CONNIE WILLIS UPDATE--November 10, 2010

I'm back from my ALL CLEAR book tour and had a great time. I got to see lots of people in Seattle, Portland, San Diego, and Phoenix. But it's nice to be back home.

I promised I'd talk about some of the things I couldn't put in ALL CLEAR, and here they are. As with BLACKOUT, there were tons of things I found out while doing my research that I wasn't able to use. Some stuff there wasn't room for, and some didn't fit the story I was trying to tell.

I loved the dozens of signs the people put up on their bombed-out shops, like "Business as usual, Mr. Hitler," and "Shattered but not shuttered." I used several in the book, but there wasn't room for all of them. Some of my favorites:

On a furniture store--"They can smash our windows, but they can't beat our furnishing values," and next to it, a smaller sign saying, "It's as easy as breaking a window to furnish a home through Smart's Easier Way!"

On a barber's--"We've had a close shave and now you can have one, too."

And my favorite, on a completely obliterated shop--"If you think this is bad, you should see what the RAF has done

to our branch in Berlin."

There were also stories which may or may not have been true, like the one about the lost newcomer who stopped a passing Londoner and asked, "Which side is Whitehall on?"

The Londoner looked momentarily taken aback. "Good Lord," he said. "Ours, I hope."

GENERAL PATTON

One of the most fun things I researched for ALL CLEAR was the Fortitude South deception campaign and the part General Patton played in it. "Cowboy general" that he was, he had hoped to lead the landings in Normandy, but Eisenhower and the British Secret Service had different plans for him. He was tapped to lead the First Army Group, which was headquartered in Kent and preparing for an invasion at the Pas de Calais. And which didn't exist. The phantom army consisted instead of fake radio messages, planted newspaper articles, false reports from double agents, rubber tanks, and plywood-and-pasteboard army camps.

It was an elaborate and risky hoax, and it would never have worked without Patton. The Germans were convinced he was the man who'd be leading the invasion whenever and wherever it came; in their eyes he was the most famous and

best commander the Allies had. And the one they were most afraid of. If he was in Kent, then the invasion was definitely coming at the Pas de Calais.

And Patton was the perfect person for the job--flamboyant, loud-mouthed, unmissable in his star-bedecked uniform with its highly polished boots, riding crop, and brace of pearl-handled pistols. He made a splash wherever he went, which was just what the Secret Service wanted.

And even though he was angry at being sidelined, he seemed to thoroughly enjoy striding around London and southeast England, "like Sarah Bernhardt," posing for fake photo ops and making headlines. He made speeches, greeted troops, hobnobbed with the nobility, and said all sorts of things he wasn't supposed to about the invasion. What people didn't know was that those gaffes were carefully scripted, including the "See you in Calais," comment which I used in ALL CLEAR.

It must have nearly killed him to keep so many secrets and not to be able to brag about what he was doing, but his silence--and his role--was absolutely essential to the invasion's success. Hitler's continued belief that the main assault was coming at Calais kept Rommel's tanks, troops, and other vital resources tied down till nearly a month after the invasion.

THE BBC

In ALL CLEAR I listed some of the coded messages heard over the BBC, but I wasn't really able to go into detail. Those messages, broadcast in French were sent out by the BBC every day just before the news.

"Ici Londres!" the newscaster would intone, "Before we begin, please listen to some personal messages," and then read a long list of messages in French, repeating them twice: "The flowers are very red." "Jean has a long mustache." "The tomatoes should be picked." "It is hot in Suez." "Children are bored on Sunday."

Most of the messages had no hidden meaning. They were there only to confuse and overwhelm the German decoders with their sheer numbers. (And provide fodder for dozens of subsequent spy movies.)

Other messages meant, "We will pick up the downed RAF flyer Thursday night," or "Expect a parachute drop on Monday next." Still others were the agreed-on signals for each Resistance group, telling them that invasion was imminent and that they were to go into action--cutting telephone and telegraph lines, setting up roadblocks, and blowing up train tracks.

Every unit had also been sent the overall message

signaling the invasion. It was in two parts and consisted of the first and second lines of a famous Verlaine poem. The first line--"The long sobs of the violins of autumn"--meant the Resistance units were to be on the alert, the second--"Wound my heart with a monotonous languor"--meant invasion would occur within twenty-four hours. Part One was broadcast several times from April on, but it hadn't ever been followed by Part Two.

Unfortunately, the Resistance wasn't the only one listening eagerly for the second message. Nazi spies had infiltrated several units, and members of others had been arrested, interrogated, and tortured, with the result that the Nazis knew not only many of the group messages, but about the Verlaine message.

Accordingly, when on the night before D-Day, the BBC broadcast, "Wounds my heart with a monotonous languor," the German wireless operator who intercepted it immediately went to Field Marshal von Rundstedt to tell him that the invasion was imminent.

Whereupon von Rundstedt said, "I hardly think the BBC would announce the invasion over the wireless." And went back to his dinner party.

To his sorrow.

THE ALBERT MEMORIAL

Westminster Abbey, Big Ben, and the British Museum were all hit during the Blitz, but in a supreme bit of irony, the Albert Memorial, that monument to Victorian excess, came through relatively unscathed.

Erected by Queen Victoria after Prince Albert died (along with monuments in Edinburgh, Manchester, and pretty much any other place people would let her) the monument has large statuary groups of the four continents (complete with topless girls and elephants, camels, bison, and cattle; friezes of history's architects, poets, painters, and sculptors; commemorations of Victorian achievements in manufacturing, commerce, agriculture, and engineering; and a statue of Prince Albert seated on a throne reading the catalogue from the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851.

It also has a golden cross on the top, which was painted black during the zeppelin attacks of World War I and left that way for World War II, but no other part of the memorial, including Albert, was sandbagged. Which is odd, since nearly everything else in London had sandbags piled around it and since in one raid the cross and one of Asia's breasts was knocked off.

Or perhaps not that odd after all. Londoners despised the memorial, and legend has it that at one point they put

large arrows around it, directing the bombers to the monument. As Ernie Pyle wrote, "Londoners pray daily that a German bomb will do something about the Albert Memorial...As the British say, they could bear its removal with equanimity."

So of course it survived. War is nothing if not ironic. Or, in Churchill's words, "War is full of surprises, mostly unpleasant."

LONDON'S THEATERS

Because of Sir Godfrey and the acting troupe and other things which happen later on, ALL CLEAR has a lot of references to the theaters of London. They were officially closed by the government at the beginning of the Blitz and then gradually reopened over the next few months. When the Luftwaffe came over, a sign was posted at the corner of the stage reading, "Air raid in progress," and the performances went on.

And on. Theatergoers were often trapped inside by the ongoing raids, so after the curtain rang down on the play, the actors--including the likes of Laurence Olivier, Edith Evans, Alec Guinness, and John Gielgud--entertained the audience with impromptu songs and skits till the all clear went.

Plays weren't the only theatrical entertainments available. ENSA, the British equivalent of the USO, put on nightly revues with magicians, jugglers, chorus lines, and skits about the blackout, nosy ARP wardens, and other annoyances of wartime life. They also went on tour, performing at army camps and airfields, and for factory workers and land girls.

ENSA's shows were amateurish entertainments, prompting some to quip that ENSA stood for "Every night something awful," and the performers themselves succinctly described the revues as "Tits and Tinsel."

"Tits and Tinsel" also described the performances at the Windmill Theater, the only theater which stayed open through the entire war. It specialized in nude revues, which were tamer than they sound due to London's obscenity laws at the time.

Nudes onstage were not allowed to move at all. This meant the revue consisted mostly of the usual comedians, singers, and scantily-clad chorus girls, but every now and then the inner curtains would part, revealing a stationary tableau of tastefully arranged naked girls.

This proved to be a problem during the Blitz. The girls had the choice of either A) standing still and having bombs fall on them or B) ducking for cover and being

arrested for moving.

They chose the former, and in so doing developed a reputation for bravery under fire which made them and their theater, with its "We Never Closed" motto a symbol of courage for all of London, including the dean of St. Paul's. Reverend Matthews, writing about the UXB under the foundations which had shut down the cathedral for three days, wrote in his book about the war, "Unlike a certain theater, we were never able to say, 'We never closed.'"

Other people weren't so reverent. One smartaleck remarked that the Windmill's motto should have been "We never clothed." But everyone in the country knew about the Windmill--and the soldiers loved it.

CHRISTMAS

A chunk of ALL CLEAR takes place during the Christmas season of 1940. It was actually the second Christmas of the war for England, but the first which felt like it. Sugar was rationed (the week before Christmas it was increased from eight to twelve ounces), French brandies and mistletoe were unavailable because France had been occupied, and turkeys were wildly expensive. So was cheese, and chocolate was nearly impossible to find.

Even the traditional Christmas pudding suffered. Not

only were sugar, nuts, and candied fruits in short supply, but the silver coins always hidden in the puddings had been replaced by nickel-and-brass ones which were "not suitable for boiling in the pudding," according to a government directive.

The government also told people not to buy lavish gifts. They were even told not to buy Christmas cards--"One bullet moulded in the munitions works is worth more to our friends than 20 greeting cards we may send to them"--though nobody paid any attention. The ARP and National Fire Service sent out their own special cards, and civilian cards bore all sorts of references to the war, from "Happy Blitzmas" to pictures of Santa and his reindeer dodging anti-aircraft fire.

In spite of everything, people managed to keep their spirits up. They gave each other folding shelter-beds and siren suits (woolen one-piece pajamas), and they crocheted afghans and rag rugs for use on the cold tube-station platforms. They baked cakes in the shape of Anderson shelters, put up trees in the tube stations and on the porch of St. Paul's (it was knocked over twice by blast and promptly put up again), and organized parties for evacuees and children in hospital. They bought War Bonds and made fun of Hitler, who they were sure would do something to try

to spoil their Christmas. (They were right, though he actually waited till four days after Christmas and then nearly burned London to the ground.) They sang carols and pulled crackers and listened to the King's Christmas speech over the wireless. And carried on.

Through five more wartime Christmases.

THE V-1 AND V-2 ROCKETS

As you know from ALL CLEAR, two weeks after D-Day, Hitler began firing unmanned rockets at England. At first the government tried to keep their existence secret from the public, passing them off as crashed German planes or gas explosions, but within a week they were coming over by the hundreds, and the secret was out.

They weren't called V-1s by anybody that I could find. The government referred to them as robot bombs and pilotless airplanes, the papers named them flying bombs, and the British public referred to them variously as buzz bombs (for the sound they made), doodlebugs (for their erratic movement), stovepipes (for their shape), and flying gas mains (the excuse given by the government for the first V-1s was that a gas main had exploded.)

To American GI's they were Bob Hopes, as in "Bob down and hope for the best," a name based on the government

advice to fling yourself into the nearest gutter.

At first the V-1s were very disruptive. The sirens went every twenty minutes and no sooner had the all clear sounded than another siren went, and this went on all day and night. People weren't getting any sleep, and they couldn't spend all their time trooping back and forth to shelters.

Even though they weren't guided missiles (the motor was designed to make a certain number of revolutions and then stop), people swore the V-1s chased them, zigging as they zagged, and lots of people had harrowing tales of frightening near-misses and narrow escapes.

But within a very short time, the public figured out how they worked, how to cope, and when to ignore them: they were okay as long as you could hear their rattletrap buzzing. The dangerous time was when they went silent. That meant the motor had cut out, and the V-1 was about to crash. At that point you hit the dirt or ducked into the nearest doorway, or dived for the curb.

And then, after it had hit, got up, dusted yourself off, and went blithely on with whatever it was you were doing. Author Edith Sitwell was in the middle of reading a totally appropriate poem--"Still falls the rain, still falls the blood"--to a large audience at Ashburnham House

when one went sputtering over. She didn't miss a beat.

But just because people got used to them doesn't mean they weren't horrible. They killed over twenty thousand people and did tons of damage. And there were a number of mass casualties. The Guards Chapel near Buckingham Palace was hit in the middle of a service, killing 121 people, and a crowded shopping center was hit on Saturday afternoon in New Cross, demolishing a Woolworth's and killing 160.

A young woman riding her bicycle to work vanished without a trace when a V-1 landed on her, and a doctor remembers watching a pretty girl in a short summer dress walking past and admiring her long legs--and then hearing a V-1 crash nearby and being called to help amputate both her legs.

But the worst was still to come. In September, Hitler launched the V-2, the predecessor of our current missile program, which truly was a terror weapon. The V-2s gave no warning whatsoever so you never even knew what hit you, they obliterated whole streets of houses, and there was no way to stop them, except for taking out the launching sites in France and Belgium, which the Allies eventually did, but not till the spring of 1945.

No one ever gave the V-2 a cute nickname. And many historians think that if it had been introduced earlier and

in greater numbers, it would have done what neither the Blitz nor the V-1 had managed to do: panic the populace. As C.P. Snow wrote, the V-2s "frightened me much more than the others...somehow the idea that fate was above one without one knowing anything about it--that I found disturbing."

The most depressing thing about the V-2s was that the war was nearly over. The Germans were retreating, Paris had been liberated, and there was even talk of the blackout being lifted. And then this!

All of the V-1s and V-2s were aimed at London Bridge, which, ironically, was never hit. But the area all around it--heavily populated central London--was, with heavy casualties. This is how the plan came about to trick the Germans into shortening the trajectories of its rockets, thus causing them to land in the less-populated suburbs east of London.

I talked about this some in ALL CLEAR, and yes, Minister Herbert Morrison did refuse to okay the project on the grounds that it would be "an interference with Providence" for the government to be put in the position of choosing who did and did not die, and yes, the officers in charge did do it anyway, one of them noting that he shared a birthday with Lord Nelson and that he "could not help

recalling his comment at Copenhagen and did not even have to substitute my deaf ear for his blind eye." He announced that he had not been present at the meeting, "and the decision was so incredible that I would only believe it if I received instructions in writing."

There's no question that their disobedience saved countless lives, though, since it's impossible to tell where the rockets would have landed if the Germans hadn't "corrected" the trajectories, it's impossible to know exactly how many. But certainly a number of them fell on empty pastures and fields. And lots fell on people in Bethnal Green, Dulwich, and Croydon. And some which would have overshot their mark landed north and west of the city came down smack in the middle of London. But, as Homer commented in the ILIAD, war's a bloody business.

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Anyone who's read BLACKOUT-ALL CLEAR (or anything else of mine) knows how crazy I am about Agatha Christie. She's a writer whom I not only love to read and reread, but to study. She's one of the world's best plotters, and no one's better at misdirection, hiding clues in plain sight, and leading her hapless readers down the garden path.

No one was more hapless than me. My first contact with her occurred when the movie MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS came out. It was a star-studded roadshow production, complete with an intermission halfway through, and I disgraced myself forever during that intermission by saying to my husband, "This is ridiculous! They can't all have done it!"

From the end of that movie on, I was determined not to let her trip me up again--only to be repeatedly fooled--and then devoted to figuring out how she does what she does. And attempting to do it myself. And when I found out she had spent most of the Blitz in London, I couldn't resist putting her in the book.

Her war experiences were quintessentially English. She took in an evacuated family (the children of her friend Peggy McLeod), had her country house taken over by the government for a nursery for children evacuated from St. Pancras, and experienced the Blitz first-hand. Her daughter married a soldier who was reported missing and then killed in action, and her husband joined the Home Guard and then the Air Force.

When he was sent to the Middle East, Agatha stayed in London, first in a house in Sheffield Terrace, and then, when it was bombed, in a flat in Hampstead, where she went

to work as a part-time dispenser. Her job was at University College Hospital, but she had volunteered to fill in before, and on the night of the twenty-ninth doctors, nurses, and dispensers were called in from all over London to help, so she might very well have been at St. Bart's.

And it's true that she refused to go to shelters or even down to her own cellar out of a fear of being trapped underground. She hated the war, and talked about the topsy-turvy existence it engendered: "Broken windows, bombs, land mines, and in due course flying bombs and rockets--all these things would go on, not as something extraordinary, but as perfectly natural."

For someone in the thick of the war, she wrote very little about it directly. In her novel N OR M?, Tommy and Tuppence are involved with German spies and fifth columnists, and in THE MOVING FINGER, the narrator's been injured in a flying accident which might very well have happened during the Battle of Britain, but THERE IS A TIDE is the only novel which directly mentions the Blitz that I know of, and that only in retrospect. It's too bad she didn't set a novel in the Blitz. With her eye for detail and her insights, it would have been terrific.

But even though there's little in her books that Polly

could have used to prep for her assignment in the Blitz, an historian like Eileen might very well have studied THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD, THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY, or A POCKET FULL OF RYE to learn the details of servant life at a country manor. Christie's mysteries are full of the kind of specific details that history books rarely contain.

And it's true that Agatha's mystery novels were the most popular books in the circulating libraries the shelters set up during the Blitz. I've always thought it was because her books reminded people of the peacetime world they'd lost and were all about the triumph of reason, logic, and ultimate justice, things sadly missing in the crazy Hitler-and-the-war world they found themselves inhabiting. But on my book tour, someone pointed out that the novels were also short, just the right length to be read in a single night on a tube platform, which I think is a good point.

But I didn't just put her in the book to indulge my liking for her. Agatha belongs in a novel whose plot is all about misread clues and a misunderstood situation, and a story in which the tiniest, most ordinary details turn out to be the most crucial. BLACKOUT/ALL CLEAR isn't just a book with Agatha Christie in it. It is an Agatha Christie mystery.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On my book tour, a lot of people also asked if I was going to put up a bibliography of additional books to read and movies to watch. The answer's yes, and here it is:

THE BLITZ NOW AND THEN edited by Winston G. Ramsey--This massive, three-volume tome was my Bible while I wrote BLACKOUT and ALL CLEAR. It was invaluable for finding out the exact times and places of the raids and the number of casualties. It also had many enlightening essays, including the log of a twelve-year-old boy who kept track of the V-1 and V-2 rocket attacks and accounts of V-1 tipping and of the trajectory-shortening deception British Intelligence employed against the rockets.

CHRISTMAS ON THE HOME FRONT by Mike Brown--This nifty book is full of photos, advertisements, and the most appalling-sounding wartime recipes you can imagine. Mock turkey, anyone? Tomato and vitamin B extract sandwiches?

THE CITY THAT WOULD NOT DIE by Richard Collier--The best book I found on the subject of the night of December

twenty-ninth and the attack on London that nearly destroyed St. Paul's and turned the City into a firestorm. Full of great eyewitness stories.

ERNIE PYLE IN ENGLAND by Ernie Pyle--The up-close and personal observations of one of the war's best correspondents.

HOODWINKING HITLER by William B. Breuer--The complete account of the deception campaigns of Fortitude and how British Intelligence successfully fooled Hitler into thinking they were invading at Calais, not Normandy--well, almost complete. There are still lots of secrets which have never come to light. So stay tuned.

ST. PAUL'S IN WARTIME by W.R. Matthews--The inside story of St. Paul's part in the war and of the attacks on the cathedral by the Dean of St. Paul's himself.

THE SECRET OF D-DAY by Giles Perrault--How the allies managed to keep the biggest invasion in the history of mankind a secret, and the critical part British Intelligence played.

WAR SPEECHES by Winston Churchill--As far as I'm concerned, Churchill was one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, and these speeches prove it. I also recommend his six-volume history of the war, THE SECOND WORLD WAR, especially THEIR FINEST HOUR.

MOVIES

ENIGMA--Bletchley Park, Nazi spies, Ultra, and a romance besides. Plus Kate Winslet and Dougray Scott.

HANOVER STREET--I can't remember if I mentioned this before, but it's a good movie about the Blitz and the Christmas of 1940 and the bombing of Germany. And it stars Harrison Ford.

THE LAST OF THE BLONDE BOMBSHELLS--about a girls' swing band which entertained during World War II. With Judi Dench and Olympia Dukakis.

THE LONGEST DAY--a wonderful and very accurate movie about D-Day, including the part the BBC codes and the French Resistance played.

MRS. HENDERSON PRESENTS--A fabulous movie about the Windmill Theater and the part it played in the war.

WE'LL MEET AGAIN--a very good BBC series about the American occupation and English small-town life during the war.