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Len Deighton

Declarations of War



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Len Deighton was born in 1929 in London. He did his national service in the RAF, went to the Royal College of Art and designed many book jackets, including the original UK edition of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The enormous success of his first novel, *The IPCRESS File* (1962), was repeated in a remarkable sequence of books over the following thirty or so years. These varied from historical fiction (*Bomber*, perhaps his greatest novel) to dystopian alternative fiction (*SS-GB*) and a number of brilliant non-fiction books on the Second World War (*Fighter*, *Blitzkrieg* and *Blood, Tears and Folly*).

His spy novels chart the twists and turns of Britain and the Cold War in ways which now give them a unique flavour. They preserve a world in which Europe contains many dictatorships, in which the personal can be ruined by the ideological and where the horrors of the Second World War are buried under only a very thin layer of soil. Deighton's fascination with technology, his sense of humour and his brilliant evocation of time and place make him one of the key British espionage writers, alongside John Buchan, Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming and John le Carré.

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Contents

<i>It Must Have Been Two Other Fellows</i>	1
<i>Winter's Morning</i>	25
<i>First Base</i>	39
<i>Paper Casualty</i>	55
<i>Brent's Deus Ex Machina</i>	68
<i>A New Way to Say Goodnight</i>	79
<i>Lord Nick Flies Again</i>	87
<i>Discipline</i>	94
<i>Mission Control: Hannibal One</i>	107
<i>Adagio</i>	115
<i>Bonus for a Salesman</i>	128
<i>Action</i>	147
<i>Twelve Good Men and True</i>	156
<i>The Man Who Was a Coyote</i>	168
<i>Afterword</i>	175

Declarations of War

It Must Have Been Two Other Fellows

James Sidney Pelling was fifty-nine years old. Ever since his cadet days he had been obsessed with motor-cars. He now had four: a brand-new Bentley, a battered DB6, a Land-Rover for the farm and a Cooper S that his new blower and modified carburettors would convert into the most exciting car of all.

For a job as complex as this he needed the electronic tuning bench at the Hillside Garage. They were Colonel Pelling's tenants – he owned all the land between the farm and the Salisbury road – and the owners gave him the use of the work-shop on Sundays.

On this particular Sunday, cook had sent him sandwiches and a Thermos of coffee. He'd hardly touched them, working right through lunchtime. By three in the afternoon he was almost finished and was watching the timing on the neon strobe when a car bumped over the rubber strips that rang a bell in the office. Pelling ignored it. Anyone who failed to see the huge CLOSED notice on the pumps shouldn't be permitted behind the wheel of a car, in Pelling's opinion. There was the imperious toot-de-toot of an Italian power horn. It sounded again, and Pelling decided that the driver must be told to go away. He wiped his hands on a piece of cotton waste.

As he entered the cashier's glass-fronted box, he noticed that it was raining heavily. He reached for the ancient raincoat and hat that were kept behind the door and buttoned the torn collar tight around his throat.

He could always distinguish a salesman's car: new, cheap and fast, well-worn by heavy driving and scratched from careless parking. The driver had an expense-account plumpness. He sat behind the wheel in a drip-dry shirt, while the jacket of his shiny Dacron-mixture suit

was on a hanger in the rear window. It was still swinging gently from the abrupt braking.

‘Come on, Dad,’ said the driver with a sigh.

Before Pelling could think of a reply the man was out of the car and advancing upon him, smiling the smile that only successful salesmen produce so quickly. ‘Colonel Pelling,’ he said. ‘Colonel Pelling. Well, I’ll be buggered, begging your pardon, sir.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Pelling stiffly. ‘You have the advantage of me . . .’

‘Wool. You can’t go wrong with me next to the skin.’ He laughed.

‘Wool?’

‘My little joke, Colonel.’ He stood to attention in a burlesque of military obedience. ‘Wool; W-o-o-l, Corporal Wool 397, sir! Royal Welsh Greys, D Squadron, No. 1 Troop. From Tunisia all the way to Florence. Best years of my life, in a way. Place me now, sir?’

Pelling tried to make this over-fed, middle-aged man into a young corporal. He failed.

‘The farmhouse on the hill,’ prompted Wool, ‘near Sergeant-Major village.’

The Colonel still looked puzzled and Wool said, ‘Oh well, it must have been two other fellows, eh?’ He laughed and repeated his joke slowly. When he spoke again his voice was loud and a little exasperated. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the farmhouse. When the Tedeschi nearly clobbered the whole mob of us, and we sat there like lemons?’

‘Of course,’ said Pelling, ‘you were the fellow with the Bren. I remember him quite differently . . .’

‘No, no, no,’ said Wool. ‘That was a bloke named Stephens. He got the M.M. for that. That was the following week.’

‘Corporal Wool, yes . . .’

‘Lance-jack at the time, actually. Ended up a sergeant though: temporary, acting, unpaid.’ He smiled and saluted.

‘Wool,’ said Pelling. ‘It’s good to see you again. You’re looking well and prosperous.’

Wool grinned and tucked his shirt into his waistband. ‘It always comes loose when I’m driving. Yeah, well, I’m not bad, how are you?’

'I'm well, in fact very well.'

Wool shook his head doubtfully and stared into Pelling's face. 'You're not looking too good, Colonel, if you don't mind an ex-lance-jack saying so.'

'I'm just a bit tired,' said Pelling. He smiled at Wool's concern. 'I've been working since eight o'clock this morning.'

'Here?'

'Yes.'

'Christ!' He looked around the rain-swept forecourt. It was grimy and littered with ice-cream tubs. A sign said: FREE WITH 4 GALLONS OF PETROL, A PACKET OF BALLOONS.

'A packet of bleeding balloons,' said Wool. 'All these petrol companies are the same: free bloody hair-brushes or free bloody wine-glasses. What they want to offer is a free bloody service: top up the battery, check the water and tyre pressures. I'll bet you never wipe the windscreens, do you?'

'No, I don't.'

'Exactly. Here,' he grabbed at Pelling's sleeve, 'you own this place?'

'I'm afraid not.'

Wool sniffed and nodded to himself. 'It's a rotten shame, that's all I can say. You were the youngest-looking Colonel any of us had ever seen – a chestful of gongs, and a good bringing-up, it's a bloody disgrace. There's your socialist governments for you. Here, I'm getting wet, jump in out of this rain.' Wool reached for *The Times* and put two sheets of it upon the plastic seat before opening the door for Pelling.

'Colonel Pelling,' said Wool, looking at him closely and imprinting the memory of this moment upon his mind. 'Colonel Pelling.'

Wool twisted round in his seat and found a packet of cheroots in his jacket. He tore off its cellophane wrapping and opened it with a flourish. 'Have a cigar?'

'Thank you, Wool, no. I've given up smoking.'

'It's a rich man's hobby now,' agreed Wool. He put the cheroots away and took from the glove compartment a Havana in a metal container. He used a cigar-cutter to prepare it, and lit it with enough

ceremony to demonstrate that he was a man familiar with good living. He exhaled the smoke slowly and turned to face the ex-Colonel with a calm happiness.

The Colonel had aged well; no surplus fat or heavy jowls. His nose was bony and his jaw was hard. He was lean and tall, just as Wool remembered him, except that the hair below his oily hat was almost white. Wool looked at Pelling's hands. His dirty skin was tanned and leathery, just as one would expect of a man who spent long hours out in all weathers slaving at the petrol pumps.

Wool, on the other hand, was not so easy to identify with the nineteen-year-old Corporal that the Colonel had briefly known. Florid, and wearing large fashionable black-framed spectacles, he was like any one of the dozens of commercials who filled up at the Hillside before the non-stop race back to London. On his finger there was a signet ring and on his wrist a complex watch and a gold identity bracelet.

It must have been two other fellows, thought Pelling. Yes, as soldiers they had been saints or hooligans, torturers or rescuers, but none survived. Those that eventually became civilians were different men.

Pelling looked at the interior of the car. No doubt about it being cherished and cared for, even if it wasn't done to Pelling's taste. The steering-wheel had a leather cover, the seats were covered in imitation leopard-skin and a baby's shoe dangled from the mirror. There was a St Christopher bolted to the dashboard and in the rear window there was a large plastic dog that nodded and two cushions with the registration number boldly knitted into their design.

'Seen any of your blokes?' asked Wool.

'Not recently,' said Pelling.

'I've never been to an Old Comrades or anything.'

'Nor have I,' said Pelling. 'I'm not much use at that sort of thing.'

Wool looked at the filthy raincoat. 'I understand,' he said. He studied the ash of his cigar. 'The funny thing was that you only came up to the farmhouse for a look-see, didn't you?'

'I'm only here for a shufti, Lieutenant.' The subaltern looked at the man crawling in through the door. The newcomer's rank badges

were unmistakable, and yet he looked younger than the thirty-year-old Lieutenant. 'You came on foot, sir?'

'Jeeped up the wadi.'

'Corporal. Crawl out and move the Colonel's Jeep into the barn out of sight.'

'There's eight gallons of water in it for you,' said Pelling, 'and a crate of beer for your chaps.'

'That will cheer them up, sir.'

'It won't cheer them up much,' said Pelling. 'It's that gnats'-pee from Tunis. Psychological warfare by the temperance people, I'd say.'

The Lieutenant rubbed his unshaven chin and nodded his thanks as the Corporal went out into the yard and started to move the Jeep.

'It's stupid of me,' said Pelling. 'I didn't realize they could see as far as the track.'

'They've got a new O.P. on the east slope of the big tit – Point 401 that is – we only noticed it yesterday, my sergeant saw a bit of movement there. Can't be sure it's manned all the time.'

'It was stupid of me,' repeated Pelling.

The Lieutenant had seldom spoken with colonels and certainly not one who'd admit to stupidity. Awkwardly he said, 'Would you like to go up to the loft, sir? Sloan, get brewing. And open that tin of milk.'

The Colonel held the field glasses delicately, as though he was taking the pulse of two black-metal wrists. From the loft he could see more than ten miles along the valley. It was noon. The sunbaked hills were misty green puddings, surmounted by outcrops of grey rock and ringed by precarious terraces of crops. The olive groves lower down were plagued with the black festering sores of artillery fire, and untended vegetables had run to seed. Nowhere was there any movement of man or machine, nor were there horses or mules, cattle, sheep or goats – at least, no live ones. Pelling searched carefully along the German lines from where the River Caro was no more than a piddle of dirty water meandering through the high-banked wadi, to the ruins of 'Sergeant-Major', as the troops had renamed the village of Santa Maria Maggiore. If it hadn't been for

the cowshed at the far end of the yard, and the abandoned Churchill tank fifty yards behind it, he'd have been able to see the hills beyond the river, and the main road that led eventually to Rome. He studied the road carefully: dust hung above it like incense smoke, and yet he could see no transport there. From somewhere far away a church bell began tolling an inexpert rhythm.

'A dedicated priest,' said Pelling, still looking through the glasses. Then he lowered them and began to wipe the lenses. He used a white linen handkerchief, rough-dried and unpressed and mottled with the faint stains of ancient dirt.

'Partisans, more likely. They use the bells as signals to regroup.' He passed the Colonel a handkerchief of khaki silk. Bought by a loving mother for a newly commissioned son, thought Pelling as he finished polishing the binoculars. Handling the smelly glasses with exaggerated care, Pelling put them into the battered leather case and gave them back to the Lieutenant.

'Your people will be coming tomorrow, sir?'

'Yes, we'll get rid of that tank and cowshed for you.' He said it like a surgeon about to amputate, and like a humane surgeon he tried to give the impression that it would make things better.

'That will give us quite a view,' said the Lieutenant. Pelling nodded. They both knew that it would make the farm such a good observation point that then the Germans would also want it. Very badly.

'Our attack can't be far off now,' said the Lieutenant, seeking reassurance. Pelling said nothing. Allied H.Q. didn't tell engineer colonels their plans, any more than they told infantry subalterns. They told the one to clear fields of fire and the other to shoot.

Pelling said, 'In another three or four weeks the autumn rains will make that valley into a bog. Do you know what rain does to that dusty soil?' It was a rhetorical question; the Lieutenant's face, hair, hands and uniform – like everyone else's – were coloured grey by the same abrasive powder that got in the guns and the tea.

'Yes,' said the Lieutenant. The attack would be soon.

What sort of man would build a farm up here on the side of Monte Nuovo: a fool or an aesthete, or both. The wind screamed constantly,

the cloud was almost close enough to touch and the trees were stunted and hunchbacked; but the view was like a Francesca painting. Back in Pelling's part of the world men built their houses low.

In war, though, it was the villages in the valleys that survived best. Houses and churches on high ground were invariably destroyed as the armies fought for observation points. There was a moral there somewhere, thought Pelling, but he was too tired to deduce it.

'What will you do after the war, Lieutenant?' Pelling sipped the hot sweet tea that was heavy with the smell of condensed milk.

'Oh, I don't know.' This was a new sort of conversation and he spoke in a different voice and omitted the 'sir'. 'I always wanted to be a vet – I'm keen on animals – but I'll be too old to start studying by the time this lot's over. Probably I'll just take over the old man's antique shop. And you?'

At first the Lieutenant was afraid that he'd offended the young Colonel. With an M.C. and D.S.O. and a colonel's rank at his age, perhaps he felt that there was no other world but the army. To soften it a little the Lieutenant said, 'You're a regular, of course.'

Pelling grinned, 'Yes. Woolwich, Staff College, the lot. I'm about as regular as you can get.'

'I suppose this is . . . to us it's the worst sort of interruption to our lives, but I suppose for you it's the thing you've been waiting for.'

'All you War Service types think that,' said Pelling, 'but if you think that any regular soldier likes fighting wars, you're quite wrong.' He saw the Lieutenant glance at his badges. 'Oh, we get promotion, but only at the expense of having our nice little club invaded by a lot of amateurs who don't want to be there. The peacetime army is quite a different show. A chap doesn't go into that in the hope that there will eventually be a war.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'You won't believe it,' said Pelling, 'but peacetime soldiering can be good fun, especially for a youngster straight from school. The army's so small that one gets to know everyone. One travels a lot, and there's ample leave as well as polo, cricket and rugger. It's not at all bad, Lieutenant, believe me. Even the parade ground can have a curious satisfaction.'

‘The parade ground?’

‘A thousand men, perfectly still and silent . . . and able to move in precise unison. Professional dancers probably share the same elation.’

‘Like marching behind a military band? We did that once, passing out of OCTU.’

‘That’s a part of it, but for me a silent parade ground has even more of a ritualistic effect. The body moves and yet the mind remains. There is a separation of physical and spiritual self that can liberate the mind like nothing else I know.’

‘Are you a Buddhist, sir?’ It was a reckless guess.

‘Once I nearly was,’ admitted Pelling.

‘And now?’

‘I am slowly rediscovering Christianity.’

Pelling had told no one about the time he’d spent billeted in the monastery near Naples, of the long conversations he’d had with the Abbot, arguing so fiercely that at times they were both yelling. Apart from his driver no one knew of the trips to the slum villages, and not even the driver could have guessed the effect that time had had upon him. ‘I’m going into a monastery,’ said Pelling.

‘Really?’ He stared at the Colonel, trying to see some strange secret.

Pelling nodded. He did not doubt that he would go back to the great white building with its orchards and its library and the life that went on without interruption for century after century. It was arranged that he would get both the tractors going again and find or build a lorry that would take the produce into Naples where they would get a better price for their vegetables.

There had been times during the fighting when only the promise of a cloistered life kept Colonel James Pelling going. He visualized himself thirty years hence; stouter than Father Franco and quieter than Father Mario – and perhaps less devout than either. Yet, as the old man had explained, the Order had in the past received men with doubts, and some of these had become its most valuable sons. Would one ever get used to being called ‘Father James’, Pelling wondered.

‘Do you believe there is a heaven for tractors, Father James?’

‘If there isn’t, Brother, then Father James will not go there.’ They were truly good, those simple men.

‘Would you be able to stand that?’ It was the Lieutenant speaking. ‘The quiet: I’d go bonkers.’

‘It’s not a silent Order,’ said Pelling.

‘You’ve no family then?’

‘A father.’ He’d go – what was the word the Lieutenant had used? – bonkers. Yes, he’d go bonkers all right. But Pelling was determined not to repeat the mistakes of his father’s solitary life. Days in the boat yard or at the drawing-board, lunch in the pub with the works manager. Dinner in the yacht club, or a late snack left by cook: dry ham sandwiches clamped under a plate. And what was the purpose of his father’s life: a couple of knots gained by hull modifications, a win at Cowes, a telegram from a transatlantic cup winner. That wasn’t enough for him, not nearly enough. Pelling could hear the soldiers below talking about what they would do with their lives after the war.

‘Mr Steeple, sir.’ It was Wool’s voice calling softly, ‘Two Mark IVs turning off the road near the track at two o’clock.’

Lieutenant Steeple said, ‘Sergeant Manley, get your sniper’s rifle. Have a go at their visors. You never know, you might star his periscope glass.’

The Lieutenant was too late grabbing for the glasses. ‘They’ve stopped,’ grunted Pelling. He rubbed the lenses with a handkerchief and then looked again. ‘Nice hull-down position if they were going to batter us.’ Their guns hadn’t traversed, so it was difficult to know whether they were covering the main road or the farmhouse to the east of it. The Lieutenant picked pieces of straw from his duty battle-dress blouse while he waited for the next move.

‘You should wear denims,’ said Pelling without taking the glasses from his eyes. ‘That rough battle-dress material picks up straw and stuff.’ He couldn’t see very well, for the morning sun reflected on the dry, dusty soil so that it shimmered as he remembered the desert had done.

‘No, no, no, sir,’ interrupted Wool. He chuckled and flicked ash

from his cigar. 'It wasn't hot and sunny, it was a close overcast day. There had been rain that morning. Not the sort of rain we got a few weeks later, but rain. And it wasn't morning, it was late afternoon when the German tanks arrived, very late, almost dark. You were in the cellar drinking tea with that Mr Steeple, the officer. I came down the cellar steps and said, "Any more tea for anyone? There are a couple of Tedeschi tanks outside the front door."' "

'Damn!' shouted Steeple. Pelling looked around for a place to stand his mug of tea and then decided to drink it hurriedly. It scalded his mouth. Pelling let Steeple up the steps first. It was his show, but Pelling couldn't resist interfering.

'Radio?' called Pelling.

'Bishop!' yelled Steeple. 'Tell Company: Two Ted Mark IVs moving in on us fast.' He looked at Pelling and said more calmly, 'No, wait a minute, make that: Two Mark IVs, range nine hundred, bearing oh three five.'

Everyone stood very quietly listening to the radio operator patiently repeating the message. Only Pelling and Steeple could see the two enemy tanks. The others were just staring very hard at the wall and the rafters, as if by opening their eyes wide they would be able to hear better. It must have been three or four minutes before anyone spoke and then Wool said, 'Listen to that nightingale sing! It's as clear as a glass of Worthington . . .'

'Couldn't have been me,' chuckled Wool. 'I couldn't tell a nightingale from a budgerigar; still can't.' He puffed his cigar. 'What I do remember, though, is you making us black our faces with soot from the stove. Regular Sioux war party we looked.'

Wool had often played Red Indians when he stayed with his Gran. Blacking his face was an important part of that. He'd take his uncle's boat and row along the stream. Using the oar against the river-bed, he could push himself right in among the reeds so that he and the boat disappeared. The cars on the road to Bishopsbridge were stage coaches, but pedestrians were miners and no honourable Indian brave would scalp them.

'Did I?' said Pelling.

'Yes, it was after the rations came up that night. You nearly put