

Nine.

On the early summer evening that immediately preceded the Soviet invasion of Britain, the royal standard was flying over Buckingham Palace, to signify that the monarch, King George VI, was in residence in the heart of London. So too was his wife Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, and their daughters, the 19 years old princess Elizabeth and the 15 years old princess Margaret. On that Saturday evening, the palace was quiet: and beyond the railing that kept the palace from the people, the city was quiet too, for it had barely recovered from the celebrations consequent on the surrender of Germany, and the demobilisation of huge numbers of troops had yet to begin.

By midnight the palace was still quiet, with barely a light to be seen from a window on any floor, and the royal standard was still in place. But sometime during the early hours of the morning there was a sudden blaze of lights in one wing of the building. This lasted for no more than thirty minutes: then, these lights were extinguished and the palace was plunged into darkness. Moments after the lights died the royal standard was lowered, and its pole stood stark against the night sky.

At exactly four o'clock that morning, there was a further burst of extremely unusual activity around the palace. A convoy of vehicles was assembled in great haste, consisting of expensive limousines and a dozen two-ton army trucks with soft canvas tops and hooded headlights. By the lights of these trucks, the convoy was ordered into formation: and at thirty minutes past four, the great gates of the palace were briefly thrown open to let the convoy roar out towards the Victoria memorial and into Constitution Hill.

Later, some people claimed to have seen the convoy pass at high speed up Park Lane, others to have seen it race into the south end of the Edgware road: and certainly, by a little before five, it was in the vicinity of Edgware itself. By then the squads of enemy special forces scattered throughout the city were ready to strike at their targets: some, indeed, had spent the previous night concealed in the vicinity of the palace, and had even seen the convoy assemble and scream out into the streets of the city. But they stuck to their orders; and by the time they went into action, the birds had flown. The question remained, however, as to how far precisely the birds would manage to fly before they were brought down and collected into the custody of these special forces.

By about five thirty in the morning the assaults on the royal palaces and residences was under way. Six units - about sixty men - of very heavily armed assault pioneers in Free Polish uniforms simultaneously blew open the gates of Buckingham Palace and stormed into the grounds. But of the expected opposition from the soldiers supposed to be stationed there, there was none whatsoever. The units smashed their way into the building and shot their way through it: but it was almost entirely empty. A lowly footman was dragged from a cupboard, in which he had taken refuge. He said that the king and his party had fled, not much more than an hour earlier. There had been twenty trucks, perhaps more. They had gone towards Hyde Park - that was all he knew. The footman was shot in the knees, but he could tell them no more. Then he was shot dead. The officer in charge ordered that others be found, who might be persuaded to know more about the missing royals. By now it was very close to six in the morning. Daylight had arrived, though not yet the sun. Aircraft could be heard, many

aircraft. Then the paratroops began to fall into Hyde and Regent's parks: thousands of them, dropped very low and dropped very thick. Soon they were falling all round the palace, in the gardens and throughout Green Park.

By the time of this daybreak, the royal convoy was somewhere in the northern suburbs of London, driving quickly for open countryside. A dozen police motorcyclists, mounted on Royal Enfields, led the procession. Attached to each was a sidecar carrying a soldier armed with a light machine gun. Immediately behind these motor cycles was a black and heavily curtained Rolls Royce, in which the king and the queen were riding along with a pair of equerries, and behind it a curtained Daimler, carrying the royal daughters and a pair of ladies in waiting. A third limousine carried other close attendants of the family. And behind it came a convoy of army trucks, each crammed with soldiers who had been stationed at and around the palace barely an hour earlier.

A few minutes before six the convoy halted, and officers from the trucks conferred urgently with the senior police driver. As they did so the drone of rapidly approaching aircraft could be heard, low in the sky. Moments later a dozen troop-transport planes in RAF livery cruised over the horizon: their doors were open, and in each door a paratroop despatcher stood waiting. Someone said they were Soviet-made planes; someone else said that it must be an exercise, though six on a Sunday morning, in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of Germany, did seem an odd time for such an exercise. Then someone in the third limousine produced flasks and sandwiches, and tea was served to the royal cars, while fuel was siphoned from the tanks of half of the trucks and hoarded in gerry-cans aboard the remaining ten.

At length the convoy drove on, even faster than before. No more aircraft were seen in the morning sky. The sun had risen; it showed every prospect of introducing a fine summer's morning. Beyond Watford the convoy swung north-west, to cut across the Chilterns on the border of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. From time to time the route skirted the line of the Grand Union Canal. Then another squadron of transport aircraft was observed, approaching from the south-east. This time the planes bore the red stars of the Soviet air force. The planes rumbled on, and disappeared towards Bletchley.

On the outskirts of Leighton Buzzard, the police woke a household and asked to use the telephone. The instrument worked perfectly well, but the girls at the local exchange said that the lines to London were down. The people of the house reported that the BBC's morning radio transmissions had unaccountably stopped half an hour earlier. Someone made a joke about Herr Hitler coming back, perhaps by Rolls Royce, but the demeanour of an elderly Guards officer discouraged laughter at this prospect. One of the police outriders suggested that they call at the town's police station. This the convoy did, though it looked a little strange in the early morning sunshine, and some early risers stood at their front-doors and looked on, until the old Guards officer asked them to return to the interiors of their houses, and to promise to have seen nothing untoward.

A single sergeant was to be found in the station. Duffy, his name was, he said. Lost a leg in the last war, so he had spent this latest one as a policeman in Leighton Buzzard. He had been there in the station all night, and was due to go off-duty at eight o'clock. It had been a very quiet night to start with, though there had been a

strange incident round about nine. A weird incident, really, very weird. A landlady in one of the town's little hotels - a bed and breakfast place, basically - had 'phoned the police around about that time. She had once been married to a White Russian before he drank himself to death, and that's how she knew something of the language. She sounded terrified.

She had booked in four lodgers that morning. They had arrived by car, from Scotland they said. They would only be staying one night. They had paid on arrival, wouldn't need breakfast, as they would be moving out at four in the morning. But the mystery was - among themselves they were speaking Russian. She was certain of this. Moving on at four in the morning. Something about an attack in Bletchley - she didn't know any more. Would the police send someone round at once?

And they had too. Sergeant Duffy had cycled round in person. But when he had arrived, the little private hotel was empty. There was no sign of any lodgers, nor of their landlady. They had disappeared into thin air. So he had pedalled back to the station and entered the mystery in the station log. What else could he do?

The rest of the night had been very quiet, very quiet indeed. Until just after six o'clock that morning. Duffy had heard aircraft, quite large numbers of aircraft, in the distance on a number of occasions. That was odd - you never heard planes on a Sunday morning, not even when the war had been at its worst. Then the radio had stopped in the middle of a programme - that had never happened before either.

And then, just a little while ago, there had been a hysterical call from the police in Bletchley - at least, that's who they said they were. The town was under attack by Russians: first small groups in

plain civilian clothes, and then uniformed soldiers were being dropped by parachute outside the town. Sergeant Duffy said the phones had gone dead at that point. Was it possible the chaps in Bletchley were all drunk?

He limped out from behind his station desk and stood on the front-steps of the station. He looked down at the little convoy, with the curtained limousines at its heart. It was quite clear that sergeant Duffy knew exactly who these cars carried.

He said to the elderly Guards officer, 'If I were you, sir, I would keep going north as fast as possible. Keep clear of Bletchley. Keep to the countryside and move quickly. You can always come back slowly. Once everybody knows what's happening'.

Sergeant Duffy saluted smartly as the convoy moved on. Then he was gone from sight. The cars and trucks and motorcyclists sped north, as quickly as they could. Over Bletchley, dozens of planes could be seen circling ominously, and at a very low altitude. But no parachutists were to be seen.

By the evening, the convoy had made it to the border country of England and Scotland. After all, it seemed wiser to put as much distance as possible between itself and London - until, as the sergeant had said, everyone knew what was happening. Driving by back roads had been a slow business, of course, but at least it had ensured no encounter with trouble. Once, the procession was trailed by a light aircraft without markings. But then it went away, as if it had no real interest in the convoy's intentions. Sometimes, in villages and small towns, news would be sought of affairs in the wider country: and though there were some reports of extensive fighting, no clear picture had yet begun to emerge.

During the early afternoon BBC radio transmissions had resumed for some hours. The country seemed to be under some sort of organised attack. But nobody was sure of its purpose or extent. Bands of armed civilians had certainly attacked and murdered senior military and political people during the early hours of the morning. But they had missed the king and queen and their immediate family, and their present location was entirely unknown.

Paratroops had also landed in the central London parks and stormed the royal palaces, according to the BBC. A hundred thousand pounds had been offered as a reward for information leading to the capture of the leading members of the royal family. The traitors - that was how the BBC now described the former fugitives - were believed to have fled the city by car. Any person guilty of harbouring these traitors would be shot at once. Then radio reception across the country went dead again.

Throughout the long hours of flight the royal convoy had grown increasingly smaller as the remaining fuel was transferred to a smaller and smaller number of trucks and cars. By the onset of dusk, at the mouth of some anonymous Borders country valley, the convoy was down to half a dozen trucks and their three limousines. They had driven off the road, down a track to a wood which concealed a derelict mansion-house, a farm steading and a pair of cottages. The wood also half-concealed the convoy.

One of the cottages was without a roof; but the other seemed as if it had been intermittently occupied. A gracious oil-lamp was lit, and then a fire kindled and got going. By their light it was evident that the walls of the room, in the fashion of such humble dwellings, were lined with old newspapers. The king himself squinted at these

old reports: some from the Marne and the Meuse, one even of his own tour of Wales in the terrible 'twenties.

There was only one room furnished, and that only with a pair of armchairs and a short sofa. The fire was built up with coal and the lamp turned low. The royals would sleep where they were: the men not on guard would sleep in the trucks. After all, it was summer. And in the morning, perhaps, it would be clearer to everyone what was going to happen next.

Just after daybreak, the attack began. A single shot from the hills announced the start of it. Half a dozen mortars targetted the trucks and the limousines of the little convoy, which were soon on fire. Men ran for cover, while snipers picked them off. Then a light machine-gun began to fire without mercy into the remainder. In the confusion, troopers in American battle-dress took possession of the house where the royals sheltered. By the time they were dragged out, the little show of resistance had finished. A young and very pretty lady-in-waiting was stripped naked, but an officer screamed refusal, and the girl was bayoneted. Two other royal attendants were thrown against a wall and shot, while the wounded soldiers and policemen of the convoy were shot where they lay. The sun was rising when the royals were taken to the mansion. Someone said there was a basement in the building. Someone else said that in that case the prisoners were to be taken to the basement. It would not take long.

That afternoon BBC radio transmissions began again, with light dance music on all frequencies. At six o'clock the news reported that the previous government had sued for peace and had accepted the authority of the new order. Any person or persons refusing to accept this new authority could expect no mercy under

the Martial Law Code. The Code, and its associated penalties, had been proclaimed at lunchtime by what the BBC called the Provisional Liberation Authority. The Authority had assumed the mantle of the former Privy Council, many of whose members were already co-operating with the arrangements newly in hand, in the cause of good governance. Until further notice, the Authority would represent supreme constitutional authority in the land, and the existing government would be directly responsible to it.

There was no reference to King George VI or his family, or to the reward which had been so recently offered for the capture of the king. To all intents and purposes, the British royal family no longer existed.