# Return to Thalenstein:

North Italy and Schloss Thalenstein, Carinthia 1945

Remembered in June 1999

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"On the night 26/27 April 1945", according to Major General Giles Mills's brilliantly written 'Annals' (of the Kings Royal Rifle Corps) Vol VII, "surprisingly Captain Waterfield's A 2 Echelon crossed the Po first, and it was not until the early hours of 28 April that the 1st Battalion crawled over that great river..." After recovering in hospital from jaundice, for the second time, I was commanding H.Q. Company, having handing over my previous post as Adjutant (since June 1943) to Giles Mills, later the author of the Annals. I was 23 years and 6 months old.

Coincidentally, on that same night 26/27 April 1945, as I learned in 1990 when visiting his son and family at Schloss Thalenstein in Carinthia, Austria, the then Graf Von Helldorf, serving with his regiment in North Italy, has been killed by Italian Partisans. He had been urged by his fellow officers to seek petrol from the Italian locals, as he was known to speak Italian, and never came back to Schloss Thalenstein, his family's seat for the past five hundred years. The family, said the son and present Graf in 1990, had come from East Germany when a daughter married the then heir to the estates. I presume they then built the present Schloss. The young Graf said that his father's body was never found. He was an infantryman (not a regular) and had soldiered in France, Russia and finally Italy. I told his son that his mother, on my arrival at the Schloss in May 1945, when I asked, had simply replied that her husband was "at the War". The son said it was years after the War before the family could establish how he died.

This story does not, of course, seek to emulate or gloss Giles Mills's detailed 'Annals', which covers the campaign from the 1st Battalion's point of view, with detailed accounts of all the rifle companies. I am here merely recording my own personal recollections, blinkered as the scenes were to me then, with narrow personal vision, and even more limited as they are now by the accidents of memory after fifty-four years.

When we crossed the Po on a floating Bailey Bridge, I travelled in a jeep, with my driver-servant, Rifleman Harry Deane and our bed-rolls loaded behind. I do not remember having a wireless set but my A 2 Echelon of supply trucks, who followed me, must have had a wireless located somewhere, linked to Battalion HQ and also possibly to Brigade. But I am curiously vague about this and do not remember any wireless conversations at the time, whereas my memories as Adjutant earlier, constantly on the radio to the companies forward and Brigade HQ to the rear are clear and vivid, and especially of Cpl Haddon, Battalion HQ signaller, who maintained the link, and Rfn O'Connor, who drove the Command White armoured scout car (American built) both with devotion and expertise, long serving veterans by then from the Desert and Tunisian campaigns.

In the flats across the Po I remember fields of ripe white asparagus, which I cut for myself to be boiled for supper (none of the modern *al dente* method). The Riflemen thought it was too exotic as, unsurprisingly, they had also felt about the snails I had found and daringly ate two years before in Tunisia, when I commanded a platoon in B Company under Major John Hope. The latter in 1945 was now commanding the Battalion, admired, respected and loved by all. He was the only non-regular officer to have command of a regular Battalion of the 60th in the War, and had

started as a Second Lieutenant in 1940 in the early days in the Egyptian desert, and had done every job in the Battalion.

At this stage too was our first encounter with jubilant Italian villagers and peasants who, I distinctly recollect, surrounded us as we drove, cheering and waving flags, but not kissing us, or at least not me. On our long flog up the spine of Italy and the Ravenna plains, I do not remember seeing civilians except in our very occasional billets in farm houses, and those we saw were cowed and unenthusiastic. After the Po I remember sunshine, flowers and especially the young girls! A great contrast to earlier winter frosts, mud, rains, snow and grey skies. At this later stage we now had a charming Italian liaison officer at Battalion HQ.

The next stages are confused in my mind. The Battalion was in a series of sharp actions. Italian Partisans (one lot, red sashed, were Communists, the other, green sashed anti-Communist, but equally anti-German), were a new and sometimes uncertain element to reckon with. I remember taking a rather reluctant R S M Nicholls, who travelled with my Echelon, forward on one occasion in my jeep to observe the scene of action from a "bund", or steep bank on a river. We found ourselves under hot fire and had to take cover, and beat a retreat. I think it was silly bravado on my part, though in a way I wanted to make myself feel again what it was like. Odd, looking back at it, but true.

Then came a tricky series of events which culminated in the dark in Battalion orders, which I attended, though of course the least important of those present. I can clearly visualise John Hope, on the last occasion I saw him alive, giving out his orders to Company Commanders in his usual calm, quiet but totally inspiring way. I had no idea what had happened to my Echelon 3 tonners, with rations, fuel and so on, and with our long serving regular Quartermaster, Lieutenant (then) Ben Ryan, (later Captain MBE) supposedly in charge. For all I knew they had all wandered into the hands of the enemy who were very much all around us. So at the end I ventured to say, though I knew well enough what I had to do, unattractive prospect as it seemed to be, "Colonel, I suppose I had better go off and find my vehicles." "Yes, please, John", said the Colonel, his last words to me. So I drove off into the dark (I can't remember if Rfn Deane was with me) down unpaved roads and tracks, and by a miracle, and not good judgement, I found my people and brought them back. They were well forward and completely lost. We felt we were surrounded by the enemy, though I do not think that we directly encountered any face to face, and the Germans were probably more concerned with their own dispositions and withdrawal than with engaging us. But there were strange noises in the dark and it seemed frightening. I have a hazy memory of driving through or past German vehicles, but it is only hazy.

23rd April, St George's Day, was a sad day for us all. At the west end of Casumaro, John Hope was shot through the back by a German sniper whilst conferring, as usual, with Lt Col Denys Simply, commanding 16/5th Lancers, in the latter's turretless Honey (tank) which they shared. Riflemen of his old B Company found the sniper, trying to conceal himself as a civilian, and despatched him. John Hope was finally evacuated to C.C.S Argenta where I went with acting Lt Col Henry Howard, who had taken over command, and John Hope's driver and batman, in hope that he would survive. But we were told he had died in the night. In Giles Mills's moving tribute in the 'Annals', "Lt Col J.C. Hope represented, even to the most newly joined, the 1st Battalion itself... his warm sense of fun and Christian leadership were to be badly missed in the peace after the approaching victory... it was a saddened battalion who saw him buried on 25 April 1945 in the Argenta Military Cemetery, as

Rfn Ganderton sounded the Last Post." I personally missed him hugely, and still do, and feel lucky I was in his B Company from the moment I joined the 1st Battalion at Himeimat in Egypt before the Battle of Alamein. He was a continuing influence and inspiration to me, far and away the most outstanding personality of my war-time experience.

When I took over my platoon in 1942 John Hope gave me no injunctions on tactics, man-management or other military matters. He assumed I was reasonably competent until proved otherwise! But in my first few weeks and later he gave me several pieces of idiosyncratic but wise personal advice. The first was that I should learn to play bridge! He got much pleasure in playing bridge, by an electric lamp from the torch battery under a tarpaulin in the rare intervals of comparative tranquillity in the Desert. But I failed him and have never been able to count cards. Though we played intensively with Americans and the French Ambassador in Bamako, Mali, in 1964/65, I was notoriously flashy and unreliable, a sore provocation to Mme Pelen, the French Ambassador's wife. Instead in the Battalion we played highly competitive poker, for carefully controlled but for us pretty high stakes both in the Desert and when I was Adjutant in Boufarik outside Algiers. John Hope enjoyed this too, but my other commanding officers did not, and I do not remember much poker in Italy or Austria.

The next thing John Hope encouraged me to do was smoke a pipe. He somehow got me a Maltese briar from Cairo and gave it to me as a present. By then I was Adjutant and on my first effort in my Orderly Room office in a tent, my Orderly Room Sgt (later ORQMS) Sullivan came in and found me being violently sick. I do not remember that he showed any surprise.

Then John Hope said, out of the blue, "you must join a good London Club; I will put you up for the Travellers." Robert Birley, my Charterhouse Headmaster, seconded me. Although it took time for mail to go round the Cape, it worked, and after the War I found myself proudly a member of the Travellers for many years until I was tempted off to Boodles where I was even more happy for another twenty years. "Lt Col J C Hope DSO MC" was on the Honours Board on the Talleyrand stairs of the Travellers, so I saw it after every meal, and metaphorically lifted my hat.

Finally John Hope said, when I was appointed Adjutant by Lt Col Lyon Corbett Winder at Tmimi, Cyrenaica in 1943, after Tunis: "I think you must grow a moustache!" I tried, and it lasted a few months, but it was so wispy and insignificant that I felt that the riflemen laughed at it, and so I shaved it off, and have never tried again.

When he went on "Python" leave from Boufarik, after four years overseas, John Hope typically took a lot of time to visit families of riflemen and officers who had been killed, and he also took the trouble to have lunch with my father, who was by then installed in his office in Burlington Gardens W1 (now the "Museum of Man") as First Civil Service Commissioner. I never heard if they went to the Travellers or Athenaeum, my father's club. But my father, evidently proud to hear it, wrote that he had received a good report on me.

After John Hope's death we advanced, against fierce German opposition largely from the unpleasant 24 SS Division, up into the passes to Austria, and it was after what is now called a stand-off in a gorge, which may or may not have been in front of Gemona or possible Venzone, that my next, and very vivid, memories come into play. We learned that the gorge held, apart from the still vengeful and determined

SS Germans, a mass of masterless men, refugees and deserters of all kinds and nationalities. We were anxious not to incur more unnecessary casualties but exchanges designed to get the Germans to surrender were proving abortive. Although the 'Annals' do not describe it precisely, there then occurred an exchange which I have always believed was my first introduction to 'international politics'. We were, as I have often described, extremely absorbed in our immediate operations and needs, and I was, looking back on it, especially naïve about the 'big picture' of international relations.

Hugh Hope, John Hope's younger brother and a regular officer, who had returned to action after escaping from captivity in Italy (he had been put 'in the bag' at Sidi Rezegh in 1941 when commanding a company of the Battalion) had been serving for some months in Italy as DAAQMG at our Brigade HQ, and became a close friend of mine, as he continued to be in later civilian life until his premature death. He came to find me early that morning in front of the gorge and suggested we should together go forward by jeep and watch at as close quarters as possible what he already knew was to be the arrival from AFHQ of an emissary from General Alexander who would seek to convince the Germans to surrender and leave the passes free for our continued rapid advance into Austria. Hugh Hope and I managed to get within earshot. I cannot remember who the AFHQ emissary was but I remember that Brigadier Adrian Gore, our Brigadier, was in the party. There were a lot of red hat bands. The German representative I can see in my mind's eye; he was, I think, a Colonel, dressed in smart breeches and boots. He made a lot of play with the fact that General Lohr, Balkan Army Group Commander, under whose command he was, had personally to authorize surrender, notwithstanding our belief, from hearing the BBC news, that General von Vietinghoff C in C South Western Army Group, had already surrendered. What jolted my mind was the statement by the British representative that "you must surrender now; otherwise the Russians will get to Vienna before we do." This made me think deeply. It was the first intimation I had of what was to become the Iron Curtain, and my first perception of political factors influencing our military dispositions. I soon learned that the Soviets were not our true friends.

After the War Hugh Hope remained a close friend though we did not see as much of each other as I would have liked due to Hugh's and my absence abroad. He commanded the 2nd Battalion in Tripoli and then retired, becoming Personnel (I think) Director of Whitbreads. I remember that once when we met for lunch at Whitbread's premises in the City, Hugh astonished me by saying "you ought to have come to Whitbread's as Finance Director." This flattering appraisal of my potential status and capacity continues, in retrospect, to surprise me.

Earlier when I was about to go to Moscow in November 1947, Hugh told me that his mother, Lady Hope, wanted me to have her late husband's "gentleman's travelling fur coat" which Eddie Tomkins (late Ambassador in the Hague and Paris) had been given before me. Eddie and Hugh had met at Bir Hakeim in the Desert where Eddie had been (having volunteered for active service from the Foreign Office) Liaison Officer with the Free French. I gratefully took the coat, musquash lined with astrakhan collar, a really Edwardian article, hugely warm and comfortable, though very heavy, and wore it in Moscow, in London especially in one very cold winter commuting to the Foreign Office from Sunningdale, and occasionally in New York and Somerton. It sits in a cupboard at Somerton but has not come out for years. When I look at it, it always brings back warm memories! I have never seen anyone else in England wearing any similar distinctive and useful but now out-dated garment!

So we proceeded through the passes into Austria, dealing with SS and blows in the road. We heard on 7 May that VE Day was being celebrated in London, but it was clear to us, feeling that the 8th Army and our part in it were forgotten, that we had a lot to do still and that, in Giles Mills' prescient words, "only tireless and intelligent work in the absence of any political briefing would prevent the seeds of another war being sown in that area." It was on VE day that I, driving my jeep, met Tony Round, who commanded a carrier platoon in a rifle company, also in a jeep. We exchanged comical pleasantries to the effect that VE day meant little or nothing to us, and we would continue to soldier on, forgotten by all!

On 9 May the Battalion drove via Villach to Klagenfurt. I recall that, again in Giles Mills' words, "we found the town a milling mass of still-armed SS and all the races of central Europe displaced under German rule." Tito's troops too were much in evidence. My personal recollections of where I slept and what I did in the short time I was in Klagenfurt are vague. Perhaps I did not remain overnight. It was not time for rest and the whole Battalion was intensively engaged in disarming Germans, separating Germans from Yugoslavs, and, very soon, dealing with the horrific problems caused by the arrival on horseback from Yugoslavia of the XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps under their German commander General von Pannwitz (who, after staying with his men on their handover, was hanged by the Russians in captivity in 1947).

Battalion HQ and others were on 10 May sent East to Völkermarkt, a small town, with a square, not far from the Yugoslav border. I do not remember being told what to do with my Company HQ and Echelon of supply vehicles (Riflemen were traditionally taught to use their initiative!) but I do remember leaving Battalion HQ and driving off further East towards the frontier with Yugoslavia - somewhat imprudently in retrospect as we were right among Tito's marauding Partisans - to the village of Haimbourg where, as it got dark, I installed my riflemen in good covered billets, and vehicles, told them to mount guard, and then went back about half a mile to what Maurice Turner, Technical Adjutant, had shrewdly selected as a suitable officers' billet and mess.

In the dark I could discern only that we were in a substantial Schloss, surrounded by farm buildings. Maurice Turner had installed us in the basement and all I remember is that we went rapidly to sleep on our camp beds (wooden in those days). I suppose our servants gave us something to eat first. We heard and saw no movement about us. I do not think we mounted any guard; after all the War was over! I am now rather ashamed to realize that at the time I had no perception that the country around us was so infested by Tito's Communist Partisans, well-armed, and intent on annexing Carinthia with Yugoslavia, and unscrupulous about expropriating and even murdering any landowning relics who might obstruct their aims.

As it happened there was indeed such a relic holding out, alone as it proved, in Schloss Thalenstein above us that night. The next morning I was up and outside early, before any breakfast. I came to an orchard and suddenly met what appeared to be a handsome, elegant woman in black riding clothes, with a big black plumed hat, on foot and leading a tall bay horse, well over 16 hands. I could not be sure of her handsomeness because she had a black patch over one eye. In my hesitant German I saluted her. We exchanged few words. If she was surprised to see a young British officer, she did not show it. Perhaps she had already observed our vehicles. I remember that I said we were installed in her house and, not expecting any negative reply, I hoped she did not mind. I think I also asked then where her husband was and

she replied briefly, as I wrote above, that he was "at the war". Curiously *insouciant* as I was, in retrospect, I did not comment on the apparent absence of any children, servants or farm workers, and the Gräfin Von Heldorf, as she proved to be, volunteered nothing. I think I asked her, before she passed on with the big horse, what happened to her eye. She said she had ridden into an apple bough!

I did not see her again for several days. We took it she was upstairs and we did not penetrate her quarters, or, indeed, search the Schloss. By this time we were really feeling the war was over and we were, hurrah, safe. In fact we were pretty idle, and not entirely safe. Until I went into Battalion HQ in Volkermarkt I did not realize what a stressful time they and the Rifle Companies were having in containing the Partisans in the surrounding area and keeping their vengeful gangs apart from their anti-Tito countrymen and, later, from the German officered Cossack cavalry who were trying to cross into Carinthia to surrender to the British Army. At Battalion HQ the acting Colonel, Henry Howard, Giles Mills, Adjutant, John Christian, acting Second in Command, and the rest showed not the slightest interest in me, except that I suppose they noted where I was located, and probably made some ribald remarks about my accommodation in Schloss Thalenstein being above my station. They were all intensely engaged in operational matters, their HQ building in the main square being faced by a Partisan Communist, and menacing, force HQ, in another building.

So I suppose I returned to Haimbourg from where we got on with the Echelon's routine business of supplying the Battalion's rations and petrol. These matters were all efficiently handled by the R.Q.M.S. Knieff; I think that Ben Ryan, our long-serving Lieutenant and Quartermaster, had by then gone home on 'Python' leave, after over four years continual service overseas. No-one from Battalion HQ, or any higher formation, came to look at me or my Schloss, which pleased us. But, as shown by later events, the existence of the Schloss, as a prime site for higher formation HQs, was being noted on the map by the staffs. Meanwhile in the next few days there ensued three events which stand out in my mind to this day, fifty-five years on.

I walked out onto the Haimburg-Volkermarkt road, I think probably on our second morning at Thalenstein, to see the most incredible sight. In a seemingly unending line of march an army of men, in files of two, came riding by towards Volkermarkt. The men, all armed with rifles, rode wiry ponies. Their bridles and accoutrements jingled. The men wore great coats and Russian style round fur hats. Among them were officers in peaked caps and German style uniform (they were Germans), better mounted. And at intervals were small covered wagons, each pulled by two ponies, from which peered women and, occasionally, children. In some cases the women, whom I remember, perhaps fancifully, as blonde and handsome, sat or lolled on bags in uncovered wagons. I felt I was in a dream watching a column revived from the European wars in Napoleon's reign. At the time I had no idea who they were. The column marched by for most of the day, and I just stood and gaped. In fact, as I learned later, this was indeed the XV$^{th}$ Cossack Corps under the German Major General Von Pannwitz. They had a harsh record fighting and tyrannizing the Balkans on the side of the Nazis. Now they were eager to surrender to the British, to escape the vengeance of Tito and the Soviet Army.

I do not intend this narrative to record in detail our Battalion's reluctant part in handing the Cossacks over, under orders, to the Russian Army, or to try to give a fresh perspective onto Lord Aldington's successful libel action against Nikolai Tolstoy for the latter's abominable accusations. I was asked to see Tolstoy long after

the War, and we exchanged invitations to dinner with him and his nice wife while they were living in Somerset. But I soon found that Tolstoy was so obsessive, fanatical and quite absurd in his accusations against 5 Corps and British politicians (notably Brigadier Toby Low, later Lord Aldington, and Mr Harold MacMillan) that I cut off all contact with him. Toby Law was a very distinguished 60th officer, who after service in the 9th Battalion in Greece was shortly with the 1st Battalion in Tunisia, where I first met him, but later became the very able BGS of 5 Corps. Needless to say I rejoiced at the success of his libel action. It is perhaps worth mentioning that I think Christopher Booker's 'A Looking Glass War' gives the most balanced and fair account of the whole story of the handing over of the Cossacks and anti-Tito Yugoslavs that I have read. At the time the 1st Battalion, which was solely engaged with the Cossacks, were very unhappy about their orders. Protests were made, but were over-ruled. Some ingenious interpretations of the orders by Henry Howard allowed a certain amount of alleviation of the impact on various categories of surrendered prisoners. But the rest went into captivity in the Soviet Union and we heard that most of the officers were quickly shot.

A few days after the amazing appearance of the Cossacks, Henry Howard, acting C.O., and Giles Mills, Adjutant, decided to come out to visit me without notice. Unfortunately, what should have been an agreeable occasion, in which I would have hoped to impress them with my Schloss, started very badly. As they approached Thalenstein they caught a Ukrainian SS officer who was evidently skulking away from the house. They were therefore highly displeased with what they took to be my idle failure to have searched the house. They also, I am convinced wrongly, took their captive to have been the Gräfin's boy-friend. I think it was quite possible she did not know he was there, as the house was like a rabbit warren, and she was, as far as I knew, alone in her own private quarters at the top. Anyway Henry Howard said I must 'do something' about the Gräfin, though he did not specify what steps I should take, and they went off, pleased with their capture but grumbling at me. I had to 'do something' so I went up the Gräfin and found her in her room. I told her about the escaped officer, but owing to my limited German, was unable (and perhaps did not try) to express the full extent of Lt Col Howard's displeasure, or seek to cross-question her on the circumstances. However I made it plain that it was a bad show, and told her she must keep to her room, and not go out. She took this calmly and did not argue. In fact it was not too harsh a punishment as she had been in her quarters since we arrived, being terrified of the Partisans. I have no idea what she had to eat. There was a Polish refugee groom so the horses were attended to, though at this stage I did not bother about them.

The next episode I remember vividly took place when I was holding my "Company Office" in the wooden-built primary school at Haimbourg. Company Sergeant Major McGarry, who had not long been with us (he came from the Royal Ulster Rifles) but was reasonably effective, marched in the defaulters, one by one, and I dispensed justice, or referred them to go before the Commanding Officer, if their offences were serious. Most of those on charge had committed minor peccadilloes with which I was empowered to deal. Suddenly, in the middle of this ritual, there was a loud noise of raised voices, and in burst a short, fat woman and a thinner man, both holding weapons in each hand, which they pointed at me, sitting at my table. I am afraid I reacted in a rather feeble manner, but nevertheless with what I felt was aplomb. I distinctly remember saying to C S M McGarry, "What's all this, Sergeant Major?" All this time there was a lot of shouting from the intruders, which I did not understand, and wild waving of weapons. My people seemed hopelessly confused,

and no-one made any move to apprehend the threatening pair, nor did I suggest this. My next words were "Please find an interpreter, Sergeant Major". After an interval, in which the flow of words continued and I sat still, an interpreter was brought in. "She says she is the Party Secretary and they intend to hold free elections here," she translated. I cannot remember what I said in reply; I think I said that the British Army was in charge, and elections were not in prospect. Anyway, everyone calmed down, and the two went away and did not return. I do not remember being much shaken, despite their pointed weaponry, and I think, in proper rifleman-like style, we thought the whole thing was funny. They were of course Tito's Communists, but although we heard no more about elections, their bravado showed that in different circumstances, they and their like would soon have grabbed Carinthia for Tito. I do not remember that I even bothered to report this incident to Battalion HQ.

So time passed, for me comfortably, until we got reports that 46th Infantry Division was coming from Greece to reinforce our dispositions against the threat of Tito's forces. This Division was commanded by a New Zealander, General Weir. He had the reputation of being a fire eater, and what we heard of him we did not like at all. Battalion HQ warned me that he had his eye on Thalenstein, and they laughed at my protests. Giles Mills recalls a rhyme which Battalion HQ made up:-

> General Weir,
> 'e said, "look 'ere,
> I want Thalenstein for my Main and Rear",

ie Divisional Headquarters. Under impending threats, I had to go, sadly, and I think the whole Battalion moved back to Klagenfurt briefly, until we went north to Neumarkt, a small village on the Graz road, for the remainder of our time in Austria.

Before I left the Schloss, I called on the Gräfin in her room and told her I had to give way to General Weir who would not prove as nice as we were[*] . The Gräfin quickly said to me, "You must take the horses, and the groom. I can no longer feed them." I was excited by this offer and instructed Cpl Smythe, who had extensive experience with horses, to fit up a 3-tonner as a box for two horses, remove the horses from the Schloss (in case General Weir's staff put in a claim!) and take the Pole, a cheerful round tub of a young man, on our ration strength! We called the big bay 'Vienna', because we never got there, and the small, temperamental but fast mare 'Susan', after a girl I scarcely knew but had admired secretly at tennis parties before the War. In due course other horses were acquired by the Battalion but Vienna proved the best and I rode him with some success, and Susan, without success, in several 8th Army race meetings at Klagenfurt and later Aiello, near Venice, when we went back to North Italy. The courses were constructed by German prisoners, under the highly professional supervision of our cavalry regiments in which were serving a number of former trainers and owners, and amateur National Hunt riders. There was a well subscribed Tote; senior officers served as Stewards, our own Major Geoffrey Shakerley MC, who had been top GR in one season before the War and ridden his own horse in the Grand National, acted as Starter. He also coached us in race riding. He became a close friend, then, and after the War. I am ashamed now to have to say that I was twice summoned by the Stewards, once for "excessive use of the whip" and, on another occasion, for having "caulkins" on my horse! I did not know what caulkins were but learned that they are small metal protuberances, to give a better

[*] Honesty compels me to record that on my return in 1990, I did not hear in the family anything but agreeable stories of General Weir and his men!

grip, on the heels of a horse's shoes. My team of grooms (as well as Cpl Smythe, Rfn Holmes had been a jockey pre-War) had put them on , unknown to me, and pretended innocence when we were caught. I do not think the penalty was severe, but we had, of course, to take them off. It was all great fun, though highly competitive, and I am glad I had the experience. Vienna went on with the Battalion to Germany later and continued to win races, under a better rider than I was. I had long since gone back to the UK, in October 1945, left the Army and proceeded to Christ Church, Oxford, to take up my 1939 scholarship. Scholarships, as my father pointed out to me, gave me priority in getting out of the Army.

I jump now to February/ March 1990, forty-five years later. Three of us who had become close in the Northern Ireland Office in the seventies formed the habit of having lunch three or four times a year in London, each acting as host in turn. Occasionally we had guests and it was on such an occasion, after a very good lunch, with myself as host, in Boodles, that one such guest, our senior intelligence office in Vienna, and the scourge of all terrorists there, invited us all back to Vienna! This then grew into a more protracted visit than lunch, as, when asked what I would like to do, in Austria, I suddenly thought of a return visit to Thalenstein. And so this was brilliantly arranged. I think I can best describe what happened by quoting extracts from a letter I wrote to Giles Mills on 7 March, after our return home.

"After lunch at a Gasthaus in Volkermarkt, we drove on to Haimburg and Thalenstein... We found the Schloss but could see no entrance. The front, with entrance from the road, now has a bund blocking it to keep out the traffic pollution, as we learned later. We continued round to the rear and found the track leading up to the outbuildings and the back (now main) entrance of the house. There was the apple orchard, bare before spring. The outbuildings were bigger and more numerous than I remembered. As we got out a beautiful lady in her late thirties, I judged, wearing Austrian style breeches and waistcoat, came up with a wide smile. I said who I was and asked if she was the Gräfin Von Helldorf. To the first statement she said "I know", which took me somewhat aback, and to my question, she answered "yes". I asked if it was her mother I had known in 1945. "No", she replied, "it was my husband's mother, and here he is." As she spoke a very tall aquiline-faced man of about 50 came on foot out of the forest, dressed also in breeches. More introductions. And then we were invited in. The rooms on the ground and first floor were very large and the walls were covered with old arms and armour. It was bitterly cold, with a fierce wind from the south west. We exchanged pleasantries in English as we climbed up stairs. The Graf said he had been six years old when we first came. His mother had sent all her children and servants north into the mountains for safety. His mother told him how profoundly grateful she had been for our presence in the house as protection against the Partisans. We inspected where we had our company mess and slept on what I think was more the mezzanine than ground floor or basement. Now Estate offices, and warm, from the wood-fired stove. There was much joking about us being installed in the servants' quarters. Carefully I said nothing about the Ukrainian SS officer who ran away, but I did admit to the horses. No very marked reaction. However, on mention of Cossacks an evident cloud descended. We felt that the present Graf had been brought up by his mother to behave that the British broke their word and betrayed the Cossacks and Yugoslav prisoners. I am afraid this was true. But the cloud lifted and we did not talk of this subject again.

"Then to tea; sunny, comfortable rooms on the second floor with splendid views to the snow covered mountains on the border with Yugoslavia. These rooms

were well warmed by the boiler in the basement, burning wood. “Supply’s unlimited,” said the Graf, “and we renew all the time.” Tea and apfel strudel, very good. Three nice countrified children home from the local school, the eldest a pretty thirteen year-old girl. The parents had never been to England, but would like to arrange an exchange for the eldest girl, Ina.

“I asked the Graf about his mother. She had died, he said, in 1971. They shared us photos of her, distinguished in looks and bearing. He said that it was a long time after the end of the War before the family had established that his father had disappeared in N. Italy on 27 April, but no traces were ever found of his body.

“In the middle of tea it dawned on me that my British friends had taken very careful soundings locally to ask if my arrival was acceptable. It seemed it was. Everyone laughed when I realized that our very warm welcome was due to elaborate inquiries and preparation. That was why, when I introduced myself, the young Gräfin had said “I know”.

“It appeared from these soundings that although very grand and long established, the Von Helldorfs are regarded locally as being rather insular and eccentric. The reason soon became apparent. The young Graf farms 500 hectares arable, but owns a huge amount of forest beside. Without prompting he launched into an impassioned tirade against the atmospheric pollution from the internal combustion engine - cars, buses and trucks. He said Kärnten was in a basin. and there was no wind (this seemed belied by the howling gale outside) and Haimbourg had nine asthmatic children, where none before. Supported by his wife he lectures throughout the week at schools in Kärnten on the evil effects of the internal combustion engine. He has put notices up on all the approach roads “Kranke Wald; Kranke Kinder”. He said it had been an up-hill struggle when he started about five years ago; but now he was accepted.

“As we started to take our leave, the Gräfin, with a radiant smile, invited us to stay for a few days. It would have been nice, but impossible. The magic of returning, brief as it was, had to be enough.

“To celebrate our departure the Graf took us to a high battlement which looked down on a walled enclosure, where he keeps a stag, and several hinds, which come when he calls. He blew a huge hunting horn as we left. The dogs all squealed. The stag came up, pawing the ground.

“A rewarding adventure. The landscape brown, not green, as we remembered it. But snow on the mountains.

“My companions admired your account in the ‘Annals’, but said it carefully eschewed emotion! I said we had no time for emotions; only regimental gossip and coarse jokes occupied our minds.”

The Graf’s younger sister wrote to me later. She is the Doctor in Haimbourg. She thanked me for ‘protecting’ her mother.

JPW: Begun at Somerton Summer 1999; finished in the American Embassy Residence in Tunis 10 January 2000.