

**J. G . BALLARD:**

# THEATRE OF WAR

## Author's preface

After 300 years, could civil war again divide the United Kingdom? Given rising unemployment and industrial stagnation, an ever more entrenched class system and a weak monarchy detaching itself from all but its ceremonial roles, is it possible to visualize the huge antagonisms between the extreme left and right resolving themselves in open civil conflict? I take it for granted that despite its unhappy experience in South East Asia the intervention of the United States to defend its military and economic investments would be even more certain than it was in Viet Nam. I also assume that the television coverage would be uninterrupted and all-pervasive, and have therefore cast it in the form of a TV documentary of the type made popular by *World in Action*.

## Part One:      ■ LONDON UNDER SIEGE      ■

### ■ STREET BATTLE

Inner London, a back street in Lambeth, where confused street fighting has just taken place. Bodies lie everywhere. Two negro GIs drag away a dead enemy soldier with shoulder-length hair. Stitched to his camouflage jacket is a Union Jack. The picture freezes and the camera zooms in on the Union Jack until it fills the screen, soaked in the soldier's blood.

■ **WORLD IN ACTION TITLES** ■ Superimposed over the bloody Union Jack: "*Civil War*"

#### **Commentator:**

One street battle is over, but the civil war goes on. After four years no solution is in sight. American casualties total 30,000 dead, a hundred thousand missing and wounded. A million British civilians have died. Despite mounting criticism at home, America pours more and more troops into what is now the European Viet Nam. But the fighting continues. This week the Liberation Front launched a major offensive against a dozen cities. Here in Lambeth a suicide squad fights its way to within 800 yards of the House of Parliament. How long can the British government survive? Will peace ever come? *World in Action* is here to find out.

### STREET BATTLE      ■

The fighting is over, and the government forces are mopping up. They flush frightened civilians from the basements and herd them away past the bodies of enemy soldiers. At the junction with the main road in the background a British Airway advertisement hoarding is riddled with bullet holes. A sullen-faced young English woman is frisked roughly by British troops while others tear the Union Jacks from dead enemy soldiers. The tank drags away a tangle of bodies lashed together by their wrists. In a jeep loaded with looted cameras, radios and record players pop music blares from the intercom.

**Commentator:**

As each day passes, life in the government-held areas becomes less and less tolerable. London is a city under siege. Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham are the last remaining strongholds of government support, defended by massive American forces. The countryside belongs to the NLF. The continuous infiltration of the London suburbs by guerilla battalions mingling with the local population has brought the front line to everyone's doorstep. Bomb outrages, kidnappings, street battles with snipers, the assassination of local political leaders - these are part of day to day life. Meanwhile, in the London over which the Queen once reigned the black market flourishes. Millions of dollars worth of American goods pour into the capital, propping up a juke-box economy of pirate TV networks, thousands of bars and brothels. In many towns and suburbs the main unit of currency is the illegal NLF pound sterling. The government-backed British dollar is despised. Anything can be bought, but nothing has any value. More and more young people slip away to join the Liberation Front. Doctors, engineers, trained mechanics desert to the enemy forces. They leave behind a population that consists mainly of the old middle class and an army of bartenders, croupiers and call-girls. London is now a gigantic Las Vegas, the latest light-bulb in the world. ready to blow out in a hail of rebel machine-gun fire.

▣ **INTERVIEW WITH BRITISH SUPREME COMMANDER**

A sometime heir to the English throne, the 36-year-old Commander of the government forces is an aggressive, media-wise opportunist with pearl-handled revolver, black flying suit and white silk scarf. He is shown parading in a succession of military uniforms, firing a sub-machine-gun at a rifle range, inspecting a dispirited platoon of government troops, boarding his roof-top helicopter which he flies himself to inspect the attacks breaking out all over the city, and generally trying to boost the morale of his entourage. His line is confident but embittered; he knows he has lost his throne by his involvement with the puppet regime. He hates the- NLF, but the Americans more. His hero is Rommel, but his style is James Bond.

**British Commander :**

As Commander of the British loyalist forces my job is to win the war and unify the country again. The enemy is increasingly fighting out of desperation. Our intelligence tells us that he is running out of men, out of steam and out of material. He simply doesn't have the economic potential to maintain a war. The people in Europe and the United States who criticize the war don't really know what's going on. Quite evidently the people of this country don't want anything to do with the people up north, or with the communist way of life.

**Commentator:**

You don't feel, General, that you and the Americans are forcing a form of government on the people of this country?

**British Commander:**

No, we're not forcing anything on them. The United States feels that this is a good place to stop communist aggression, and if the government forces do win, and I know they will, we'll have firstly, a good ally, and we'll have stopped communist aggression from taking over the United Kingdom and eventually France and everywhere else.

[Points to map showing blacked-out areas of British Isles.]

Our forces are now moving forwards into a series of major confrontations with the other side, so I think you can look forward to when that map will be white again. Then I know the Americans will be glad to leave for home.

■ **COMMENTATOR IN GROSVENOR SQUARE . . .** Maps in hand, he addresses camera . . . American Embassy in background, surrounded by tanks.

**COMMENTATOR:**

Meanwhile, however, the British Commander is reported to be asking the US President for yet more troops. How many soldiers will be needed to hold the line against the NLF? Despite the General's easy optimism it isn't his map which most people look at, but this one issued by the NLF.

[Lifts other map. Black areas encircle major cities all the countryside.]

It's this one they consult if they want to visit their relatives in the country or move to another town. It's this one they use if they want to defect to the NLF.

■ **EXPLOSION BURSTS ACROSS SQUARE**

Camera wobbles, swings wildly . . . Panic, people running . . . Commentator ducks, then starts talking in confused way,

**COMMENTATOR:**

...there's been a - it looks, it looks as if a sniper ... What seems to be happening is that a -

■ **CROWD FORMING A ROUGH CIRCLE AROUND A JEEP**

GIs push people back, and look down at the body of an American officer in the front seat, blood pouring from wound. Pop music blares from the intercom radio a few inches from his face.

**Radio Announcer:**

We have a list of the latest curfew regulations. In the inner capital the curfew bell is midnight to 6 am for Kensington Knightsbridge and Battersea and from 10 to 7 am for the 3rd Air Cav, and support units in -

■ **GI REACHES OVER AND SWITCHES OFF RADIO**

## **Commentator:**

Five minutes ago a senior officer was assassinated as he sat in his jeep outside the American officers' club here in Grosvenor Square. An NLF killer in civilian clothes stepped through the lunch-time crowd and fired a single shot, then disappeared back into the crowd. The officer, Colonel Wilson J. Tucker, a military adviser in the "hearts and minds" mission, widely suspected of being a cover for a CIA murder squad, died within a few seconds. All that's known about the killer is that he was "young", probably in his early twenties, a safe enough assumption at a time when most of the young men and women here have long since left to join the Liberation Front, at a time when to be young automatically invites the attentions of the military police and the hostility of the old and middle-aged who provide the last support for the puppet regime. As one visiting Canadian journalist put it to me...

### ▣ CANADIAN JOURNALIST IN HOTEL BAR

**Canadian Journalist:** All the NLF have to do to win this war is wait ten years. By then everyone on the government side will be either dead or in a wheel-chair.

### ▣ SHOTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT CAMP SITE

Police hustling them about . . . Older people watching as girls and young men have their hair shaved.

**Commentator:** Certainly one of the most striking divisions in British life is the now unbridgeable gulf between the young and the old. Even if the peace talks start and a settlement is finally reached will it be possible for them to live together in one society? A legacy of resentment, intolerance and sexual jealousy has been fed by years of violence and open war. At a time when the twin pillars of life in the government areas are the strip club and the US dollar, does Britain any longer possess the political and social institutions to make possible a real society?

**Canadian Journalist:** I don't see Parliament now as a functioning entity in any way. It's a rump of older Members of Parliament and extreme right-wingers, a blow-hole for all kinds of unpleasant fascist gas. As a legislature it's non-existent. Let's face the facts, the British government is a puppet regime, **and it means to keep it that way**. The economy has a real balance of payments surplus for the first time in thirty years, thanks to American war-spending and the GI dollar. Baby, nobody on this side says "*Yank, go home*". They're more likely to offer you their sister - or their mother. Their sister's on the other side.

**Commentator:** Patriotism takes many forms. Is it significant, though, that the flag of the Liberation Front is the Union Jack, longstanding symbol of the union of Britain's major provincial areas - a symbol now hated and feared by the government supporters? To what extent can the government itself provide any prospects for unity?

## ▣ INTERVIEW WITH BRITISH PRIME MINISTER ▣

A former Labour Prime Minister recalled to office, to lead the all-party coalition, he sits uneasily inside a sandbagged Downing Street, literally duckin every time a shot is heard. He is surrounded by armed guards, but looks shifty and dispirited. All too clearly he is at the Americans' mercy, and has no ideas for bringing the war to an end .

**Commentator:**

Could I ask you first, Prime, Minister, are you hopeful at the moment at the outlook for peace?

**Prime Minister:**

Well, it depends very much on what the other side wants to do. The latest offensives - attacks against the ordinary people of this country - don't suggest that they're particularly sincere in their talk about wanting a settlement.

**Commentator:**

Do you envisage that the departure of the American troops will create problems? If one travels around London one sees that a large part of the local economy is geared to serving the GI. When the GI is gone, won't there be problems for those people who presently are ...

**Prime Minister:**

Well, this contains the same problem shared by all those countries which have had large American forces on their soil - Germany, Japan, Viet Nam. I think it will be a good thing because we shall be back to normal and a lot of people will have to look for a living within their means. They'll have to give up a lot of windfall benefits which come from the war and create social problems. We've now got in this country a class of people created by the war, and I think it's a good thing that this will stop.

**Commentator:**

Childhood for most of the children in London has been a strangle life with the American dollar, hasn't it? The American dollar has been the way they passed thair childhood. When that in the form of the GI goes, are they not going to have a lot of problems?

**Prime Minister:**

I'm sure they will. They'll be economic problems mainly. I think we're all going to have to find ourselves, so to speak, a painful process whether it's an individual or a nation. I think there's going to be a period of readjustment, possibly of turbulence, but they must go through the process. Perhaps if they'd gone through it twenty years ago there wouldn't be a war now.

## GENERAL VIEW OF PEOPLE HANGING AROUND ENTRANCES TO AMERICAN BASES

### **Commentator:**

Can the British people find themselves? Can they go through the painful process of re-establishing themselves as a single nation? With 70 per cent of the economy tied to the war, with the revenues from North Sea oil long since sold off to the Germans and Japanese, will ordinary people be able to make the adjustments necessary to living with the other side? In short, do they want the war to end at all? **World in Action** visited a village in the front line to see how the bulk of the population is facing up to the reality of the war.

### ▣ GENERAL PICTURE OF SMALL TOWN IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Barbed wire, road blocks, troops and armoured cars. Gunfire in the distance.

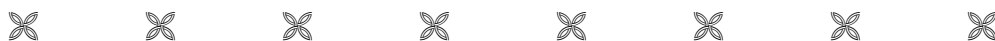
### **Commentator:**

Here at Cookham, only twenty miles or so from the centre of London, the "windfall benefits" of the war are more likely to be a sniper's bullet or a barrage of enemy mortar shells. This is one of the so called pacified villages. By day the British and American forces occupy the bunkers and pill-boxes. In the evening they withdraw with the local administrators to a fortified enclave near the American base at Windsor. At night the Liberation Front moves in. At this moment their advance positions are no more than two hundred yards away, their sentries watching us through binoculars. None of these villagers will talk to us. All are assumed to be Liberation Front sympathizers, but in fact they are professional neutrals, living on the edge of a giant razor that could cut them down at any moment. They farm the fields, work in the garages and shops, and wait for the Americans to leave. Strangest of all here, there is no one between the ages of four and forty.

### ▣ TANK APPEARS ' FOLLOWED BY BRITISH AND AMERICAN SOLDIERS

### **Commentator:**

A special task force arrives, part of a self-styled Pacification Probe that will advance ten miles into country recently occupied by the Liberation Front. One tank, ten GIs of the First Cavalry Division, and thirty British soldiers are under the command of Captain Arjay Robinson. **World in Action** is going with them to see what happens.



## Part Two: PACIFICATION PROBE

### Commentator:

A Pacification probe prepares to set off It's 6.35 am, and the thirty British soldiers who will do the major part of the fighting -and the major part of the dying- wait quietly in the background as the American tank crew and radio specialists prepare their equipment. The American weapons and communications are now so sophisticated that the British troops can barely understand them. Many of these men will defect on this mission, many more will die. What are they up against? Last month a Swedish film crew smuggled itself through the front lines. Their brief film shows what life is like within the Liberation Front.

### ▣ NEWSREEL OF LIBERATION FRONT AREAS

Mountains, tunnel entrances guarded by young soldiers and armed young women. Union Jacks flying. People working in factories. Alternative technology, windmills, small-scale smelting works. machine shops, hand-loom. Children everywhere, thin but healthy. Kibbutz atmosphere, young mothers in khaki mini-skirts with babies and rifles. Slit trenches, men with rifles move through fields around burnt-out American tank. Callisthenics in drill-hall, communal singing around flag. Indoctrination sessions, 18-year-old political commissar addressing doctors and nursing staff in hospital. Children taking part in people's theatre, 4-year-olds dressed in parody US military uniforms miming bombing attacks on sturdy villagers. Everywhere slogans, loudspeakers, portraits of George VI.

### Swedish voice-over:

The mountains of Scotland and Wales are the main strong-holds of the National Liberation Front. In the four-year war against the British central government hundreds of underground schools and factories have been built. From here supplies and equipment go out to the front line. By now all the agricultural areas of England are under control of the Liberation Front. The soldiers and peasants are organized in communes, the women farming and looking after the children while the men are fighting. Their leaders are young. There are few here. Everywhere morale is high, they are confident that they have won the war and that the Americans must soon leave. They are Scottish, Welsh, people from the northern and western provinces of England, West Indians, Asians and Africans. For four years they have been bombed but they are still fighting.

### ▣ COOKHAM

. . . . . Cut to Captain Robinson on the turret of his tank. He scans the empty fields. Nothing moves. In the compound below the soldiers have finished readying their weapons and equipment. The **World in Action** commentator puts on US combat clothing, strapping a gun around his waist, trying out heavy boots. A helicopter clatters overhead.

**Commentator:**

Half an hour from now the forty men of Alpha Company will set out from Cookham. As we move off across this guerilla-infested countryside two companies of combat engineers will have flown in to the target area by helicopter. They will deal with any local opposition. The main function of Alpha Company, this so-called pacification probe, is to re-establish the government's authority. The thirty British soldiers and the District Administrator will stay on after the Americans have left, recruiting local militia, setting up a fortified hamlet and redirecting the area's agriculture. The target area is at a key point on the P14 Motorway to the south-west. To keep this road open the government forces are setting up a chain of fortified villages along its 200-mile length.

▣ **CAPTAIN ROBINSON CHECKING HIS MEN'S EQUIPMENT**

**Commentator:**

Alpha Company's commander, Captain Arjay Robinson, is already a veteran of this war. Thirty-two years old, he comes from Denver, Colorado, and is a graduate of West Point. He is married to a clergyman's daughter and has three children, none of whom he has seen in the two years he has been here. A career soldier, he has already decided to stay here until the Americans leave.

▣ **SERGEANT PALEY CHECKING TANK TREADS**

**Commentator:**

His second-in-command is Sergeant Carl W. Paley, a 26-year-old bachelor from Stockton, California, where he was general manager of a local radio station owned by his father. Like Captain Robinson, he has had almost no contact with the ordinary people of this country. To him they form a grey background of blurred faces - girls he meets in the bars outside the base camps, old men who clean out the barracks or serve as waiters in the sergeants' mess. Apart from the prostitutes, the only young English people he will see are likely to be in the sights of his guns. Last month Alpha Company was involved in a major action in which over 250 enemy soldiers were killed, a third of them women auxiliaries. But to Sergeant Paley they are merely 'Charlie' - a blanket term carried over from Viet Nam, or 'the gooks'.

▣ **TANK ENGINE STARTS UP**

American soldiers climb aboard, the British form up into a column behind it.

**Commentator:**



As for the British troops who will go with them - like all the Americans here, Sergeant Paley holds them in little more than contempt. Underfed and ill-equipped, the British troops have to provide their own food and bedding. During the next six hours the Americans will ride to the battlefield on their tank. The thirty British will walk. Mostly men in their forties, with a few younger men drafted from the penal battalions, they represent the residue of the armies conscripted by the government three years ago, armies now decimated by casualties and desertions.

#### ▣ MAJOR CLEAVER

A thick-set man with British army moustache climbs on to the tank beside Captain Robinson. He wears American boots, fawn trousers, brown leather jacket and carries US Army revolver.

##### **Commentator:**

The only Britisher whom the Americans pay any attention is Major Cleaver, the District Administrator who will be in charge of the pacified village. A former regular army officer, Major Cleaver is one of several thousand DAs sent out by the British government to run the civil administration of the recaptured areas. Part political commissar, part judge and jury, Major Cleaver will literally have the power of life and death over the people living under his rule, a power that he and his fellow DAs have been quick to exercise in the past.

#### ▣ THE CONVOY MOVES OFF

The infantry spread out ahead and to the side of the tank. They follow a road through wooded terrain with meadows and abandoned farms on either side. Now and then there is a halt as the tank is brought up.

##### **Captain Robinson:**

Helicopters are the thing that's happening these days. You can get in there real fast with heavy suppressive fire, and if you need to be pulled out you can get out real fast.

##### **Sergeant Paley:**

It's definitely the way to fight a ground war.

##### **Commentator:**

But for Bravo and Charley Companies, who are supposed to be going in by helicopter, today is not the day for fighting a war. The weather in the target area has closed in, and the helicopters have returned to base. Alpha Company gets ready to move on alone, every man here hoping that the weather will clear.

**Sergeant Paley:**

This country, weather's the main thing. It rains a lot and you're very wet most of the time, but you know as a soldier you can't ask for a certain territory to fight on because you just have to make the best of what terrain you have.

**Commentator:**

Sergeant, what do you think of the chances of peace here?

**Sergeant Paley:**

Well, I think they're... I don't know, as I see it as long as Charley's got a weapon and some ammo and using it he's not going to give up. I think he's pretty much got his heart in it, giving his own people a hard time here.

**Commentator:**

Tell me sergeant, why are you in England?

**Sergeant Paley:**

Why am I in England? Well, curiosity, I guess. I just wanted to know what the war was like.

**Commentator:**

What is the war like?

**Sergeant Paley:**

Well, it's all right, I guess. For a year I'd say it's a good experience. You really learn a lot from it.

**Major Cleaver:**

Naturally one hopes that peace will come to the country as soon as possible. Positions have become very entrenched during the past year, there's a legacy of bitterness on both sides. This is not the kind of civil war that resolves anything.

**Commentator:**

What about the fighting itself? Don't you find it difficult to be shooting at your own people?

**Major Cleaver:**

They're not our own people any longer. This is the whole point of the war. They're the enemy now, and peace isn't going to turn them overnight into our friends.

**Commentator:**

But aren't there a lot of desertions from the army?

**Major Cleaver:**

Not as many as there used to be. Most of them realize that conditions here are a lot better than they are on the other side. The bombing has killed hundreds of thousands of people. Sitting here eating C rations is a lot more comfortable than being boiled alive in napalm.



## THE COLUMN MOVES ON



Slow penetration of forest on either side of the road. We see the tank stuck in a small stream. A long shot of farmland and the motorway on the left, the village to the right. Nothing moves. The camera turns and we see the American and British troops dug in along the edge of the field facing the village. It has been raining but the sky has cleared. Everything is very quiet. Machine-guns and weapons being set up. The tank is hidden in trees. Captain Robinson scans the low sky through binoculars.

### **Commentator:**

Three o'clock the same afternoon. Alpha Company has arrived at its objective. No signs of the helicopters, so Captain Robinson and his men will have to go in alone. How many Liberation Front soldiers are facing us? Perhaps fifty, perhaps a hundred. Will they fight? Or will they fade away into the surrounding countryside, leaving their women and children behind until night comes again?



## THE VILLAGE IS COMING TO LIFE AFTER THE RAIN-STORM

Young men and women appear. They go about their work. A stall is set up and food is distributed. Young mothers in their khaki miniskirts drop their children into the communal creche. Others move towards the fields and farm buildings with rifles over their shoulders. A damp Union Jack is run up on the village flag-pole. Meanwhile, the American and British government forces watch quietly over their gun-sights. Through the zoom lens we focus on individual soldiers, and then on individual villagers in their sights: a young man with a head-band who is the kibbutz leader; his girlfriend with a baby; a coloured girl with a pistol on her waist. The leader speaks through a megaphone, the sounds just carrying across the field. He is making some kind of joke, and everyone in the village laughs.



## THE FIRST FARMERS WALK OUT ACROSS THE FIELD

They are still unaware of the government forces, and carry their rifles slung casually over their shoulders. One of them, a young Pakistani, has spotted something moving across the field. He follows it between the cabbages, then bends down and picks it up. It is an American cigarette pack. Puzzled, he looks up. Ten feet away he sees the barrel of a light machine-gun aimed at him by Sergeant Paley. Crushing the pack in his hand, he opens his mouth to shout.



## CAPTAIN ROBINSON SIGNALS

Sergeant Paley opens fire straight at the young Pakistani. Torn apart, he falls among the cabbages. Massive firing breaks out. The other young men and women in the field are shot down. Mortar fire is directed at the village, the tank lumbers forward, its heavy gun opening fire. Through the long-distance lens we see isolated men and women being shot down, others running for shelter. The food stall is overturned. A barn is burning. Captain Robinson signals again, and the men move forward in a general advance, firing as they go.

The **World in Action** commentator and Major Cleaver move up with them, taking

shelter behind the tank. Counter fire is coming from the village, from a small blockhouse built behind a bicycle shed. Two British soldiers are shot down. In the village now everything is burning. Bodies lie around, there are burning motorcycles and food scattered everywhere.

#### ▣ EVERYTHING IS QUIET

The battle has been over an hour or so. A few fires are still burning, smoke drifting towards the distant motorway. The British government troops break down the doors of the houses. They stare at the lines of bodies, mostly young women and children. Six prisoners have their hands wired together. The remaining villagers are driven out into the field.

#### **2nd Commentator:**

Two hours ago, in the attack on this small village beside the M4, the **World in Action** commentator was killed. As he followed the first wave of American soldiers he was shot by an unknown enemy sniper and within a few minutes died of his wounds. His report on this war has been shown as he made it.

#### ▣ VILLAGERS SQUATTING IN FIELD

---

GIs prepare demolition charges.

#### **Captain Robinson:**

We're moving them out, just generally get them out of the way. You can bomb their houses flat easier that way without the conscience of the people on your mind. Put them out in the field.

#### ▣ EXPLOSIONS RIP APART VILLAGE BUILDINGS

Close-up of bodies of rebel soldiers dragged along in mud behind the tank. The column pulls out through the dusk, heading back to Cookham.

#### **Major Cleaver:**

To help another human being out, it's worth the expense and loss of life. It's just that I sometimes wonder whether some of the people that I know who have died knew what they were dying for. That's about the hardest thing to think of, you know. If a man doesn't know why he's dying, it's a bad way to go.