

## **Keeping It Real: The Podcast- Episode 1: Christopher Jary**

**Today on Keeping It Real we are talking to Christopher Jary- a military history author and volunteer at The Keep.**

I'm Christopher, and I'm an imposter because although I have written a number of military histories I am not a historian. I'm really not. I know a fair amount about history but I didn't train as a historian and my real interest is in writing, it just happens that I write about military history or have done quite a lot, but not exclusively.

So I'll tell you a little bit about how I got into it, and it began with this one, which I wrote when I was in my early thirties. And what happened was this, my mother was married to an RAF pilot who was killed in the Second World War, this chap here with the map. And my father was actually a soldier and this chap was killed and my mother remarried after the war and I was born in 1956 (which makes me an old git!)- I'm 66. And I grew up in a house where this chap was remembered. And in the 1980s my father, who was a soldier, was suddenly approached by a filmmaker who was making a film about the battles as they went into Germany in 1945- so across the Rhine.

And as a result of what my father found, he hadn't met him for years, his old platoon sergeant, two of his corporals, and several of his soldiers including his runner- who wouldn't be much of a runner now because he was getting on a bit!- but he was only 19 in 1945. And it prompted my father to write a book called 18 Platoon, which was about the platoon he commanded when he was twenty. And it was about all the wonderful men who I knew now, and he dedicated the book to this chap- his wife's first husband, who if he hadn't been killed he wouldn't have married my mother and I wouldn't be here.

One day in the late 1980, I was sitting thinking about the 18 Platoon and how nice it was that my father had dedicated it to Jack and it struck me how sad it was that Jack wasn't around to write his own story. And that very day my mother phoned me up, and said I've been thinking- I want you to have Jack's log book. Which she had kept, it's his pilot's log book, telling me all about what he'd done, and I thought this is a sign. So I got in touch with a lot of people who had served in the Royal Air Force with Jack and I produced this book. I doubled my Christmas card list! I had so many friends who were in the role of command, all who have died now I'm afraid, they died. The last widow died about ten years ago. But they became a really important part of my life and I learned an immense amount.

Now do any of you know about the Cheshire homes? No? It was a wonderful invention by a chap called Leonard Cheshire, who was a bomber pilot, who when he came back from the war he set up a series of homes in this country and right across the whole world. 150 of them. And he became very famous indeed, and he was Jack's squadron commander and he wrote the forward for this, so I'm very proud of that, but if you go down one of the arcades in Dorchester you will find the Cheshire homes shop. So that is how I began writing books. And then I spent a long time teaching people about how the British government works. So I wrote three books about that, and then I came here and they said- "we hear you write books!. Would you write our regimental history?". So I said "okay!" and it took me two years and that was that one. So that was the first book I wrote for this place, then I wrote a trilogy which is those three about a brigade involving Dorsets and Devons and Hampshires and I wrote a

couple of others and I only did two more. So that's how I started . That's why I wanted to collect some props, so you could see. I had no plan to do any of this, it just came my way and I thoroughly enjoyed doing it, so I'm very happy to answer questions that you'd like to know because I've actually learned how to write books, I've taught myself how to do it and it seems to work for me. And maybe if you want to write books I can help you, save you some pain!

*So while you're researching these books, what's the most emotional story you've come across?*

That actually is a really difficult one because it is deeply emotional, because my interest in all of this is the people. I'm not interested in guns, I'm not interested in strategy, I'm not interested in uniforms, my interest is the people. So in writing, for an example I've got in writing, this one, that was really close because I mean if this chap had not died I wouldn't be here. So it's a very odd relationship, my one with Jack, because he was married to my mother. So writing that I can remember writing bits of it with tears running down my cheeks because you realised, I mean I was 30 when I wrote this and he was 28 when he was killed. He had a young daughter and at that stage I had two daughters.

That sort of thing hits home, but writing these three, this is about 3 battalions of infantry. The 1st Hampshires, the 1st Dorsets and the 2nd Devons, and they started off in Malta, they then went to Sicily and Italy and landed there and fought there, and they finally landed on D-Day- they were the first troops ashore on D-Day. Now of course when you're writing three books like this, you get to know them, you really do get to know them and very few of them died on Malta, it was a horrible time but actually only 30 of them were killed on Malta, a fair number were killed on Sicily and Italy but D-Day and Normandy and the whole campaign in Normandy was such a crushing expensive campaign in life.

So many young men- I mean my father got out there. He was told "your life expectancy is three weeks", but he actually survived ten months and survived the whole thing, otherwise I wouldn't be here. But that was what you were dealing with and of course finding out about these people and what they were doing at home in England before they went to warrior D-Day, and then you hear how they died, it's heartbreaking. So you're absolutely right, and we should never ever lose that because the whole purpose of this place and the whole purpose of these books is- for gods sake dont get involved in wars if you can avoid it! Because ordinary people like you or me want to live, you want to die in your bed at about the age of 104 don't you? Yeah, having enjoyed your family and life along the way. Well this lot didn't get that chance and that's what's tragic.

Did you have a question?

*Yes, when you write your books what's your research method like?*

Well now I'm cheating. This one was very very hard work because it's 32 years ago now, well 33 years ago that I was writing it and I was living up North and all the information was at the National Archives which you know where they are at Kew. So I used to have to go there, which was a real pain, you sat and you wrote it all out in pencil and then you took it home and you typed it up and computers were just beginning to come in then so some of it was

typed on an old typewriter, some of it was handwritten, some of it I did on a very old fashioned word processor and it was a very very cumbersome way of doing it. Now of course if I wanted to do that I'd get onto the web, the very records I was using- the operational record books for the quadrants that he flew with where ever debriefing after every raid from every bomber crew is recorded, everything there. The time they took off, what aircraft they were flying, what they saw when they reported back all of that's there, that now is available on the web. And for three quid I can have a whole month's operational records, I don't even have to leave my study at home, it's there, which is fantastic!

Nowadays of course I can do all that, and I've got Ancestry.com so if there's somebody in here and I wonder how olds this chap, where's he from? I can look him up on Ancestry and find out where he's from and what he did, what he was doing in 1939. Do you use ancestry, any of you? Yes, there was a 1939 sort of census- it was an employment census, but it shows everybody who was doing a job at that time. So it tells you their age and where they were living and who they were living with and what they were doing. So all that sort of stuff available, helps bring these people to life. But the real key is to get other people who are very interested in it to do some of your research for you! So you'll notice that on these later books down here you've got me and then you've got with various other people and those withs are people who do various aspects of the research with me. Right, get somebody else to research! What you can't do is delegate the writing, I can't anyway. I do the writing and every word in all of these I wrote because I think that's the bit that I can contribute best to, whereas where the research comes from doesn't matter as much, and I'm involved in the research as well obviously. So that's how I do it now and it works a treat. They are a lovely team, they really are, I mean everytime we produce a book we go have lunch at Poole yacht club to celebrate!

*What was the first book you wrote using the internet Christopher?*

It would have been one that's not on this table actually, which I wrote for my 50th birthday, which was a series of letters to my great grandchildren about what I knew about the family because it struck me- I can see what I can see, I can see half of what my parents could see, I can see about a quarter of what my great grandparents could see, and after that it starts to get very vague and I thought actually it would be rather nice to write a book of what I know so that they can see what I can see.

So that's what I did instead of having a party or a big holiday or something like that for my 50th birthday! I wrote a book called *The Chance That Made Me*, which is a series of 40 letters doing just that. And actually that's the book that I enjoyed writing the most- it was fun because you could put in it what you liked!

*When we introduced ourselves you asked us what area of history we enjoyed,*

And you said Midway- no you said Midway- *you* said the American War of Independence!

*Yes! But I was wondering what your favourite era of history to research is, like what's your favourite era of history that isn't something you've written a book about?*

I have never written a book about the Desert War. That would be from 1940 to 1942- but that's still Second World War! I'll tell you what I really want to do, I want to write a novel about bomber command. Nobody has written a really good novel about bomber command and I think it is a fascinating subject. It's like the trenches in the First World War, it is unique to the experience of those people. It will never be repeated, it never happened before and it created its own entire culture, the way people talk to each other, their values, quite different.

I learned all about it by doing this. I'd just like to write it in a way that's not constrained by what's happened to one person, but I hope will show what it was really like. So that's the next project, I'm not going to write another one of these for a bit and I'm going to have a go at that.

*Do you think it will be hard to go from factual to this style?*

It may well be mildly impossible, I don't know, I may not have it in me! Again I don't know, I've never tried but I'd like to give it a whirl.

*Do you ever get bored writing books?*

No! But I'll tell you what happened with this one, and this I hope will be useful actually, because I learned [while writing Bomber Command] that when you're writing something, you assume you start at the beginning, and then you move on through the various bits until inexorably, you reach the end. And I did start at the beginning, and the beginning actually is quite emotional- because the beginning starts at the end, with Jack being killed, and then you go back into the story. And I found actually when I tried to go back into the story, I was getting bored writing it, and that's dreadful! Because if you're bored writing it, nobody is going to read it.

I remember for about a month or two, I was thinking "come on you really must get going!", and then I thought no- find the next bit that you think is going to interest you, and write that. And so I did. And that was the end of the book, so I'd written the beginning and the end, and then there was another bit in the middle that interested me, so I went back and wrote that. And then, only then, did I go back and write the bit that I'd had trouble with. And I have done that with every blooming book since then- you write the bit that you want to write, if you've got it in your head. You've got the mood of it, you've got the language for it, you know how it's going to be, you feel it, and then you do the other bits later.

And subsequently I discovered- you know the composer Elgar? Who's a deeply emotional man- I know he looked like a Major General, but he was deeply emotional man, and he used to get a violinist called Billy Reed to come down and see him at his cottage, and he'd have been writing a violin concerto, and when Billy Reed got down there, he'd find a bit of concerto on this wall, and another bit round here and there, all around the walls. And his job was to go around with his violin playing these bits, and then Elgar would move that bit up here, and then they'd play it in a different order, and what was happening was a sort of musical jigsaw. And it's actually how I think the creative process works.

Now I'm not saying anything I've written is in the same league as Elgar! But what I'm saying is that's how creativity works, it doesn't work consecutively or in an orderly way, it comes in bits and starts, and then there's a next process, which is knocking it in to shape.

This book took immense trouble, this is my book D-Day Spearhead Brigade, because it all took place in one day. So it's all about the 6th of June 1944, one particular bit of beach, and 2'000 men who landed on it. So you're getting lots of different views of the same thing, from lots of different places, from lots of different people. And how do you tell that story- do you tell it consecutively? Do you go back and do it in bits? Do these people here and then these people here? There isn't a straight answer- you've got to find the best structure that will work, and it took me ages to sort it out! But I'm quite proud of it, because at the end of it I think it works, but it's that thinking your way through and deciding what's important, what sort of tone you're trying to put across, and getting the creative juices to flow a bit- and they will!

*Is there any part of writing a book that you don't like doing, Christopher?*

Indexing! [laughter] Though that's loads easier than it used to be, because once you've got it on a word processor, you just press A-Z and it sorts it out, as long as you've got it sorted properly! It's bitty, but I mean the first book I indexed years and years ago- I had to have 26 different bits of paper for each letter of the alphabet, and you have to write all the As out and then put them in the right order, and all the Bs and so on. Awful job!

*What with these being stories about real people, what do you do, how do you choose when to leave a bit out? What would lead you to leave a bit of the story out?*

I developed a sort of Geneva Convention with these people- because it's very easy if you're sitting in 2022 writing about somebody from a nice comfortable desk with my computer in front of me, and I can make all sort of judgements with the benefit of hindsight, and the people I'm writing about had to make rotten decisions on the spot with limited information- all while they were frightened, cold, hungry, had stomach ache, all the things you would suffer in battle. Your boot laces cutting into your feet because you hadn't taken your boots off for three days, you're wet, your trousers are wet, you're not at your best to make these decisions. And some people made bad decisions. I'm not going to sit in judgement after all this time.

So I'm careful about that. If I knew that someone died horribly, I'm torn in half. Because on the one hand, my job is not to wrap up the reality of war, on the other, there may be a family out there. So that's a difficult balance, and I've judged both ways on different times, I tend to err on the side of putting it in, because I think one of the things that frightens me most at the moment is that there are too many people around who have not lived through wars, and therefore don't realise quite how horrible it is, and why you've got to take great care about it all. So it's a difficult one, it sounds like a huge moral question. It is something I take seriously, and I try to get it right. But I do try to give these people a good press, and give them the benefit of the doubt.

There's one person in the book I've just completed [So Red A Road], that's at the printers now, who was a General, who was an absolute stinker as far as I can make out! Nobody liked him at all, he was completely and utterly as far as I can make out, without any human

warmth at all. Even with him, I've toned it down a bit, but I haven't found anyone that said anything good about him. What of course you fall back on is what people at the time said, and a lot of this [So Red A Road], though I've put it together and linked it, a lot of this is their own words. And those are the most interesting bits, and it's not for me to tinker with those. Does that answer your question?

*Yes! I was just asking how do you decide which bits of history do you decide to keep in, and you've answered it well!*

Thank you! [laughter] I thought it was a jolly good question!

*Could you tell us about the book you've just written, So Red A Road?*

Yes! It's quite a personal one in a way, because it's something I grew up with. My father was in a brigade that did exactly this particular route. It's called So Red A Road, which is a quotation from Thomas Hardy, and it says that, I'll paraphrase, I've seen a lot of war, and I am not convinced that many goals are worth reaching by So Red A Road. So wars are not worth it.

So it tells the story of three battalions, of the Dorsets, the 4th Dorsets, the 5th Dorsets, and the 7th Hampshires, who fought their from Normandy through to the end of the war at Bremen in Germany. And they lost a lot of people in Normandy, so that's the one I've been writing. Very sad, some interesting stories, lots and lots of quotes from people, including some of the old boys that we knew here, one of whom, Ron Beale, only died two years ago just as Covid was starting aged 98, and he survived, so he'd been a Dorset policeman, so there are some happy stories as well of people who survived and came through it all.

*As a now experienced writer, if you could go back to yourself when you wrote your first book, what advice would you give yourself? What have you learned since then?*

Take more risks, so don't play safe. Put some opinions in, but back them up with evidence. Opinions are of no value whatever unless there is some evidence behind it, as I'm sure your History and English teachers will have told you repeatedly! But it's true isn't it, if a politician says something do you believe them, but if they point to some evidence that supports it, you start to think- well maybe!

Another good thing of course that a good writer does is they don't tell you, they show you. So you illustrate through character. And one of the things I think I've learned through these, is that they need, a history needs just as much plot, character, and momentum as any novel does to keep it going. And it's more difficult, because you can't make it up! You've got to find it from amongst the material, and try and put that in, so I think those are the things, and also of course not to worry too much about writer's block, because there isn't such a thing. Work your way around it, by just concentrating on the stuff that's flowing rather than chipping away at some hard surface that's not yielding anything. That's not a bad image, do you like it!  
[laughter]

*I wondered who the General was that nobody liked?*

[laughter] Oh yes, his name was General Sir Iver Thomas, and he was known as Butch, which was short for Butcher, and he was, I mean if you think of the caricature of the First World War General, which wasn't actually fair, but if you think of the caricature of that he was pretty much that. He was humourless, he was suitably unaffected by casualties, and he was pretty arrogant, and he drove rather than led. But, he was also a brave man, and he could be quite surprising. So for example, he taught people in England- he knew that he was going to have to move his men very quickly- so he taught people in England to jump on any vehicle they possibly could- a tank, an armoured personnel carrier, anything they could going in that direction, you get on it. It was called the "quick lift", and that was his idea, and it was a very good one. It meant that they had mobility that other people lacked, because they thought in those terms.

He also, in a period just before they crossed the Rhine, when they hadn't got a lot to do, in the forest in the Netherlands, and it was largely a time of controlling and holding the line, he recreated the divisional battle school they had in England. And they were running courses, just in those three weeks, running courses out on the line. So he was not wholly bad, he was a thoroughgoing professional, but you wouldn't have invited him round for Christmas.

*What's one of the most strangest, unexpected things you discovered while researching your books?*

Oh! Yes! I can tell you this, it's very recent! When I was writing *So Red A Road*- no, I'll start with another story, because this is connected. When I was a little boy, on the landing, we had a thing called an ottoman, like a little thing you could sit on and open, and inside you could keep things. Inside the ottoman, was a parachute camouflage smock. And in the camouflage smock, there were two holes. One here, and on there [pointing to each shoulder]. And beside the camouflage smock was a webbing shoulder strap. And in the webbing shoulder strap, there were two holes. And what it had amounted to was that my Dad had been wearing this camouflage smock for clearing out the garage, and dirty jobs like that. And it stank, it was disgusting! Really unpleasant.

But he'd worn that, and a German parachutist fired a whole magazine from a Schmeisser machine gun at him, and missed him completely. One went through his belt, one went through the webbing shoulder strap, through the camouflage smock, out through the camouflage smock either side, out through the webbing shoulder smock the other side, and missed him wearing all of it! One hit the road, and a tiny piece hit him, he had a tiny little scar on his hand, all it did was cut him. But when he turned around, he realised that one of his Corporals had followed him across the railway crossings, and he had been less lucky, and he'd been shot dead. Now that Corporal was called Wilfred Portius, and in 1981, my wife and I went to where that was, which was near Kleve in Germany, where Anne of Cleves came from, and we found the railway crossing where Corporal Portius was killed. And we went to the cemetery and we found his grave, and I took a photograph of the grave and I brought it home and showed it to my father. So I grew up with the story of Corporal Portius.

So when I was writing the book that I've just finished, just as I was writing what I call the personal postscript, which is why it mattered to me, I thought I'll start with Wilfred Portius, and I'll tell them about the camouflage smock, and while I was writing it, I thought, I'd like to know more about him. I mean, I'd been to his grave, but what about him? So I got on to

Ancestry, and there he was, and I knew that he came from the North East, from near Durham, and I discovered from the 1939 census that he'd been a hairdresser in Hampshire, in Southampton before the War. And then he'd enlisted, and I found that he had two sons, and then I found that his son was on the web, he'd worked on the war memorial in the North East. And I was able to talk to him, and Wilfred's son John, now aged 80, sent me all the photos he had of his father, and he just put them in the post to me! And I thought, that's unbelievably trusting! He didn't know who I was!

So I had this photograph of him, and he'd also gone to the Ministry of Defense, and he'd got his father's service records. Now, I knew Wilfred Portious as a Somerset Light Infantryman. What I didn't realise was that because he'd been a hairdresser in Southampton, when war broke out he enlisted not in the Somerset Light Infantry, or in the Durhams, which would have been the local Regiment where he was born, he enlisted in the Hampshire Regiment!

And did you know he'd landed with this lot that I'd written about, landing on D-Day? [gesturing to D-Day Spearhead Brigade] He'd been there, before he'd got to my father, and he fought all the way through that campaign, through the Normandy battles, at Arnhem, and then when this lot was all sent back to England, he was kept on and he was sent to join the 4th Somerset Light Infantry, where he met my father. And then he was killed beside him on the railway crossing. And that, I just thought, wow! Isn't that a coincidence! So I've written about him in D-Day Spearhead Brigade, and I didn't even know he was there!

But very touching! And I think, if you want to know one of the things that gives me the biggest kick out of all this, it is the relationships you build up with other people whose Dads were there, or Uncles were there. Now I mentioned Ron Beale earlier, Ron Beale was a Dorset policeman, before he was a policeman he was a Dorset soldier, and he was wounded in Normandy. He was a very gentle soul, and he had a lovely, lovely smile. 200 watt smile, really lovely. His best friend was killed beside him, in Normandy, and his best friend was called Eddie Snook, and he came from Shillingstone, and you'll find him on the Shillingstone war memorial. And he was Ron's best man when Ron married in 1942.

And not very long ago, some people turned up here, and said "we'd like to know about my Uncle who was in the 4th Dorsets, and was killed in Normandy, his name was Snook", and I said Eddie Snook! And I was able to show them the film we'd made about Ron, talking about Eddie, I was able to put them in touch with the family, and we were able to have a tea party around this table with all the Snooks sitting one side, and all the Beales sitting the other, and they were enormous friends! It was like a family reunion! They'd never met before, that they'd got in common was that their father's had served together and were good friends. And that side of it's just lovely, and Wilfred Portius' son sending me those photographs and trusting me with them and the response I had from all the people who knew Jack, it's a very special relationship and it's one that continues through the families. And that's partly what this place is about.

That's a very long answer to your question!

*I was wondering- I know that war is full of all sorts of horrible things, but there were also lots of funny encounters. It was full of awful things, but also full of people, who do lots of silly or*



*funny things, so I was wondering if you knew of any funny encounters that anybody had that you've researched?*

One of the things that I really liked about the Bomber Command people that I got to know was their irreverent sense of humour- they had a wonderful sense of humour. And it was the same one, and it didn't matter if they were rear gunners, pilots, ex public school boys or whether they were from elementary schools, they all shared it, and I think if you wanted to capture it, there was a man who wrote a series of books about his experiences of being a bomber pilot, and one of them is called Lancaster Target, and his name was Jack Curry, and he was hysterically funny.

He was a really cocky little so and so, no question about it, he was 19 years old, and he knew best about everything. And it didn't really change, I mean I knew him in his 70s and he was still like that. But he was one of the most professional pilots you could imagine, I mean he would land a Lancaster- do you remember the chap that landed that plane on the Hudson? Sully? He was like that, every flight for Sully seems to have been an exercise in perfection, he wanted to get it absolutely right, and Jack Curry was like that. He really was, he wanted to get it right. He would land a Lancaster back from a raid, and he would try to do a three point landing in a Lancaster, they weren't designed to do that, you do that in little jet type bi-planes, in things easy to manoeuvre. Those things you land on the first two wheels, and then you screech to a halt and the tail comes down and bonk, that is the end of the landing. But Jack, he would keep it right in the air until the very last moment, and then stall, when the wheels were about two feet off the ground.

And what I learned about those bomber command people, was that there was this very lightness of touch, this wonderful irreverence, they took the mickey out of each other constantly. And it went on- I went to reunions with them years later, and they were still doing it when they were in their 70s and 80s, but at the back of it was this real professionalism.

And the final point that I'd make actually, apart from the humour, which I think is a really important point, is it's something that doesn't come over in a lot of films about war. I watched- did you see Dunkirk? The Christopher whatever-it-is version? It just didn't ring true, and one of the reasons it didn't ring true was because it was all monotonous, one tone, all the way through. It was depressing. And actually, it all wasn't like that. You talk to them, and there were high moments of enormous fun, and there was this colossal comradeship that you'd never find again anywhere. And because of the nature of the Second World War and the evil they were fighting, I think there was a clear sense of purpose about it.

But you're absolutely right, the humour is part of it. And people that leave that out- as sort of a really nice bit about Jack Curry, I must tell you about this, his wife was in the WAAF's, the women's auxiliary air force, and where they lived was always known colloquially as the Waffery, and Jack phoned up to speak to her, and got through to this rather pompous WAAF, and said "is that the Waffery?!", and she said "this is the Women's Auxiliary Airforce Officers Mess, to whom do you wish to speak?", and his wife Nia then came to the phone, and he said "is that the whom to which I wish to speak?!" [laughter]. A lovely deflating sense of humour which I liked very much, and I miss him terribly.

I remember watching a WAAF who'd been engaged to a chap who was killed, and she described when she had been told he was killed, and she came back to the station having been for a walk, and there was a party going on, and you can't stop for that sort of thing because people need to let off steam, they need to have fun, while they could. There are good reasons for doing that, but very hard of course for someone that's just lost someone.

*Spike Milligan books are worth reading, he writes about the funny experiences of his Second World War experience, but also the tragic sides of these stories really well.*

*You mentioned Dunkirk, and that you didn't like it very much, what's your favourite historical film?*

About war? Best war film is the Cruel Sea. Absolutely no question. It absolutely rings true, and what's it about? It's about relationships, that's got a wonderful line in it, this is the funniest war joke I know, when they join their ship, they have a really nice Captain who's an ex Merchant Navy Captain, and they have these young sub-lieutenants, who have only just joined and don't know anything about it. And they have a first-lieutenant, who is a bully, and a loudmouth, and everybody hates him. And they realise after they've done a couple of convoys across the Atlantic escorting merchant ships across, and it's really unpleasant and dangerous, they realise just how awful it's going to be. And this chap doesn't like it at all, and they drop in to conversation that the Navy take duodenal ulcers very seriously, because if you have a duodenal ulcer it may blow up at sea, and if it blows up while you're at sea, you may die, and you'll be out of action. And so if you have a suspected duodenal ulcer, you won't go to sea.

Anyway, they're sitting around having their dinner, in this film, and this chap is suddenly, in the middle of eating these sausages, clutches his stomach and yells, and then rushes from the room. And the other officers of course have already planted this idea, about the duodenal ulcer, so they know exactly what's going on, so one of them is laughing, and the Captain who doesn't know anything about this looks at him and wonders why he's laughing, and so he says "oh I was thinking about something else sir", so one of the other young officers who does know what's going on says "it hardly does you credit when the first-lieutenant is in pain, you'd hardly be able to laugh at anything else!" [laughter]. That's a very good film I think- the Dambusters I think is incredible. There is a film called The Appointment In London, which was actually written by someone who was on Guy Gibson's squadron, he wrote the music for it, and that I think is extremely good. Those are the war films that I think work.

I watched last night, which was a grave error, A Bridge Too Far, and I'd forgotten just how bad it was. It really is a very very bad film indeed, and I switched it off. I'd recorded it so I could have a look at it again after all these years, and it was absolutely dreadful.

*What do you think about War Horse Christopher, considering it's about the Dorsets?*

I haven't seen it!

*Have you not? I wondered if it was odd watching a film about something you'd written about?*

I am very very wary of watching anything about animals, because I am incredibly sentimental about animals-

*Oh, do not watch War Horse then!*

[laughter]