaced; and he remembered the thirty Daks circling Algiers, over the tiers of white houses, the green hills and wooded heights, the curved beach, the jetties, the hundreds of little boats, over the fine slope of sand at Sidi-Ferruch where the troops had waded ashore a few weeks before; and, on his way to his first battle, he'd fallen asleep. He'd stayed asleep over the vineyards and pine and eucalyptus, the arid deforestation and erosion, while the Daks rocked and wallowed in the hot, bumpy air currents that came up from the mountains, and other men were sick; and he'd woken just before the red light and five seconds to the green, the shuffling feet and dragging static lines and the air flowing in through the opened panel and the second of them to die. Joe Hayes jumped fifth man out, and it was his destiny to demonstrate that in future operations the Daks must fly over the Dropping Zone with a different tail trim, for otherwise a man's opening parachute, like Joe's, might catch on the tail-wheel and tear -

The Viscount trembled now, held only by its brakes, anxious to go, enter its element, and Mills, who hadn't fastened his safety-belt, was thrown slightly forward when it did. It leaped into the air and was at once tugging its way up.

Mills couldn't withhold admiration. 'What a kite!' he said to the priest.

The heart-shaped face of the beautiful Irish girl was leaning over the priest, offering Mills a sweet. She was used to scrutiny, but pinkened slightly under Mills's frank approval.

The priest nodded. 'Yes. The world is a small place. We are going to be neighbours whether we like it or not.'

'Are you going on holiday?'

'No. I am returning from holiday. I work in the Belgian Congo.'

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Mills said, 'Why not stay at home and do something about the Irish?' and laughed in friendliness, wondering if the priest could take it, and feeling that he could.

The priest smiled a little sourly. 'There are plenty of priests in Ireland to undertake that great work! Where are you going to? A holiday?'

'A place called Arnhem.'

The priest's eyes examined him carefully, with skill, with pity. 'Not quite a holiday?'

'I just wanted to see someone.'

'There was a battle there.'

'Yes, there was.'

The heart-shaped face was there again. She couldn't quite stare out Mills, and he was able to scrutinize her auburn lashes, the fine red hair under the cheeky hat, the texture of skin and mouth. 'Lunch?' she asked, a question answered by herself. The priest said something to her and she acknowledged 'Yes, father', and Mills knew she was a Catholic and even a virgin. He took the tray and fitted it into its recess and began to eat. There was still the sensation at the top of his head of being pushed; they were now over the North Sea, but beyond the glint of the wing he could see nothing. There was no feeling of movement, only of surging power.

The priest said, 'You are not a Catholic?'

'No, father.'

'Why are you going back?'

'Does there have to be a reason?'

'You are avoiding it.'

'Did you ever kill anyone?'

'I haven't the courage anyway,' admitted the priest. He made a gesture of self-contempt. 'Just a man of words. It all counts.' Mills liked him now. 'You must not feel that what you did was necessarily wrong,' ventured the priest. 'It was the kind of war in which it was justifiable. Principles,' he concluded vaguely.

'I killed one of my own mates.'

The priest flinched a bit, chewed some chicken and lettuce, sighed. 'You carry an immense burden. It was, you thought, justifiable also, I feel sure.'

Mills turned away, saw the massive white shining heads of



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thunder clouds, and, 17,000 feet below, the dark-blue gleam of the sea. He had killed Harry Mann because it had been necessary, Harry's eyes, still alive in the body without legs, left arm, stomach, had pleaded while his voice had screamed on and on like a drill. Mill's mind had suggested to his feet that he go nearer: perhaps there was a hope. The sweat had streamed off him and he knew he was going to be sick. He'd cocked the Sten and prayed for the only time in his life, but not answered, God was busy elsewhere, there was a lot to do, he must decide himself. He'd twitched with shock as the Sten fired and rushed on, bayonet fixed, towards the crest and the saturated mortar pits, but in five seconds the sobbing sisters had re-established the range and six mortar bombs had moaned over and he'd dropped flat and, vomiting, he'd pleaded angrily, that's *enough*, and looked up and where Harry Mann had been was a charred small crater and he'd known there was no God so the weight of killing a mate didn't mean anything any more than the fact that Harry Mann, a Catholic, had died without the rigmarole.

But the priest was a good little man and Mills tried to explain it: 'When you see the first one pulped you forget about words, prayers. You don't mind me saying this? And this one was going to die after a lot of agony -'

'God's infinite possibilities -'

'Forget it,' said Mills harshly. 'Words wouldn't have altered it.'

'I think you are or could be a good man,' said the priest. 'Will you have a glass of brandy?'

'I'm a horrible man,' said Mills. He laughed hugely. 'But I'll have the brandy.'

'There is the Dutch coast.'

It was very green, paler than England, sensed as flat despite the aerial perspective which flattens anyway, and the canals gleamed into the distance. The Viscount was going down in wide sweeps. The priest grimaced, 'My ears sting!' and Mills also deafened, read the words, didn't hear them. The pretty stewardess had fetched the brandies and smiled, trying to keep her feet and not spill the drink. Down below were the big boats in Amsterdam, the cranes and barges. Visibility was excellent, everything seemed clean, the very air. Now dimensions and speed were confusing; buildings flicked by under the lowered



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wheels and the airscrews, in a different pitch, screamed in the ears, and then the undercarriage bumped gently and they were rolling on the vast stretch of Schipol aerodrome, watched in the afternoon sun by hundreds of people on top of buildings and in outdoor cafés.

Ten minutes later Mills, slightly dazed by the speed of translation, stood on the pavement outside the airport, confused by the speeding right-hand traffic. There were only three passengers in the small K.L.M. bus that roared off into Amsterdam, but one was an English girl with a child who was married to a Dutch officer and was interested to talk now in her old tongue. At the Central Station he found it quite easy to buy a ticket to Arnhem: everyone spoke English.

With two hours to spare he strolled about, but soon felt the urge for beer. Sitting in a café in the sun he became acquainted with two girls who spoke good English but came from Finland. They were slender and attractive, not at all as he had supposed Finnish girls would be. They were very keen on going on a boat and, with an hour still to spare, he sat in the boat, a 72-seater, and talked nonsense while the beer and the sun lulled him into carelessness and the man pointed out things in four languages: seventeenth-century houses, Rembrandt lived here, there are four hundred bridges in Amsterdam, half a million bicycles, boats being loaded, a large floating dock.

He caught the train with a minute to spare and a lot of promises to write and call on them should he ever be in Helsinki, and sat in an empty compartment laughing, hot in the sun, wanting more beer. He watched Amsterdam recede: Prins Hendrikkade, the Marine Établissement, the buildings of pink brick, the big ships, a windmill, and St Nicolaaskerk, and loved it quite a bit after only two hours. Already he had a job to recall the two faces, and the other girl, with her Catholic gentility and slenderness, but he remembered the chunky good face of the priest because he was rare and shouldn't be forgotten.

The electric train stopped at every station, gave him time to see from the ground what he had once seen from the air. Before and after each small station was a level-crossing with the inevitable cyclists. It was still warm, bright, and clean as the train neared Arnhem. Now he saw the heath and forests of the Drop-