Waugh’s weariness became a Weltschmerz, its literary expression his obituaries of Christian civilization, *Brideshead Revisited* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy. In a *Life* article of 1946, Waugh deployed a telling adjective for the war: “preposterous.” The reality of what came after (*posterus*) had mocked the ideals that had come before (*prae*). In 1939, Guy Crouchback, *Sword of Honour*’s protagonist, has eight years of “shame and loneliness” in self-exile at his family’s *castello* at Santa Dulcina delle Rocce, near Genoa. He has no heir, and his marriage has failed.

War straightens Crouchback’s posture and restores his purpose. The enemy is revealed by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 as “the Modern Age in arms.” Guy takes up the sword and defends the honor of his ancestors. After confessing to the local priest, the modern crusader touches for luck the sword on the effigy of Sir Roger de Waybrook, a Crusader buried in the church at Santa Dulcina delle Rocce: “‘Sir Roger, pray for me,’ he said, ‘and for our endangered kingdom.’”

Sir Roger, we read, never reached the Holy Land. Shipwrecked on a foreign shore, he enlisted with a local baron who promised him onward passage to Jerusalem, but who “led him first against a neighbour, on the walls of whose castle he fell at the moment of victory.” What comes after Crouchback’s vow is a mockery of his ideals. He fails in war as he has failed in love, not for lack of ardor, but because romantic ideals are incompatible with the modern age. Chivalry survives only in effigy, and the chivalrous class—the aristocracy—are found wanting on the battlefield. Crouchback’s name and kingdom survive, but the title of third novel of the sequence makes it clear that, morally speaking, the terms of survival are *Unconditional Surrender*.

“Is there any place that is free from evil?,” Madame Kanyi the Jewish refugee asks in *Unconditional Surrender*, when Guy is serving on a military mission to Yugoslavia in early 1945.

“It seems to me there was a will to war, a death wish, everywhere. Even good men thought their private
honour would be satisfied by war. They could assert their manhood by killing and being killed. They would accept hardships in return for having been selfish and lazy. Danger justified privilege.”

“God forgive me,” Crouchback replies, “I was one of them.” The trilogy that opened with a confession closes with one. His first act is the hopeful intention of a vow of arms; his “last act,” like Sir Roger on the ramparts, is a tragic mockery of good deeds. As a parting gift, Crouchback leaves a pile of American magazines at the Kanyis’ home. Marshal Tito’s militia arrest and execute the Kanyis for holding “a heap of American counter-revolutionary propaganda.” Like Sir Roger, the Kanyis die short of the Holy Land in a world without sanctity. For in total war and under totalitarian ideology, no place and no action can be “free from evil.” Crouchback’s charitable gesture has exposed the Kanyis to the emerging dynamics of the Cold War. Back home, Crouchback is widowed by a flying bomb and left holding the baby, a son fathered by the hairdresser Trimmer, that nemesis of aristocratic values. For failing to die honorably, and for succeeding in compassion, Crouchback is cuckolded in perpetuity.

The centerpiece of Sword of Honour, and the hinge of Waugh’s own war, is Officers and Gentlemen. The central three chapters describe Crouchback’s “descent into the netherworld of Crete” in late May 1941.

Crouchback is the headquarters’ intelligence officer of a Commando brigade called “Hookforce” after its commander, Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook. Waugh disembarked onto Crete near midnight on June 26, 1941, as the headquarters’ intelligence officer of a Commando brigade called “Layforce” after its commander, Colonel Bob Laycock. Hookforce and Layforce are thrown into lost battles to cover the flight of a broken army. In both fictional and real forces, officers forfeit their claim of privilege by using it to escape danger. In both, the brigade commander and his intelligence officer escape capture as the British and Commonwealth forces surrender.

When Brideshead’s Charles Ryder leaves Sebastian Flyte for the last time in a squalid room in Marrakesh, he feels that he is “leaving part of myself behind.” When Crouchback, “doing a bunk,” flees Crete in a purloined boat, he is “leaving behind part of his manhood.” For Waugh, if not for Ryder, valor was the better part of discretion. “Bloodshed has been avoided at the cost of honor,” he wrote to Laura in September 1940, after his unit of Royal Marines had pulled out of a failed raid on Dakar. As David Pryce-Jones has related, two decades later, Alan Pryce-Jones heard Waugh tell his son Auberon, who had nearly killed himself in an accident while serving as a Blues officer in Cyprus, “It is a soldier’s duty to die for his country.”
Waugh landed on Crete amid catastrophe. The quayside at Souda Bay was burning, and Layforce’s disembarkation was delayed by fleeing troops clambering aboard. A “terrified naval commander” burst into the captain’s cabin, wearing only shorts and greatcoat. “My God, it’s hell,” he said. “We’re pulling out. Look at me, no gear. O My God, it’s hell. Bombs all the time.” Waugh and his fellow officers “took this to be an exceptionally cowardly fellow,” but within a few hours of landing realized that he was “typical of British forces on the island.”

The battle that had begun with German parachute landings on May 20 was turning into a rout. Despite information given to Waugh as he disembarked, German paratroopers had already seized the airfield at Maleme, near Chania, and were now being resupplied and reinforced by the Luftwaffe. The Germans had cut the road that connected Heraklion, Rethymnon, and Chania, the three cities on the northern coast, and had seized British supplies of food and ammunition. They had air superiority, too. As Waugh moved east in search of orders, a “rabble” of exhausted, hungry, and thirsty soldiers flooded in the other direction.

A brave death was Waugh’s ideal. His fearless comportment under fire suggests that he wished to meet it: “May I share your trench?,” he asked a covering Australian private before taking cover from a Stuka raid. But this was not the reality of Layforce’s orders. At dawn on May 27, Laycock and Waugh located Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, the New Zealander commanding the defense of Crete, at his headquarters in a tent near the coastal road. British, Australian, and New Zealander forces were retreating in disarray over the foothills of the White Mountains to the southern port of Hora Sfakion. Layforce was to form part of the rearguard, while the Royal Navy evacuated as many “fighting troops” as possible.

Was this, Laycock asked, to be “a defense to be held to the last man and the last round”? “No, a rearguard,” Freyberg replied. “Withdraw when you are hard pressed.”

But Layforce’s two battalions retreated up the road to Hora Sfakion before they were hard pressed. On May 28, Waugh established Layforce’s headquarters at an inn by a shaded spring at the village of Babali Hani (now Agii Pantes), close to the junction of the coastal road and the mountain road to Hora Sfakion. From this bucolic vantage, Waugh spent the day watching German dive bombers at work to his east: “It was like everything German—overdone.” One of their targets was Layforce’s A Battalion. Its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Felix Colvin, had landed two days before the main body of Layforce to liaise with Layforce’s superior, General Weston of the Royal Marines. Weston was exhausted; when Waugh located him, he was asleep on the floor. Colvin had
cracked up. Waugh found *him* hiding from a bombing raid, “sitting hunched up like a disconsolate ape” beneath a table.

Laycock gave orders for a “timed rearguard action lasting two days,” then went ahead. But that night, Colvin mandated withdrawal: “His battalion was fiercely engaged, he said (this was balls) and, without explaining why he was not with them, he gave us the order to withdraw.” Waugh slogged uphill on foot through the night with the chaos of retreat around him. At dawn, Colvin hid in a storm drain. Waugh pushed on, to a village where a silent Greek girl led him to the corpse of a British soldier. At night, stragglers “emerged from the ditches, like ghosts from their graves, and began silently crawling along towards the coast.”

After a twelve-hour march on the night of May 30, Waugh walked down the Imbros Gorge—“magnificent, narrowing and deepening until it looked like a seventeenth-century baroque landscape”—found Laycock, and then located Freyburg’s headquarters in a cave near the foot of the gorge. “You were the last to come,” Freyberg told Waugh, “so you will be the last to go.”

Shortly afterward, General Weston ordered Layforce to embark only after all “fighting troops” had been embarked, and charged Laycock with surrendering the next morning to the Germans. “Well, gentlemen,” Weston said, as he left for a flying boat to Egypt, “there are one million drachmae in that suitcase, there’s a bottle of gin in the corner, goodbye and good luck.”

Around midnight on May 31, Waugh, Laycock, and one hundred twenty of Layforce’s original eight hundred men were taken onto a British destroyer. Two battalions of “fighting troops” were left behind to be taken prisoner.

The quotations in Waugh’s account are from his “Memorandum on Layforce.” He wrote it in late 1941, for personal use. The narrative and characters are those of Officers and Gentlemen; the non-military phrasing suggests that Waugh had already begun reworking his experiences. As Corporal-Major Ludovic, the dastardly subaltern, reminds us when pondering his novel, The Death Wish, fictional characters are not real people. The key foils to Guy Crouchback’s earnestness arise freely from the Wavian phantasmagoria: Apthorpe, the unprofessional professional soldier in Men at Arms; Ivor Claire, the attractive but delinquent officer in Officers and Gentleman; Ludovic, who “wins the game” of life as a military climber and man of letters in Unconditional Surrender; and “Trimmer” McTavish, the ship’s hairdresser, pseudo-Scotsman, fake hero, and heartless seducer of Guy’s ex-wife Virginia.

Many other characters, especially those from the other ranks, are so composite as to be untraceable, Trimmer among them. Waugh also invents entire episodes, as when Major “Fido” Hound—the fictional Colvin—is discovered by a Cretan shepherd costumed “in the style of Abdul the Damned.” And, of course, Waugh reworks experiences for artistic effect, as when he places the words of a cowardly Presbyterian minister, “They say it’s *sauve qui peut* now,” in the mouth of
Hound. Still, Crouchback’s war is recognizably Waugh’s war in its settings both social and military, in its harrowing passage to disillusionment, and in the spiritual preoccupations that Simon Raven, in a 1964 Spectator review of Waugh’s single-volume revision of the trilogy, summarized as “willful eccentricities which had to do with politics and the Church of Rome.”

The power of Waugh’s trilogy—and the Memorandum’s apparent corroboration of his tale of cowardice and betrayal—has encouraged historians and literary biographers to see Crouchback’s shame as Waugh’s reality. It is, in the sense that Waugh felt ashamed at the conduct of the British officers on Crete and unmanned and dishonorable for the manner of his escape. But new research by Donat Gallagher, an eminent Wavian, suggests that Waugh misunderstood the nature of his military position in his last hours on Crete, and afterwards too. Gallagher also strongly criticizes the standard account of the battle, Antony Beevor’s Crete: The Battle and the Resistance (1991), as well as Beevor’s literary followers, the Waugh biographers, Martin Stannard among them, who have repeated Beevor’s account of Waugh’s chaotic final night on Crete.

Beevor believed that Layforce’s remnant had not received orders to leave Crete. He alleged that Laycock “lied” about this, telling senior colleagues that he had been ordered to get away “early.” At 10:30 p.m. on the night of May 31, Laycock, instead of securing the perimeter until all “fighting troops” were ready to disembark, had “jumped the queue” for disembarkation, by rushing two hundred men to the beach while the perimeter was still under German fire. Half an hour later, in “direct contravention” of orders, Laycock had directed his men onto a landing craft. Beevor accused Waugh of covering up this malpractice—by burning Laycock’s battle diary and masking Laycock’s misconduct, and his part in it, by subsequently contriving a brigade War Diary packed with “distortions of the truth.”

There is no implication that Waugh, like the fictional coward Ivor Claire, abandoned his men or disobeyed orders.
Gallagher undermines most of this account. Beevor, he says, missed a Creforce directive dated May 28, which ordered Layforce to “disengage” and “itself disembark” on the last night of the evacuation. Beevor missed Weston’s War Diary, which lists Layforce among the “fighting forces” to be evacuated. Beevor missed evidence showing that at 6:00 p.m. on the last night, the Royal Navy doubled the number of evacuees from two thousand to four thousand; in the event, its ships carried more than five thousand. Also, Gallagher writes, Beevor mistimed the fighting on the perimeter and underestimated the “turbulence in front of the beach.” The Germans didn’t fight at night, so fighting on the perimeter had stopped around 9:00 p.m. Meanwhile, thousands of stragglers blocked the march of the two “fighting forces” battalions that were scheduled to disembark.

In Gallagher’s assessment, Layforce didn’t reach the shore until midnight, and left as late as 2:30 a.m. Finding that the beach master had already left, Laycock saved as much of his fighting force as he could. There is no implication that Waugh, like the fictional coward Ivor Claire, abandoned his men or disobeyed orders. Indeed, his bravery amid a collapsing defense suggests that he helped save the hundred and twenty men, who, racing against a group of Northumberland Hussars, got on the very last boat to leave. Gallagher’s clarification isolates the facts of the evacuation from their “transforming” in the labyrinth of Waugh’s conscience, where privilege, Waugh felt, had failed to withstand danger.

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