

6. *World War Two*

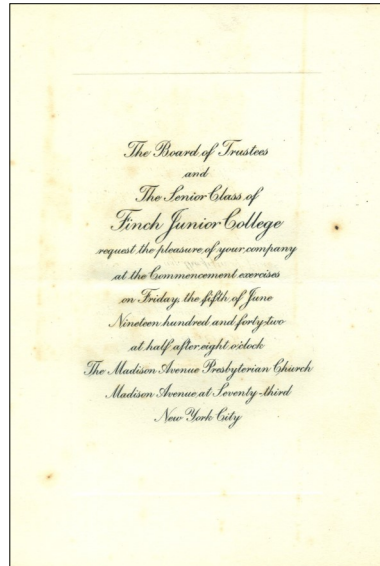
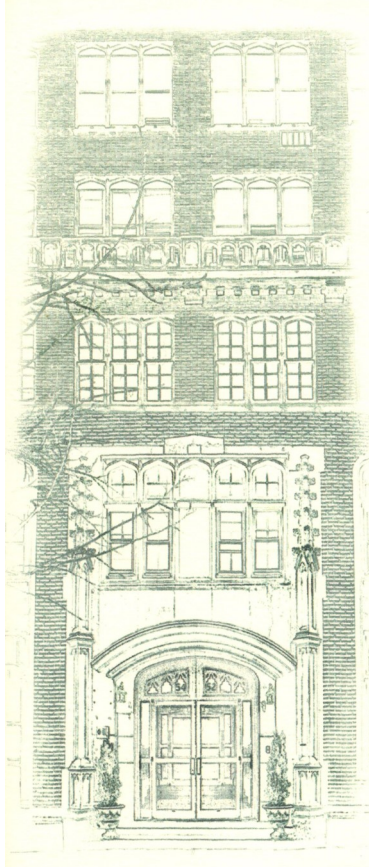
We went back to the States in 1940 because Sir Winston Churchill advised that anybody who had relations in America should take their family over there because of the food shortages at home. My Uncle Cecil (Baker) and his wife Therese were living in the US so I went with my mother and sisters.

I wonder what happened to the other English boys and girls who crossed the Atlantic with us. I made one friend called Donald Gray, always known to us as Dondo. My mother became friends with his mother during the crossing. Dondo remained in New York and became a lifelong family friend over the Atlantic until he died in 1989.

We lived firstly in Princeton in a house next to Professor Einstein. By now I was 18 and my mother decided that I should go to college. She had seen girls slaving over their typewriters and said, "That's not for my daughter".

My School Certificate secured my entry to Finch, a women-only college in New York, and I was awarded a scholarship. My only duties were to show visitors around and do some light office work. I took a two-year course in Business Studies, which included shorthand writing. We were allowed to take one extra course and I chose Music Appreciation which took place in a chilly upstairs studio.

The first year I lived with a family - because the daughters were away at college, there was room for me. It was rather difficult because the parents were having a divorce and the little boy was suffering from that, so I was supposed to look after him. I remember giving him some chocolates on his birthday.



Left: Finch College, NYC

Above: the invitation to Hilary's graduation, 1942

I remember the family with whom I lodged took me to the hairdresser. I was eligible for a reduced rate as a young person, but the style I wanted wasn't suitable for my age. When they looked at my hair they said, "You're not eligible for a cut and blow dry".

Uncle Cecil gave me an allowance of \$50 but it wasn't enough. I had some jewellery I could sell but I had to use a fake name because I didn't want the newspapers to think that the niece of the American Ambassador to the UK was having to sell jewellery.

I became friends with Martha Mason, we did a lot of things together such as walking in Central Park. We ate very good fish because her parents came from Maine. I can remember the lovely colours in Maine when I visited her.

Uncle Cecil gave me a very nice warm fur coat. Therese, his wife, wanted to take out the silk lining before giving it to me, but my uncle said, "You're not to do that, you're to give her the coat as it is". It was a lovely coat, very heavy with big square shoulders, though I'm not sure what the skin was.

We were very lucky in New York as we had no food shortages during the war. We had delicious desserts, such as milk shakes with frothy milk on top.

In June 1942 the city was put on alert for an attack at the same time as we were graduating. We were plunged into darkness and were all given the wrong certificates. I got one for Domestic Science which was the last thing I should have received.

In 2010 I was honoured to receive the Jessica Cosgrave Award for Lifetime Achievement from Finch. A full account of the presentation speech is given at the end of this book. I was also presented with a beautiful crystal rose bowl.

In my time off from college I went out soliciting for donations for the WRVS with a lovely lady called Lily Fleming, who was the Lysterine heiress. Later, she retired to live in Palm Beach and was very kind, entertaining our son Hughie when he first went to live in West Palm.

Lily gave me this beautiful dress of striped velvet in blue and white. Later in the war, when I was back in England, I went down to Lewinnick and wore this dress to dance with my grandfather. He was a very good dancer and we were able to waltz together. I think we even did the rumba - though we couldn't tango.

At the end of the war the American chap who ran Bundles for Britain received a knighthood. Uncle Cecil ran a different organisation, the British War Relief Society. Therese, his wife, was furious that Cecil didn't receive an award, because she was a terrible snob.

John G. Winant

While Hilary was at Finch College, her uncle John Gilbert Winant, was sent by President Roosevelt in March 1941 to serve as US Ambassador in London. It was one of the most challenging tasks any American could have faced at the time and a tribute to the reputation 'John G' had built up as Governor of New Hampshire and, despite his Republican allegiance, as a friend and reforming ally of the Democrat President.

Winant had to replace Joseph Kennedy, who was considered by many British leaders to be an appeaser and Nazi sympathiser and whose tenure had poisoned relations between the two countries. Winant's talent for empathising with working people was exactly what was needed in London during the Blitz. On arrival, his first words were: "I'm very glad to be here. There's no place I'd rather be than in England."

He rapidly endeared himself to the British people as the face of American support and built up a close relationship with Winston Churchill. He refused to use the Ambassador's opulent residence and insisted on taking a small flat near the Embassy in the centre of London, placing himself in harm's way.

Although he still came across as shy and awkward when called upon to speak in public, he was an engaging character, with a record of bravery as a pilot in WW1. He bore a passing resemblance to Abraham Lincoln, whose ideals, he said, had inspired his political life. He remained courageous and during the Blitz would frequently walk the rubble-strewn streets, pausing to offer personal assistance to those who had been victims of the bombing. He often accompanied Churchill on morale-raising visits to some of the worst hit areas.

This determination to share the experience of the poor was an echo of his attitude during the Great Depression when he would walk to his Governor's office at State House in Concord, New Hampshire, talking to desperate people in the streets and handing out money.

His fame then as the youngest and most progressive Governor in the US had led to him becoming a hot tip as a Republican presidential contender. But Winant's support for Roosevelt's New Deal that was designed to counter the worst effects of the Depression meant he eventually forfeited Republican support. The New Deal extended across the country exactly the kind of State Welfare programmes that Winant had first introduced in New Hampshire. Before sending him to London, Roosevelt made him head of the Social Security Board and sent him to Geneva as US Representative to the International Labor Organization.

In London, he found a means and a time to express that belief. But his personal life was less successful. His wife Constance Russell, who came from a wealthy banking family, was a socialite and did not share his zeal for politics and reform. Their relationship was cool. During his tenure in London he is widely reported to have had an affair with Churchill's daughter, Sarah, who eventually rejected him.

After Roosevelt's death, Winant returned to Concord. Feeling excluded from post-war political decision-making, he shot himself on 3 November 1947. Churchill sent 48 yellow roses to his funeral. A lectureship and a professorial post were endowed in his name at Oxford University.



John G. Winant

John G. was not a very good speaker, he couldn't project his voice, but he had very good contacts. One was with the International Labour Organization so he could get support from them for people all over the world.

When John G. walked the streets of London during the war he saw girls who were very poorly clad. He thought that they were in need of money and didn't realise they were prostitutes. He would say, "You must come in out of the cold," and this was rather misunderstood by the public who thought that he was there for other purposes. In many ways he was rather naïve.

My grandmother (Winant) was a difficult old lady and insisted on staying in a very expensive hotel in NYC. When she and John G. came to visit us I was most annoyed because I was sent upstairs and wasn't allowed to participate.

In 1948, Winant Clayton Volunteers was founded, an annual exchange programme for US and British volunteers to support disadvantaged groups in London and NYC. The US volunteers always visited us at Oldfield.

I came back from the US on my own after graduation to join the war effort. My Uncle Cecil had wanted us to stay in New York but Mother decided that she had been let down by one American and she certainly wasn't going to let the same thing happen again. So then, she also returned with my sister Ulie.

I initially joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and was sent for training in Scotland. They wanted me to monitor a lone barrage balloon but I said, "I haven't come all this way back to sit on a beach".

I went down to Lewinnick to see my grandfather who suggested that I join the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). He said, "The only thing you can do is go to London and see if you can get an interview with the head of the WRNS (known as the Big Panda)." That's what I proceeded to do and she said they would send me to Golden Square in Soho for an interview to make sure I was quite healthy and not a security risk. They asked me what skills I had. I replied, "Well, I can read and write". I was accepted and sent to Plymouth to receive training in coding. One night the city was bombed, but I was very lucky because I was in hospital with jaundice, so I escaped.

I was then sent to Alexandria in Egypt, where I was issued with uniform and worked in Signals. Rommel had been defeated at El Alamein in July 1942 and in a second offensive in October and November 1942. The Royal Navy took over control of the port of Alexandria from the Egyptians for the duration of the war, to support operations across the Mediterranean and the land campaign in North Africa.

We went on watch at night, and I took four-letter numbers from ships at sea, but I found that quite difficult because I was on land. I had to guess what it was meant to be. To keep us awake, we had cups of hot chocolate.

At one point I fell ill. I could only eat seafood, nothing with any fat in it. I was sent off to a nursing home in a resort somewhere and it was a wonderful place because you could ski in the morning and have dinner the same day

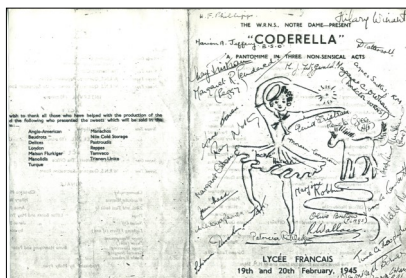
down below on the beach in the heat. When I went on leave I always took some of my rations with me, particularly the sugar – it was not like our pure sugar, they were crystals – we don't have it in England any more.

We had free entry to the sailing club, where I learned to sail, and we were also able to enjoy the swimming pool. Mostly, we had a lovely time, and I made lots of friends.

In the evening you could get out of your uniform and be given a pass to stay out, but you had to be back by 11pm. You'd go dancing in the hotels. I learned to waltz and dance the rumba.

Right: Wrens drama group, the Desert Angels and, below left, the signed programme for *Coderella*

Below right: Hilary and great friend Veronica Bowyer-Smythe

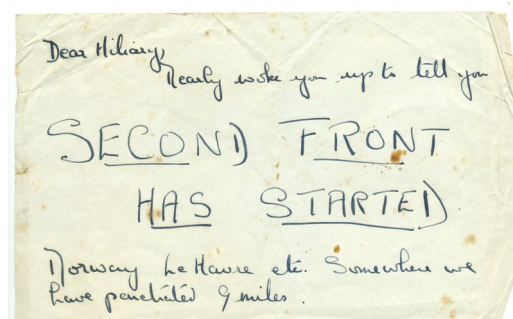




Wrens in uniform: Hilary (left), Veronica Bowyer-Smythe and a Canadian friend

I wasn't always back on time. We'd leave what looked like a body in the bed when we went out and then climb back in through the window.

I remember when you came off duty you were meant to go back in the bus, but I used to prevail upon a sailor to let me share his motorbike. Anyway, when I got back to England I was on the Council and there was a young man I recognised and it turned out to be this one who had given me lifts. He had quite a menial job by then, with a lower ranking than me as an Officer, and he never came to see me again. I was sorry about that.



Hilary kept this note which was left on her bedroom door in Alexandria

My sisters were also active during the war after finishing their schooling. Ulie attended Miss Fine's School in Princeton from which she graduated in June 1942 with A's in everything except PE, and went on to the women-only Smith College, thanks to the generosity of her godmother, Aunt Helen. She spent the last part of the war in the WRNS, shore-based, and was in Plymouth for D-day. She was horrified when any of the girls slept with the Officers.



Ulie at Lewinnick in Wrens uniform

After the war, Ulie may have worked for Churchill's literary agent, certainly she went down to Chartwell to proof-read one of Churchill's books and the family was unimpressed because Clemmie didn't offer her anything to eat!

Val joined the American Red Cross because, having been born in the States, she wasn't eligible to join the British Forces. After the war, when Bay and us girls were all back in London, she became a Blue Badge Guide, showing tourists around London.

Bay, who had also returned to England, was based at Lewinnick, looking after the house and Grandpa (Ganner). American servicemen were based there and used to put on plays on the terrace.



Bay at Lewinnick



Wartime portrait of Val, Ulie and Hilary

We had Italian prisoners of war who worked for us. One charming one called Ofilio was lucky because he had the room with the boiler. We were very fond of him and at the end of the war he came to say goodbye to us and said, "Do you want to examine my luggage?" And we replied, "No, Ofilio, you've been like one of the family."

My father Clinton had remained in Paris with Ninette and her three children, Patrick, Josette and Claudine, at the start of the war. The German invasion of France took place between 10 May and 25 June 1940 and the Nazis took control of Paris.

Clinton enlisted early in the war in the French Foreign Legion (FFL). He told my younger half-brother Clint that he had retreated with them to Marseille, where his unit was disbanded because there were so many German deserters and ex-cons, and they knew that they would be shot if the Nazis caught up with them. All the records were destroyed in the face of the advancing enemy. My father explained that he was relieved by the destruction, because in those days one could lose one's US citizenship if one had served under a foreign flag.

Anyway, the Nazis became aware of Clinton's presence in Paris, perhaps because of the high profile of his brother, John G, in London. Soon after the Americans entered the war in 1942, the Germans came round to visit him and invited him to make propaganda broadcasts on behalf of the Nazis.

Clinton, who was immediately aware of the danger to him and his family if he declined, quickly packed up and prepared to leave Paris. He, Ninette, Patrick and Josette fled south by train and were taken across the border to Switzerland by a farmer whose land was divided by the border. They made it safely to Geneva and then Claudine's maternal grandfather put her on a Red Cross train to rejoin her mother.

Clinton travelled on to Washington DC alone. Once he was settled, Ninette and the three children went to Lisbon and continued from there by the famous Pan Am Seaplane to New York. Arranged by his brother John G, Clinton was given a government job for the duration of the war with the Maritime Commission, whose main job was to oversee the building of the 'Liberty' ships. The job continued after the war's end, probably to oversee the dismantling of those same ships.

My half-brother Clint was born on 18 May 1944 in Washington DC. In 1950, my father, Ninette and their children all returned to Paris where Clint was brought up. Both Clint and I recall that our father was later awarded the Legion d'Honneur for his WW1 service and time in the FFL, and proudly wore the decoration in his lapel.



In 1949, after the death of Frederick Baker, Lewinnick was sold. These pictures, showing elegant rooms and furnishings, appeared in *Country Life* magazine to advertise the sale