

The Suicide Club

Also by Andrew Williams

FICTION

The Interrogator

To Kill a Tsar

The Poison Tide

NON-FICTION

The Battle of the Atlantic

D-Day to Berlin

The Suicide Club

ANDREW WILLIAMS



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Intelligence is about people and a study of people. It is not simply a question of studying people on the other side, but studying one's own as well. We have to learn about one another, not just about strangers.

*Sir Maurice Oldfield,
Director of the Secret
Intelligence Service [MI6]*

In memory of Dick and Millie Ellis from Sunderland.

July – August 1917

Every success brings us nearer to the end of the long and desperate struggle and we are now justified in believing that one more great victory may turn the scale finally.

*The commander-in-chief of the British armies in France,
Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig to his generals,
on the eve of the Passchendaele offensive,
5 June 1917.*

Bakers and Thieves

Muzzle flash white and burnt. Twisting, falling in filth, gaping a silent scream to stop. Then darkness. Smothering. Total. Pinned like a butterfly in a tray. Phut, phut, the dying respirator, dizzying wisps of memory condensing in its glass discs, familiar faces looming, dissipating, as if glimpsed in a cloud of gas. And voices, whispering in the Scots of those lost on the field at Loos in the battalion's first days. 'You've come tae us frae oot the battle,' they say. 'Frae hell tae emptiness, tae this purgatory.'

Then he hears himself pray, 'Sweet Jesus, let me back.' But Jesus doesn't answer, only the dead. 'Why? Why should you be saved?' they whisper. 'Why not us?'

‘CAPTAIN! CAPTAIN INNES!’ Mertens was shaking him, his face tense with concern. ‘You were calling out. You must be quiet.’ He raised a piano finger to his lips. ‘Are you sick?’

‘A dream.’ Innes touched his chest, feeling for the brass crucifix. His shirt was wringing wet.

‘Bad dream, no? From before?’

‘Yes, Joos, from before.’

Mertens squeezed his shoulder. ‘The war will be over soon. You hear? British guns. It’s the big attack. One of our men at the station heard a German *Oberst* say so.’

Ratchet after ratchet, the gears of the machine were turning again. British gun-crews, grimy, stripped and grunting with

the effort, and the air thick with the smell of cordite; shell fire tearing the ground above the shattered city of Ypres, scooping gobbets of flesh and clay from the German line and rumbling on across roads and ditches into Flemish villages, leaving only brick and sludge in its wake. Flash, flash, the engine of war was sparking the night, rattling windows in distant cities where small children cowered beneath covers like the enemy in his concrete pillboxes.

‘We must leave.’ Mertens offered his hand, hauling Innes to his feet. ‘The nuns are waiting.’

Boom! Innes flinched as the percussion trembled through the floorboards and lifted the dust from the picture rail.

‘*Godverdomme!* That was big.’ Mertens whistled. ‘The gun at Moere?’

‘Too close to be anything else.’

They had gazed at its barrel a few hours before, making a careful mental note: fifteen-inch howitzer; reinforced cement emplacement, its walls fifteen feet thick at least; underground ordnance gallery; electric security wire. A few minutes’ observation that had taken days to organise. First a suitable café, a haughty Bavarian lieutenant, and then a brawl convincing enough to secure them a sentence of six weeks’ forced labour in the forbidden zone. Their work gang had marched hard miles of *pavé* with pick and shovel, footsore, hungry and abused by the enemy’s field police. Belgium’s factories had been plundered in the first years of the war but its people could still be pressed into service. Innes had dug the foundations of a new reserve line, mixed concrete, repaired roads, and seen all a spy might hope to see. At the end of the fourth week he had run.

Boom! He frowned and touched his brow as the attic room shook again.

‘Sorry, Joos. A little jumpy.’ He wasn’t sure why he said so.

He wouldn't have admitted it when he was in the line. Mertens nodded sympathetically. A decent sort, he was a baker and old enough to be Innes's father. 'They're managing two rounds every three or four minutes,' he said, reaching into his coat for a cigarette.

'Is that good?'

'A gun that size? Yes.'

'Ah.' Mertens took his watch from his waistcoat and peered at its shattered face by the thin light of the window. 'No time for a cigarette, Captain. Almost ten o'clock.'

The hall was dark but for a sliver of smoky light from the parlour. Members of the family would be gathered there, waiting for the click of the front door to signal they were free from the fear of sheltering a British spy.

The storm at Ypres flickered in the broken panes of the house opposite, its confused echo haunting the empty street.

'Are you all right?' Mertens whispered.

'Yes. Of course.' He was a little embarrassed. 'Fine. Really. It's nothing, I'm fine.'

'Keep close then, Captain.'

Mertens moved swiftly and lightly for a large man, holding to the shadow of the buildings opposite. Innes tried to follow, but wielding a pick for the Germans had aggravated the old wound in his leg. It was the electric-blue hour and still warm, but the village had drawn its blinds and fastened its shutters. Summer in the enemy's *Operationsgebiet* ended every evening with the eight o'clock curfew.

Mertens was waiting in an undertaker's doorway. 'Just the next corner. I'll check it's safe.'

'Together, my friend, let's go together.'

The abbey enclosure occupied almost a side of the street: a walled garden, the west end of the domestic range and the church, its stepped gable as black as a crow's wing. There was

a row of shops opposite, a post office and a small hotel, light spilling through its shutters on to the pavement.

Mertens bent closer, cupping his hands to Innes's ear. 'The door – there.' Weather-worn, studded with rust, it was set low and deep in the wall, a dozen paces from them. 'Please wait here, Captain.'

Innes tugged his sleeve. 'No.'

They were pressed against the ivy-clad wall of a house in their own no man's land between shadow and the sanctuary of the abbey.

'We must move.'

'I know, I know.' But it wasn't how it should be. The grumble of the battle, men and metal sucked from miles around into the maelstrom at Ypres, yet the village was so still and there was that careless light at the hotel, just a few yards along the street.

'Please, Captain. Let me try the door.'

'Joos, there's—'

There was a blinding flash and Innes shrank into the ivy as the enemy howitzer thundered another shell in the direction of Ypres. For a second the street palpitated in its afterglow. When he raised his eyes again the wicket in the church door was open and there was the bent silhouette of a man on the threshold – a priest, to judge by his robes. He was carrying a pillar candle like the one lit at the Easter altar to banish the darkness of the tomb. He took a few shuffling steps, glancing up to be sure perhaps that he was still beneath the arched portal. Then he sank slowly to his knees, grey head bowed in prayer with the candle a few inches from his chin, its troubled flame cutting deep lines in his face.

'What is he doing?' Mertens' voice cracked with fear. 'He'll lead them to us.'

'I don't—' No. The priest's face; it was a kindly light. 'We must go. Now! Quickly!'

Turning away, the hotel lights spilling into the street, Innes could hear the slap of military boots, and a moment later, the confusion of many feet, a shouted order, and as he ran, *crack!*, a single rifle shot. Mertens was a few yards in front, stumbling and almost falling, picking himself up and pushing on again. *Boom!* His face was sickly white in the gun flash as he glanced back along the street. *Bloody, bloody leg* – the rhythm of Innes’s stride – *bloody, bloody leg*. He knew he wouldn’t be able to run far, and he could hear the enemy, somewhere. Mertens was pulling away, disappearing at the bottom street. *Bloody, bloody leg*. Where were they going to hide? *Bloody, bloody* . . . where the devil was he? But Mertens wouldn’t desert him.

A woman steps into the street, beckons ‘*here*’. Mertens is at her door. ‘*Hurry*,’ she urges, driving him along her dark hall and through her kitchen. A child is wailing there, a small crumpled face. Mertens has lost his cap. Drawing bolts, they go down to a yard, then neighbour to neighbour, weaving through washing poles, on without question until their guide leads them up steps to another door, another stranger; and as he catches his breath they whisper in Flemish, their guide, their saviour offering a shy smile, then she has gone.

‘This is Pierre, another one of the network’s *promeneurs*,’ said Mertens. ‘Ramble sent him here. Thank God for Ramble.’ His voice trembled a little. ‘Pierre is a baker, like me. Well, he used to be.’

Innes offered his hand. ‘Ramble sent you to look after us?’

Pierre nodded curtly, his spectacles slipping down the bridge of his nose.

‘We’ll be safe here tonight,’ said Mertens. ‘No, not in the kitchen—’ pulling a chair away from Innes, ‘the parlour. There’s a space behind the fireplace in there.’

They sat in silence, knees pressed to their chins. Innes slept for as long as he could, but in the coffin darkness there were

dreams, those same Scots voices, whimpering, sweating, shaken awake. Pierre brought a little soup and the news that a German soldier had struck the priest with a rifle butt and he was unconscious. Innes touched the brass cross beneath his shirt and tried to pray for the old man, but it wasn't as easy as it used to be under shell-fire, the old words had come then with conviction and feeling. Everyone was a believer in the line.

Later, they heard the Germans clumping lazily around the house, shouting, turning over furniture. They left after only a few minutes.

The following morning Pierre moved them on in a farm wagon, by green lanes north-west towards Bruges, the grey sun too weak to dissipate a beard of mist from the fields, and for once the fighting was lost in the rumble of wheels and the clopping of the horses. 'To the market at Torhout,' they told Germans who asked, but most just marched by. The first night Innes was hidden by an elderly doctor and his daughter, the second on a farm, and the third with a carpenter near the border. Sleepless, his leg aching in the short sleigh bed the carpenter had made for his son, his thoughts drifted back to his old battalion and one of the last conversations he'd had with its officers. 1916. High Wood on the Somme. Shaken by three hours of shelling, and exhausted pretending not to be. When it lifted there was whisky. Dust motes dancing in a shaft of late sunshine. At the entrance to the dug-out, proper Clydeside cursing. Some of the men started up a chorus of 'We're Here Because We're Here,' although a good few wouldn't be by the end of the following day.

'Does anyone know?' Ferguson said.

'Know what, Major?' someone replied.

'Know what the hell we're doing here, of course.'

What a card, they'd laughed; only an old sweat would have the temerity to ask. But Fergie wasn't laughing.

Many times since, Innes had asked himself the same. From the parapet of a trench the depth of a well-cut grave, the world seemed a cruel, pitted place of blasted trees, wire tangles and rotting bodies, a place where men sang without reason, *we're here because we're here*.

He shifted on to his side, his cheek pressed to his coat. It smelt of sweat and the road, and the cement he'd mixed for the enemy. There was comfort, and good reason, and faith to make sense of the sacrifice. The old Belgian priest with his paschal flame, kneeling before his church in prayer, hands knotted like old oak about the candle. *A pillar of fire by night*. Priest, doctor, farmer, carpenter, risking their lives to shelter a British spy. To London they were numbers in Ramble's network, but to Innes they were the purpose of the whole bloody business. *Where are you, Ramble?* He reached beneath the blanket to touch his cross. Crafted from a fragment of brass shell-case, it left a green stain on his chest. 'But it will keep you safe,' Ramble had said; 'Safe, always.'

In the end he gave up trying to sleep and sat at the edge of the bed, rubbing the hollow in his right thigh left by the shrapnel he'd caught on the Somme. 'A Blighty one,' his surgeon had said, and he was right in a way. Tonight he was too far from the Front to hear the guns, only the rain pattering against the shutters and a startled blackbird. Was his old battalion at Ypres? Ferguson was dead. Milne and Low were dead. If he could speak to them he would say, 'You fought for freedom and justice. The flame you lit will never go out.' The thought brought him close to tears; thank goodness no one could see him. Mertens was snoring lightly. After two months of danger and companionship, they would go their separate ways in the morning. Just one more goodbye in a long series; in each an image of death, someone famous once said.

*

Sebastian Aerts had once made his living as a cracksman but now the laws were German he was a patriot, a *passeur*. Ramble turned a blind eye to his private enterprises because running lines in and out of the occupied territories called for his sort of nerve and attention to detail. Spies and intelligence one way, booze and cigarettes the other.

‘Still don’t trust me, eh?’ he said, when Innes asked about the arrangements for his crossing.

‘The forest border, like last time?’

‘That’s the one, Captain. Here . . .’ Dipping into a canvas sack, he tossed Innes a pair of rubber gloves.

‘So you don’t fry on the fence . . .’ His brown face was a wind-blown web of smile lines. ‘The rubber boots you’ll have to pay for this time.’

They stepped from the carpenter’s house into a grey sheet of rain. ‘German soldiers hate the rain,’ Aerts observed, pulling the brim of his sou’wester lower.

‘All soldiers hate the rain,’ Innes replied.

Skirting fields, seeking the cover of hedgerows and trees, they worked their way round the town of Arendonk towards the forest at its northern edge, stopping only once to rest and shelter in a barn, and to share bread and beer with a farm labourer.

‘That’s lucky,’ Aerts declared, as they were preparing to resume their journey. ‘Our friend says the Huns have lifted the checkpoint on the canal between here and the forest.’

Dusk beneath the trees, the ground boggy and broken, Innes pitching forward on to his knees and jolting his thigh. ‘You move like an elephant,’ the *passeur* muttered.

His companions were waiting deep in the forest, in the shadows by a lake. Two of them were brothers, perhaps the *passeur*’s sons or nephews, and the third was an older man called Merckx.

‘All right, Captain,’ said Aerts, ‘you rest. The boys and I will check on the guards.’

Wet and bone-weary, Innes sat on a stump and stared emptily at the rain circles on the water. He trusted Aerts to know his business. That’s how it worked in the occupied territories. Trust. Links in a long chain. Ramble insisted they weren’t spies. Spies lied and cheated and did ‘immoral’ things. No, they were Belgian soldiers fighting for their country’s freedom, even old thieves like Aerts.

A heavy hand on his shoulder made him jump. ‘For God’s sake!’

Aerts was shaking with laughter. ‘I might have been a Hun, Captain, then you would have had to swim for it,’ he said, gesturing at the lake.

‘I couldn’t be wetter than I am now.’

Aerts threw him a pair of rubber boots. ‘For free, because we’re comrades. And there’s this . . .’ He slipped a waxed cotton package from his coat and gave it to Innes. ‘From Ramble. The reports from the network in Antwerp, Brussels and Roulers. Ready?’ Short but powerful, he hauled Innes back to his feet with ease. ‘My boys are keeping watch. When it’s clear, we’ll run out with the frame. Once it’s up . . . three minutes, that’s all. Or you’ll be caught up there and—well, you know they won’t take chances, they’ll shoot. Bad for all of us.’

‘But especially me.’

Aerts chuckled and reached up to slap Innes’s back. ‘When you’re across, remember to watch out for the Dutch guards. There aren’t many but you don’t want any trouble. If they try to stop you, say you work for Gasper. Most of them owe me. Walk due east towards Reusel. You have a compass?’

Innes nodded. He didn’t anticipate trouble once he was over; the Dutch wanted to keep things quiet, head-down neutrality, see and hear no evil. It would be fine . . . once he was over.

‘Last thing . . .’ Aerts held up his gloved hands. ‘Watch out. No trailing knees.’

Somewhere beyond the fringe of the forest there was the murmur of voices. Crawling on their bellies now, closer, closer, and Innes could hear two men speaking German. Saxons. One of the guards wanted a light for his pipe.

The border was only a dozen yards from the trees. The Germans had cut through the plantation and the ground was stippled with stumps. First a belt of wire, then a dimly lit fence ten feet high and laced with copper, carrying a charge of six thousand volts. There was no sign of the enemy, but it was impossible to be sure. Aerts took the ropes. Somewhere in the forest on either side, the brothers were gripping the other ends: a sharp tug when the sentries were out of sight, then *Go!* Merckx was quietly clearing branches from the frame they had left hidden there.

Aerts held up his right hand. ‘Stand by.’

Innes’s heart was beating faster with excitement, because it was still possible to feel it, in spite of everything.

The other rope rustled through the brambles like a snake, jerking Aerts’ left hand. ‘Wait here, Captain.’ He began hauling the triangular frame clear of the trees. Like a garden toy or the top of a hangman’s tree, there were rungs to a right angle, two rubber-covered rails to place over the electric fence, and a hypotenuse of supporting poles. A sheet of tarpaulin over the barbed wire, and Merckx was over, reaching back to lift the frame. Innes glanced at his watch. Seconds were ticking by. Like the trenches, the worst thing about going over – the time before – waiting with his imagination. Now, a minute.

But the frame was up at last and he was running, gaze fixed on the barbed wire, head first and over. He paused at the bottom of the ladder to make eye contact with Aerts – an

unspoken thank-you – then he was climbing. One foot carefully in front of the other, his boot slipping on a rung, and swaying like a ship's stoker on Sauchiehall Street at closing time: God help him if they didn't have firm hold of the bottom. Hoisting knees and boots on to the rails at the top, his bad leg trembling with the effort. Above the fence now, the bright bones of an animal at its base. Left hand, right knee, right hand, left knee, and over at last. Climbing down, jumping the last few feet, he glanced back into Belgium and waved, but Aerts was too busy to notice. So he pressed on through thorns and bushes, then across the corner of a potato field, his boots so thickly caked in mud he had to swing his legs, but his spirits lifting with every heavy step, the refrain of a soldier's song the men sang on their way out of the line rolling round his head. After twenty minutes tramping steadily eastwards he reached the road, the faint glow of the border lights to his right and safety, a good meal, beer, a hot bath to the left – if he could rouse an inn-keeper. The tension of the last few months was draining from him: forget the beer and the bath, he thought, all he really wanted was a bed with thick white cotton sheets that rustled when you drew them back from a goose-feather pillow. He could see the silhouette of the church at Reusel and was impatient to be there.

Head bent to the gusting drizzle, he was concentrating so hard on putting one foot in front of the other he didn't notice the motor car until its lamps were spilling on the road in front of him. It looked expensive. A driver and a passenger. The road led into occupied Belgium and nowhere else. Germans? There was no time to hide even if he could find the strength to. The driver was closing the throttle, cruising to a halt, his face still lost behind the lamps. Innes kept walking. If he heard the passenger door open he would force it shut, then run for the hedge or the ditch.

Another few strides and he was level with the car. Something German; black; the engine still running. Both men were wearing Homburg hats. Thank God the driver's hands were gripping the wheel. Walking at the same steady pace, he passed by the passenger side. No sound; no movement. Then the squeaking of a door, and he rocked forward ready to run.

'Oi! Silly bugger. Where do you think you're going?'

Innes stopped and almost laughed out loud because, yes, he was a silly bugger, and the night was over at last. 'Oh, it's you, Tinsley.'

'Of course it is, who else?' Tinsley walked round the car to offer his hand. 'You're late. I 'ad word it would be midnight.'

'I wasn't expecting a reception.'

Captain Tinsley was an old Merchant Navy bruiser who tried not to venture further than his smoke-filled office in Rotterdam and the bar at the Hotel Weimar.

'Well, I'm 'ere now,' he said, 'get in.'

His driver was one of the Secret Service Bureau's locals. Innes climbed up to the back seat and arranged a blanket over his wet knees. 'Is there a good hotel nearby? Oh, and before I doze off . . .' he reached inside his coat for the packet of papers, 'The latest returns from the network. I'll do a report tomorrow.'

'Keep 'em. You can deliver them to London yourself.'

'What?'

'All right, let's go,' Tinsley said, addressing the driver. 'We'll 'ave to be quick.'

Innes leant forward to make himself heard over the engine. 'Where are we going?'

'To the Hook. You're to catch the first boat in the morning. Careful!'

The driver was trying to turn the car around without venturing on the muddy verge.

‘But I’ve only just got here.’

‘I know.’ Tinsley shifted awkwardly in his seat to look back at him. ‘Look, Innes, orders.’

‘From whom?’

‘Captain Cumming. Wants you in London at once . . . yesterday. Now, if I were you, I’d just sit quiet and think of old England.’

Innes leant back and pulled the blanket to his chin. ‘Scotland, Tinsley. Scotland.’