Voiceover: This program is sponsored by Colonel Illinois Jennifer N. Pritzker, Illinois National Guard Retired.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is Pritzker Military Presents.

Clarke: Welcome to a special episode of Pritzker Military Presents with British historian Sir Alistair Horne, a recipient of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library’s 2016 Founders Literature Award, interviewed by Antony Beevor. I’m your host Ken Clarke, and this program along with more than five hundred others covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. This program was filmed in Alistair Horne’s home near London and features a discussion of Horne’s life, military service, and distinguished career as a historian, journalist, and author along with a variety of subjects ranging from WWI to the present. Antony Beevor is an award winning author, military historian, and veteran who has published several popular histories of the Second World War. Recipient of the 2014 Pritzker Literature Award for a lifetime achievement in military writing, Beevor has written fifteen books, and his works have been translated into over thirty different languages with over six million copies sold worldwide. And now Sir Alistair Horne and Antony Beevor.

Beevor: Hello, I’m Antony Beevor, and it’s a great honor for me to interview Sir Alistair Horne, recipient of the 2016 Pritzker Military Museum and Library Founder’s Literature Award. Sir Alistair was selected by the Museum and Library’s founder Colonel Jennifer N. Pritzker to receive this award for his immense contribution to further the public understanding of military affairs and military history. Sir Alistair was born in 1925 and educated at Le Rosey in Switzerland and Stowe School in England. As a teenager early in WWII he was sent to live in the United States where he attended Millbrook School. On his return to England Horne served in the Royal Air Force in 1943 to 1944 and later as an officer in the Coldstream Guards from 1944 to 1947. Promoted to captain he was attached to the security service MI5 in the Middle East. Sir Alistair worked for British Intelligence in the opening period of the Cold War. He then graduated from Jesus College Cambridge with a master of arts in literature and was a foreign correspondent to the Daily Telegraph in Germany from 1952 to 1955. His strong connections with the United States continued as a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson Institute in Washington D.C. But he is best known for his works of French military history. They include The Price of Glory: Verdun, The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune 1870-71, To Lose a Battle: France 1940, A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962, which was awarded the Wilson Prize for History. This book was recommended by Henry Kissinger to President George W. Bush during the Iraq War and was closely studied by the US army afterwards. Horne has also written several biographies: the two-volume official life of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, three studies of Napoleon, and in collaboration with Viscount Montgomery, the son of the field marshal, Sir Alistair also wrote The Lonely Leader: Monty 1944-45. Nearly fifty years ago, feeling very strongly that the historians of the future needed every encouragement, he set up and endowed the Alistair Horne Fellowship at St. Antony’s College Oxford to advance the research and work of young historians. Sir Alistair was made an honorary fellow at St. Antony’s College and in 1993 he received the degree of Doctor of Literature from the University of Cambridge. A recipient of a number of awards, the Chevalier, the Legion of Honor in France, and commander of the British Empire, Horne was knighted for his work as a historian and for international relations. His most recent book Hubris: The Tragedy of War in the 20th
Century was published last year to great acclaim. At the age of ninety it is a feat which any historian might envy. Sir Alistair, congratulations.

Beevor: Alistair, early in the war when Britain faced invasion, you, like many other teenagers, were sent to the United States. Did this--it must have been an awful wrench at the time, but did this have an influence on you later on you think in terms of your writing or your career?

Horne: Yes, I went under extreme protest from school. I was fourteen. I thought I was ratting on my father who just said, "Go." and I went. And I was extraordinarily lucky. I was blessed by having had a relatively miserable childhood, being an only child without a mother. I found myself in a marvelous family with whom I still keep touch who have really been in one way or another fundamental experience in my life, better-shaping experience.

Beevor: So, love of America very much came from that particular period?

Horne: Absolutely. And continues.

Beevor: Good. Excellent. You've had an extraordinary, varied career, and I must admit I never knew you had been in the Royal Air Force. Do tell me a little bit about your time during the--in the RAF.

Horne: Very few people did know about it. The story is I had a passion from the age of fourteen to fly a Stibilier. As I think many of us did. And I went to the US consulate--British consulate in New York to join up when I was seventeen. And I was very fortunate because the doctor who saw me had obviously had a rather good lunch, and he went out of the room, gave me enough time to memorize the chart. Because my eyes were slightly not quite up to standard. I knew it was such and such. And I was given a dollar to go to Canada and join up. The most exciting moment of my life, as followed by the most devastating moment. After two months training in Canada I though I was god, and by a Canadian doctor turned down, sent back to England in ground crew actually fumigating officers' blankets. This is 1943 so I thought this is no way to fight a war, so a lot of pulling and struggling, and I got out--out of the air force and transferred to the Coldstream Guards. Of course the extraordinary thing looking back on it, you know when you're eighteen you know you're not gonna be killed; it's gonna be somebody else. Otherwise there's wars that wouldn't be fought. But I though--in my mind I didn't know what it would be like to be shot down, or brewed up in a tank. I just really wanted to fight.

Beevor: No, you're absolutely right. I mean, the sense of immortality of youth. I suppose it's as old as war itself.

Horne: It's extraordinary. It's extraordinary. And if it was fought by thirty-year-olds, there wouldn't be any war.

Beevor: I fear you're probably right. Funny enough, Michael Howard said a very similar thing about--

Horne: Did he?

Beevor: --when you are young, I mean it's only because you were stupid and young that you often took such crazy risks as you do in war.

Horne: Yes, yes.

Beevor: And I'm sure there's a lot of truth in that.

Horne: And of course this comes out a lot when you study the career of the armored regiments in Normandy.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: Who have gone all through the desert, and many of them had lost their edge 'cause they had seen what it was like to be blown up in a tank.

Beevor: Yes. They became canny, as it was said, yes.

Horne: Exactly.
Beevor: But tell me, though, about the Coldstream Guards. Did you go through sort of Pirbright and Caterham or officer--officer training unit or--
Horne: The lot.
Beevor: The lot.
Horne: Caterham and Pirbright. Absolute hell, being sent to that. And one could see the point of being marched around a square when you’re gonna be driving a tank.  
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: But it was all to a point. The only one thing I thought was quite utterly useless was learning the Morse code. How many tank commands have ever have time to tap out Mae West?
Beevor: Yes,
Horne: But it was fun, and I enjoyed it. And I don’t think I was a very good officer. But I got out of the--I graduated, can you believe it, on the sixth of August 1945. So after two years of slugging around, that was my war.
Beevor: That was your war.
Horne: It was all over.
Beevor: And by then presumably if you were intended for the guards armor division by then they were in Germany just as occupation troops.
Horne: Well they stood there and wanted to like guards with tanks.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And we were converted. And of course the last thing the commanding officer wanted was a lot of spare, young officers trained in tanks.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And mine kept--took--disliked me. I can't see why. And he used to come in every once in a while--"Say, Horne, I've got an interesting job for you. Military sanitation, how about that?"—soldiers’ VD. And I said no, so I do think that's why he stopped. And one day he came in and said, "Horne, I don’t think you’re up to it, but there's an opening to go to an intelligence course."  And--
Beevor: So that's how you got into military intelligence.
Horne: That is how I left. I hardly saw the regiment again. And I was sent off to the Middle East and then really excited—that was my war, was Palestine.
Beevor: Yes. But that was MI5, but it was this sort of field security, I mean the equivalent to the American counterintelligence corps.
Horne: No, no, no. Very superior to field security. We were the equivalent of the OSS.
Beevor: Oh, really?
Horne: Yes.
Beevor: Well, it's sort of like SOE you mean, or--
Horne: No. OSS was the precursor of the CIA.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And they also had their branch of security.
Beevor: Ah, right.
Horne: And I don’t want to embarrass American listeners, but on the whole we were way ahead, and they learned from us. And we taught them almost everything they knew about intelligence during the war and afterwards. And the CIA came along and took over.
Beevor: So where were you when you say you were in the Middle East carrying out field security—I mean, sorry, carrying out--
Horne: Field security was done by sergeants. (Chuckles)
Beevor: Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Fine work. What your job obviously was more--but what was your job? Do tell us a little bit about it.
Horne: Well, I can't--a lot of it was deskwork. And it was interesting from a later point of view. It was a lot of analysis and checking up on people and stories. And I had the greatest good fortune. I had the most wonderful boss called Maurice Oldfield.

Beevor: Oh, yes. Indeed, the famous Smiley. The origin of Smiley.

Horne: Smiley. Smiley
Beevor: And John McCarrick.

Horne: And he was. He looked like Smiley. But Maurice had this--he was really an academic, and he had a tutor's mind. And he didn't believe in the sort of principle of intelligence, need to know.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: They were only allowed to know that much. And if he trusted you he told you the whole picture. And it was a wonderful education. And interesting, I think it was my first really brush with history. That's where it all began.

Beevor: But sorry, where exactly were you in the Middle East at this point?

Horne: Between Cairo and Jerusalem.

Beevor: During that period of the British mandate.

Horne: Yes.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: Yes. And we had a horrible period where we had to evacuate Cairo. And we lodged for a short while on the Suez Canal at a place called Fayed, which was quite unpleasant.

Beevor: I can imagine, yes indeed.

Horne: And then I got demobbed in '47, drove myself back with a mate from MI5 all the way back to England, which is exciting.

Beevor: Goodness. Went all the way across Europe, I mean right--

Horne: Across Turkey.

Beevor: Across Turkey.

Horne: Which had no roads. But anyway, that was it. And then I--I was demobbed. Actually demobbed in Palestine. I don't know why, in Jerusalem. And given a wonderful sort of Kibbutz clothes.

Beevor: Those are your civilian clothes. That was the equivalent of the demob suit, was it?

Horne: I wish I had kept them.

Beevor: Oh, goodness yes. But I'm--what intrigues me. Was it the fact of working for such a famous spymaster as Maurice Oldfield, was that what brought you into British intelligence in a more general way later on?

Horne: Yes, we always remained in touch. And strangely enough, Maurice—all of Maurice' so-called young men—my contemps-- subalterns and captains--followed Maurice to MI6.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: That he went to after 5. Except for me. I went to Cambridge and was regarded something as an outcast. But I always kept in touch right to the end of his life, Maurice, did sort of extracurricular jobs for him.

Beevor: Yes, which, can we go into, or--

Horne: Not really.

Beevor: No, not really.

Horne: Not really, no.

Beevor: It's still subject to the official secrets act.

Horne: Well, I have written a little part in my book. Now, what to actually do? But for instance I was a foreign correspondent in Germany, which you'll want to come to that. I did what now today would be considered unspeakable.
Beevor: Using journalism as a cover for intelligence work.
Horne: Exactly, because you see there was a Cold War going on. And it was sort of considered to be your duty if you were asked to do something, you did it. And it was also very--it was (chuckles) a great adjunct to my journalism because I had to pick up all sorts of things that I--
Beevor: Well, yes. Which you couldn't necessarily publish, but at least it was great background information.
Horne: Yes, yes. The sort of thing I think looking back on it, there's a curious correlation between being a spy, a journalist, and a historian.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Basically the whole thing is to ask questions and doubt, be suspicious. And they're very close to each other.
Beevor: Well, very good training in terms of analysis. In terms of--
Horne: Yes, yes.
Beevor: --drafting out the essential, or rather getting rid of the chaff and making sure that you focus on the essential.
Horne: Absolutely, absolutely.
Beevor: Terribly important. But presumably again, that was--was that Maurice Oldfield who, shall we say, got you to do a little bit of extracurricular?
Horne: Yes.
Beevor: Indeed. Well, what a marvelous time you had.
Horne: It was remarkable. I had so regretted that it ended very badly with how he was set up.
Beevor: That's right, yes.
Horne: But, yes it was. And really the extraordinary thing is things seemed to happen by happenstance, they call it in America. You really expected--as Bismarck said, if you have a mantle of God, reach up and grab it.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Never miss an opportunity. That was rather what happened to me all the way through, going from being a spy to a journalist to a historian.
Beevor: Well, you can never predict how careers are gonna turn out.
Horne: No, never. All the subjects you get to write.
Beevor: Yes. Well, I started in the army as a regular officer. I never believed at that stage I was ever gonna be a writer. But it's extraordinary the way that things do evolve.
Horne: Did you think you were gonna be a field marshal?
Beevor: No, I never--I had dreams about sort of, you know, going fairly high and commanding the regiment. I mean, in those days a young subaltern dreamt of commanding the regiment. They didn't think of becoming a general. They didn't work out their career so far ahead.
Horne: Of course the regiment or the brigade in my day was god.
Beevor: Yes. Absolutely
Horne: Absolute god. And--
Beevor: Whether you would have grabbed his mantle or not is a different matter. But (chuckles)--
Horne: I wouldn't have been offered it.
Beevor: No. Now, tell me a little bit more about Germany, because it was such an extraordinary period in the 50s before the Bundesrepublik really developed and during that period of the Cold War. Were you in Bonn or Berlin?
Horne: You're quite right. I was mostly in Bonn. I must tell you how it began. I was brought telegraph in the newsroom, which is absolutely ghastly because you couldn't see across the room 'cause of smoke, and I didn't smoke. And anything to escape. One
day the foreign editor came in and said, "Hands up, anybody who speaks German." Well, I had done German o-levels, so I put up my hand. And amazingly I got the job. And he said, "You've got a hard job ahead because Steve, the principle correspondent is having a nervous breakdown." And my God, he was, too. He was batty as a fruitcake. And I arrived in a great hurry from driving all the way from London in the middle of a crisis. The crisis was the Russians were trying to sort of--you remember the Berlin airlift? Beevor: Yes, they were trying to squeeze--cut off Berlin. Horne: Yes. The threat was they were gonna do a mini-- Beevor: Another one of those. Horne: One of those. So questioning of the Russian broadcasting house of the east west zone. Beevor: Yes. Horne: And so we besieged it. It was a siege within a siege, and I used to go every day to talk to the communist-- Beevor: The German communists were manning it. Horne: Yes. Beevor: Yes. Horne: And ask if he needed sandwiches or anything. And it was those very exciting days. And the interesting thing was the telegraph. If you read it today, I should think that he was from Germany would cover about two inches. Those days, almost every day as they say, you read the paper every day because there's always a struggle--it was all about the struggle for the soul of Germany. Beevor: Yes. Horne: And it could have gone either way. So then I went back to--I was sent to Bonn to run the Bonn office as well while Reggie Stein, my unpleasant boss stayed in Berlin where he had a girlfriend, so he--he's dead, by the way. And I had a free run of West Germany. And one day--it was all quite boring, waste of time. But one day I had an opening and I heard from a French girlfriend. She had a very bad day at the office. I took her out to lunch—you're looking awfully miserable. I said, "What's the matter?" "Oh, my boss, who was a deportee, is absolutely in flames because the Allies, the Anglo Americans, are going to give crook back all his properties." So I thought, wow. And I rushed around, checked up with all the people I could find in the Ally I commission, found it was true, and that was the story really made my name. Beevor: That was quite a scoop, yes. Horne: It was quite a scoop, and also the ramifications; it ran for about a week, always headlines on the front page. And then we have the great thing about the European army. And above all the question whether Germany was going to gain full independence or not. And of course whole battles, really, we wanted German soldiers, which, and-- Beevor: As part of NATO, yes. Horne: As part of NATO, and also as part of the Korean War. We were dead scared, with reason. When I worked in Bonn there's a big bridge there. And the eastern side had a sign on it saying, "No Soviet personnel allowed beyond this sign. And I thought it was a bit of a joke. That was literally all we had. We had normally ten or twelve American divisions, but they were all quite useless, and nobody else. Beevor: Yes. Horne: So that was why we had to have German, a German army. Beevor: And that was the reconstitution of the Bundesfeier. Horne: Exactly. Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And then there's the story of hunting back on war crimes, war criminals who were let out, always under great protest by the Daily Express about it. And I had to deal with that sort of thing and interview old soldiers. So life was very busy.

Beevor: I bet it was.

Horne: I was very lucky to be there. And I wrote a book, my first book, *Back into Power*, which--Times, and that was the poem that got me sacked from the Telegraph roughly. And so I just had to wrap my head start writing books.

Beevor: Well, one always needs a push, and that was definitely your push.

Horne: Who gave you the push?

Beevor: Oh, I--the push came for me when I was writing books after leaving the army, and obviously to survive I needed another job, and I was working in sort of publishing, and eventually they realized that my main interest was getting on with books, and so I was fired but fortunately with enough compensation to keep me going anyway for at least another year or so.

Horne: Did you write a book while you were in the army?

Beevor: Yes, but thank God it was never published.

Horne: Oh, really?

Beevor: No, it was a novel. It was only on--started off--

Horne: It is curious to know, the first thing I wanted to do, even while I was still in the army, was to write a novel. I never have.

Beevor: Well, I think everybody always, that's their dream of writing a novel first. But what I'm very intrigued by though is your connection particularly with United States, because there, at one stage, you went back and you were working for the Woodrow Wilson Institute in Washington D.C. Tell me a little bit about your time in America. This was after Germany obviously.

Horne: Well chronologically, it's rather jumping ahead. It was the Macmillan book.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: And I got a whatchamacallit--

Beevor: Fellowship grant?

Horne: They call it a scholarship.

Beevor: A scholarship, right.

Horne: It's so nice; it's so flattering. To the Woodrow Wilson to explore the American papers of Macmillan. And that was fascinating. I adored America. I saw America as a grownup instead of as a child, as well as what a wonderful country it was, and from the point of view of academia and writing how accessible people are. Many a door in Washington--"Come in", and I've always found that--I love working with Americans. And then I went back there again when I was doing the Kissinger book, that sort of thing, to the Woodrow Wilson.

Beevor: Well, by then you had made many friends of course in the United States--

Horne: Yes I did.

Beevor: --and obviously through them you had met more and more. And so really quite a large network, particularly in the political world of Washington.

Horne: Washington is extraordinary.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: It's always called the government by leak, because everybody talks, which is very nice for us writers.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: I loved it.

Beevor: The dinner party circuit in Washington and the--

Horne: It is my plan very carefully never to spend a moment in summer.

Beevor: No.
Horne: Fall and winter are lovely. Summer, unbelievable, which I think explains why you have such strange acts of government coming out of it. After all it's built as a tropical swamp.

Beevor: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. But I mean America being--and Germany have been sort of two important parts of your life, and yet your major works often were on French military history. So how did your love with France sort of start?

Horne: You’re quite right. Actually it ties in with my work as a foreign correspondent because I used to travel quite often from Bonn to Paris, sometimes with corzet Konrad Adenauer, who incidentally I admired quite hugely. And he used to drive through again and again and again the deadly triangle of Sedan, Battle of Sedan 1870, Verdun 1916, Sedan again in 1940.

Beevor: Yes.

Horne: And I had a great French friend. He's just gonna be a hundred this year. Frances Guerrier, who said if you really want to know the history of Franco German dispute, go to Verdun. So I went to Verdun, and I was completely haunted, captured by the place. And I thought what I would do was write one book with the three battles in it. Of course as always happens, it turned into three substantial books--

Beevor: --books about each of the separate ones. Yes

Horne: About each one, yes. The Price of Glory, For Paris, and To Lose a Battle. Took a long time, about ten years. I don’t know how fast you write, but I find I'm getting slower and slower.

Beevor: I think that's perfectly natural. Funny enough I was talking to a woman, a French economist, last night. And I mentioned that I was going to be seeing you today, and she immediately had huge admiration, because she said, "As soon as I came to England the first books I read were your trilogy on France."

Horne: Really?

Beevor: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

Horne: She probably hated them.

Beevor: No, not at all. No, no, I think she was full of admiration, I can assure you.

Horne: A lot of people say, "How do you get the Legion d'Honneur when you're so beastly about the French?"

Beevor: Well. No, but the French actually can be pretty beastly about themselves. It's true, and I'll say they can be very, very honest.

Horne: I think, I love working in France. Quite different to America, and yet if you haven't pressed my button, magical things happen. Final touch with illustration from The Savage War of Peace, which was in a way an incomplete book because I didn't have access to the Algerians. I wanted to see Ben Bella. I was told, "You can't possibly. He's locked up in the desert; he's had his tongue torn out, so not much good." And it was concentrated all on France, French. And as you know there's a right time and a wrong time to write a book. You may start absolutely the right time. I think I got The Savage War at the right time because there were plenty of survivors, and they all wanted to talk. And the funny thing--although I failed with Algiers for the reason I explained, the funny thing is the French were like sort of candidates for psychologists couch or a priest. They wanted to talk, talk, talk.

Beevor: Well, it had been such a traumatic experience for France. And they wanted to talk with somebody who would be in a way neutral and understanding.

Horne: Absolutely. Well that and I had started off with one of these incredible bits of luck that happen. I knew a lovely French senator whom I had skied with who came from Lalande. He had such a thick accent I could hardly understand a word he said, but he was terribly friendly. He was socialist... and he invited me to the Luxe Manor one day for lunch. I don't know if you've ever had lunch there.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: You have.
Beevor: I have actually.
Horne: Unbelievably sumptuous. And he said, "How's it going?" And I said, "Not very well because I'm working in a ghastly place called Nantes, where all the files are." I held myself from saying it's a ghastly socialist place. He said, "Ah, Degoutant. Degueulasse. Se tres socialiste." (Chuckles) And he said he was number three socialist of the government. He said, looking really miserable, "We can't go on with that. What I'm gonna do is I'm gonna take you out to meet the librarian at the bibliothèque--"
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: "--and every--he'll get any book you want, any paper you want from Nantes to do your work here." Now can you imagine that, being offered to an Englishman--I mean a Frenchman in England? --I don't think so. And to finish the story, he had a marvelous wife who'd be in the resistance. And he knew--put me in touch with all the left-wing people like Guy Mollet, Jacques Soustelle, Mitterrand. And she knew the other side because through her resistance friends, they all gathered in a restaurant in Rue des Barres called l'Ministere, and many of the old resistors had become OAS, anti-De Gaulle, so I had the run of them.
Beevor: The Day of the Jackal, yes, I mean--
Horne: Day of the Jackal, yes.
Beevor: --the attempt to kill De Gaulle and--
Horne: Yes.
Beevor: --and the revolt of the generals, yes.
Beevor: So not only met them all, but you were then able to write about them when you finally finished The Savage War of Peace.
Horne: Yes. I only had one disappointment. Bloody lawyers. I went and had an interview with I think the nastiest man I've ever met, who was a doctor, a Pied-Noir in Algiers, who told me he spent his days tending his, what he called his parishioners, healing them. They had wounds or whatever. And at night, he said, then we got down to work and blow the legs off as many he called them Boudins, as many Algiers as we could. And what a horrible man. I spent a whole evening with him until two in the morning talking about it.
Beevor: And felt sick afterwards.
Horne: I felt sick afterwards, and I wondered if he was gonna kill me. I wrote it up, and then my British publisher sent it to the lawyer, and the lawyer said, "Have you got this written down?" I said, "Yes." "But has he signed it?" "No." So I had to wait 'til he died.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Long time. You've probably had that experience.
Beevor: On the whole I've been remarkably lucky. But anyway. No, I haven't suffered too much in that particular way. But what I'm--I think has been probably often regarded as your most important book, certainly the most influential one in some ways, The Savage War of Peace--I mean, the way Kissinger insisted that George W. Bush should read it during the Iraq War and the way that it was--then became required reading within the US Army.
Horne: Too late, too late, too late.
Beevor: Too late, too late to learn the lessons perhaps.
Horne: I'll tell you who didn't read it, and I --but he said it was his favorite bedside reading, was Ariel Sharon.
Beevor: Oh.
Horne: I know.
Beevor: I was asked to write Sharon's official biography. You can imagine how fast I retreated from that idea.
Horne: Great book.
Beevor: Perhaps, but you know, I-- I would not have been able to deal with the political side of his life at all.
Horne: You couldn't.
Beevor: No. Absolutely. What-- tell me a little bit about visiting Verdun and the affect it had on you.
Horne: The affect was very powerful. I think it moved me more than any book I've written. In fact I'm not ashamed to say I found myself weeping writing it. And such terrible stories, such terrible, useless tragedy. And one thing that reminded me quite recently I went there again, and I visited a German cemetery where they have all these black, real somber tombs. And there among all the crosses were quite a substantial sprinkling of Stars of David, and I thought, "This is 1916. Twenty years later, Kristallnacht." How could it have happened? How could it have turned around? And what a tragedy for these loyal, patriotic Germans whose family had risked their lives in Verdun to be treated like this by Hitler. Anyway, it's just one of the many--
Beevor: The madness of racial theories.
Horne: Madness. I also had a--the only time I've seen a ghost, well collective ghost, I had very good maps that the French army supplied me with based on the maps of 1918. What they didn't show were the trees they had planted in the meantime, so in a way they were quite useless. And one day I got horribly lost in those trees, and I started to panic. I thought I heard ghosts. And I had ran and ran and ran in a complete and total panic 'til I found my car miles away. But I've never had that anywhere else.
Beevor: But when one thinks of the numbers who've died on those battlefields, it does somehow leave some sort of spirit. I mean, when I was a young officer in Germany with Belsen concentration camp next door to our camp, what we found was when exercising the polo ponies in the morning they wouldn't go anywhere near the camp. They'd shy away. Dogs wouldn't go near the place. And it was said that birds wouldn't even fly over. Horne: Well that was the thing about Verdun. Certainly when I wrote the book there were no birds. And I took a battalion of Coldstreamers once to give them a talk in, oh, 1980 let's say, and one of the major pop tom says, "The funny thing about this: there are no birds here." Now they've come back.
Beevor: They have finally come back.
Horne: This is the interesting thing, that Verdun as you know has become sort of a model to Europe.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Everything is Europe.
Beevor: Yes, it is a sort of liex sacres of memory, yes.
Horne: And the--it was a little chapel which had been demolished and built again called Ferrey. And it was always there, it was Notre Dame de Verdun, and now Notre Dame de l'Europe.
Beevor: Notre Dame de l'Europe.
Horne: It's an accepted thing that Mitterrand and--
Beevor: And Kohl--
Horne: Whoever--and Kohl stand there shaking hands.
Beevor: Well, holding hands even.
Horne: Holding hands.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Very moving. Very moving indeed. And I think that to my mind is one of the reasons why I voted him stay in.
Beevor: Yes. No, it was. It was definitely the symbol of Franco German reconciliation, certainly.
Horne: Yes, and very fundamental.
Beevor: But to go back to France a little bit.
Horne: Yes.
Beevor: When one thinks of, if you like, the great flaws in French history, and these great flaws, which really either stemmed from 1789, the La Guerre Franco-Francais, which is sort of very much that sort of civil war in France, but also the other great flaw surely was Napoleon's obsession or his idea of La Guerre of Glory, which pushed the French army into often wild adventures.
Horne: Hopeless adventures.
Beevor: Hopeless adventures, yes.
Horne: But you see that existed after all way back in history, and it was part of the reason why that idiot Louis Quatorze built Versailles. I always felt that the revolution came a hundred years too late. It should have happened--
Beevor: --at the time of Versailles, yes.
Horne: What a monster he was. And certainly it was--it was drilled into every soldier in 1914 La Guerre, what you're there for.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And to extend to 1940, but it didn't work.
Beevor: No, because by then the whole idea of La Guerre was tarnished. And you had the split in French society.
Horne: Well, exactly. That's the other thing.
Beevor: Yes, yes, yes.
Horne: The fundamental split, which goes back to the pre-revolution between them and us.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Between the bourgeois and the sans-culottes. And the really unfair thing about history, whatever revolution they had 1789, 1830, and--
Beevor: 1848.
Horne: Yes. The bourgeois always won.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And the sans-culottes didn't. So then I think that probably still rests today, the fact.
Beevor: There is still resentment.
Horne: You can't get waiters in restaurants.
Beevor: Well I think there are probably greater problems that France is facing in that particular way. But, Alistair, you've also written various biographies too. The official biography of the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.
Horne: Yes.
Beevor: A great figure in the Second World War as well as the prime minister trying to put Britain back together again after the serious crisis, and very close relationship with JFK.
Horne: And a very brave man in the Somme.
Beevor: And a very brave man in the First--in grenadier in the guards in the First World War, absolutely. But also you've written about Montgomery with his son Monty, The Lonely Leader and several books on Napoleon. Do you find writing biographies very, very different to writing the other works of history that you've worked on?
Horne: Well it's a very good question. Yes and no, because in fact all history is just a concatenation of biographies. I loved writing--I think when I was doing Verdun, I found
myself fascinated by about writing about Joffre and Castelnau and Haig and those people. And I think that that's what made--really is that history should be people.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And one of the things I learned in Millbrook School in New York that I'm greatly indebted to, I had a wonderful teacher called Henry Callan, long since dead, who taught American history. I did English history in school, and it's just about a lot of incredibly boring kings. And I didn't want to go. Now Henry Callan made us read The Civil War, the first thing I'd learned about the Civil War. But somehow he made those old--they weren't so old, come to think of it. Stonewall Jackson, Norman Smear--and Lee, they came out of sort of figures.
Beevor: These great characters, yes.
Horne: And I thought, well this is sort of a new look at history. I since then spent some time exploring the Civil War battlefields long before it suddenly became popular by Bruce Catton I suppose. But I sometimes wish I had been able to contribute. But so much has been written about it. But the interesting thing was the little I had learned from my American school history of the Civil War made me realize at any age why didn't they teach this--in 1914?
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Why didn't the British learn? They're so bloody arrogant, the British Army. If only they had any idea of the sunken land at Antietam and what infantry with muskets and rifles could do to a large force of people.
Beevor: No, you're absolutely right, and I'm afraid we had a similar problem in the Second World War where, you know, the British felt that they knew all the ropes and that the Americans were sort of--how green is our Ally, was the joke at the time. And the idea that sort of, we will teach them how to fight the war. But of course it was the Americans who learned far more rapidly than we did.
Horne: They did learn rapidly. They learned from our mistakes.
Beevor: Churchill rather unfairly said of the Americans, you know, they always arrive at the right solution at the end having tried everything else first, and I think that was slightly unfair but it's actually--as I say, the Americans did learn rather more rapidly.
Horne: One thing they didn't learn about, but you must have been--were you in tanks or armored cars?
Beevor: Tanks.
Horne: Tanks. What kind?
Beevor: Chieftains.
Horne: Ah. What I find absolutely appalling, and I constantly want to write it, but I wrote about it in the Monty book--why was it that we couldn't produce a decent tank between the Americans and ourselves?
Beevor: Right until the end war.
Horne: Right until the end of the war, yes.
Beevor: The Comet was the first decent tank, which had been produced, yes.
Horne: Yes.
Beevor: I fear I can understand from the British point of view, and that was of course in 1940 after Dunkirk having lost all the equipment, all they could do was to go on producing the same kit that had been produced before. But I'm afraid this was also I think a question of design, the way the chief--the best designers were interested in the air force or of course naval designers. And I'm afraid the army always got the last--the last of the--
Horne: You know, the designers and designers, the Sherman was the most ghastly tank. I had just trained in it. Fortunately I wasn't in one under fire. I would have gotten out in a great hurry.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: They're always there as the Ronson,
Beevor: That's right.
Horne: With one flick of their light.
Beevor: Well, the Germans called them Tommy Cookers.
Horne: Tommy Cooker. But Ronson was the--Sherman was thrown together with bits of agricultural material Americans had in stock and with a French First World War gun on it, 75. And they--for an instant they were queen of the battle at Alamein. But why did they never develop the Sherman from the eighteen months they had between then and D-Day?
Beevor: No. You're right, they didn't. Eisenhower to his credit was furious about this, and actually he did much more. I'm afraid Montgomery tended to sit on the tank people who shouting that they needed better tanks. And he said, "No, no, no. We can't undermine confidence in our material." So he didn't I'm afraid support--
Horne: I think that we may come--I think it was Monty who actually pushed for the Firefly, which was a--
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: --a British Sherman with a 17 pounder on it.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: Americans didn't.
Beevor: Well they did eventually when they brought in the Jackson, which was--which brought in a similar gun, and they outgunned the Sherman. But anyway I think this is all getting very, very technical, but it's fascinating.
Horne: (Laughing) It was interesting. Fascinating to do the book on Monty, because this funny little old man. He moved his headquarters probably twenty-seven times from May onwards. And-- which is both his making and his failing because he believed in being, from Rommel, up to the front with the troops, which meant that he wasn't--didn't have a link to the back.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And so--and Eisenhower did. I think that was the fundamental failure of one of Monty's many failures was, too much up front and too little behind.
Beevor: Well, also he was shall we say not very generous with information about what he was up to and what he was doing.
Horne: No.
Beevor: He hardly ever visited Eisenhower.
Horne: No.
Beevor: And he was never in touch really with Bradley during that particular period.
Horne: No, no.
Beevor: So should we say Allied cooperation was not quite perhaps up to--
Horne: No, it wasn't. It wasn't. I have to say it's extraordinary how reputations get chewed over and over and over. I think Bradley goes down in my estimation, everything I read about him now. Patton goes up. Monty goes up a bit. (Laughs)
Beevor: Well, I think we might agree to disagree, but anyway that we'll finally see it. But one of the things I very much wanted to talk about was nearly fifty years ago you set up the Alistair Horne Fellowship at St. Antony's College Oxford. And I'd be very interested in what, A, inspired the whole idea, but also what you were looking for in those you chose to bring on as historians in the future.
Horne: well I'm so glad you asked that because actually looking back on my misspent life, the thing I'm most proud of. And it started out in '69. I wanted--I thought it was totally latent that it was nearly impossible for a young man to get a first foot on the ladder, but to be able to afford to get the first foot on the ladder. And affording meant time or money.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And I tried around several places. I tried my college at Cambridge, Jesus. No. No luck. I wrote to all sorts of people including of course the Sir Michael Howard. Michael came up—and then eventually John Bayley who had been very kind giving me the Hawthornden Prize. And between them they said, "I can't think of anything, but there is an inspired, rather eccentric don at Oxford who might be interested, Raymond Carr.
Beevor: (Chuckling) Yes.
Horne: Did you know him?
Beevor: Yes, indeed. God knows. I was a huge admirer. He was such a delightful man.
Horne: He was a delightful man. He was very eccentric.
Beevor: Very eccentric.
Horne: In the nicest possible way. He immediately took up with the idea, and he said, "If you put some money up, I'll get the Fuller Foundation to match it."
Beevor: That was brilliant.
Horne: So I put up what at the time seemed a colossal sum of money: ten grand. And I topped it off with various prizes. But what it's done is to—we have now—it's been going nearly fifty years. And we have one fellow a year to write a specific book. For instance the first one, really the most successful, Norman Davies writing on the Polish Soviet war of the 1920s.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: He really set the model.
Beevor: Well, he set a very high bar.
Horne: A very high bar indeed. And he's still there. And I think we've helped get published over—at least forty books, and some of very high value. Ian Buruma, for instance.
Beevor: Oh, goodness yes.
Horne: Michael Ignatieff. I have a whole other room next door to my own are St. Antony's books. And I did a—at the twenty-fifth anniversary I persuaded the fellows to do a sort of book of essays.
Beevor: Oh, yes. A collection.
Horne: And it's one of the rare things in my life that really actually worked. Because imagine trying to get twenty-five dons to write something when they say they will and delivered on time. We got twenty-four out of twenty-five. And some rather strange ones. There's a marvelous man who was former ambassador in Laos, and he'd come sort of after retirement. All he wanted to do was write books on food. He wrote the definitive—while he was a Horne Fellow, did the definitive book on Atlantic fishes, the edible fishes. I know. You might not think it's very exciting, but it did awfully well. And he came, I'll never forget—Raymond is very eccentric. But he always asked the interviewee, "Do you see yourself using Oxford, and particularly this college?" And Alan Davidson replied, "Oh, I'm glad you asked me that question because actually I was going to ask you a small favor. You see, I live on a barge, and it leaks. Would you mind if I put it up on blocks in the quad?" Well, he didn't get the permission to put the boat in.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: But he got the fellowship, which was worth only about ten pounds a year in those days, plus all the run of St. Antony's. And then late in life I suddenly got an invitation from The Hague. He had been given the Erasmus Prize, 100,000 euros. I thought, well, well done. We've had Michael Howard has always played an influential part in it, and has gone on through three, four awards.
Beevor: And so finally your most recent achievement or most recent book was Hubris, but you start that book with the Battle of Tsushima.
Horne: Yes.
Beevor: Which of course was probably an even greater example of hubris than almost any other with the Russians--
Horne: Also what a tragedy from the Russian point of view. This mad commander Rozhestvensky sailed all the way around the world which was maybe in itself worthy of the Guinness book of world records.
Beevor: In madness, yes.
Horne: Unbelievable. A fleet of fifty battleships only to be sunk in twenty minutes by the Japanese, which had its affect on subsequent history.
Beevor: Well, on the whole Russian revolution, yes.
Horne: And the Japanese thought they were gods.
Beevor: Yes.
Horne: And still do, I think.
Beevor: Well. (Laughs) We will have to see. We'll have to see. Well, Alistair, thank you very much indeed. I mean, it was a fascinating tour de reason of your life and career, many things I didn’t know. And also once again many, many congratulations for the Pritzker Founders Award.
Horne: Thank you so much Antony. It's been a real pleasure talking to you. You made me think about lots of things I hadn’t thought about.
Beevor: Well, that’s why it's fun for historians to talk together.
Horne: Yes, exactly.
Clarke: Thank you to Sir Alistair Horne and Antony Beevor for a brilliant discussion and to Colonel Jennifer N. Pritzker for sponsoring this program. To learn more about the 2016 Founders Literature Award or the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on Pritzker Military Presents.
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