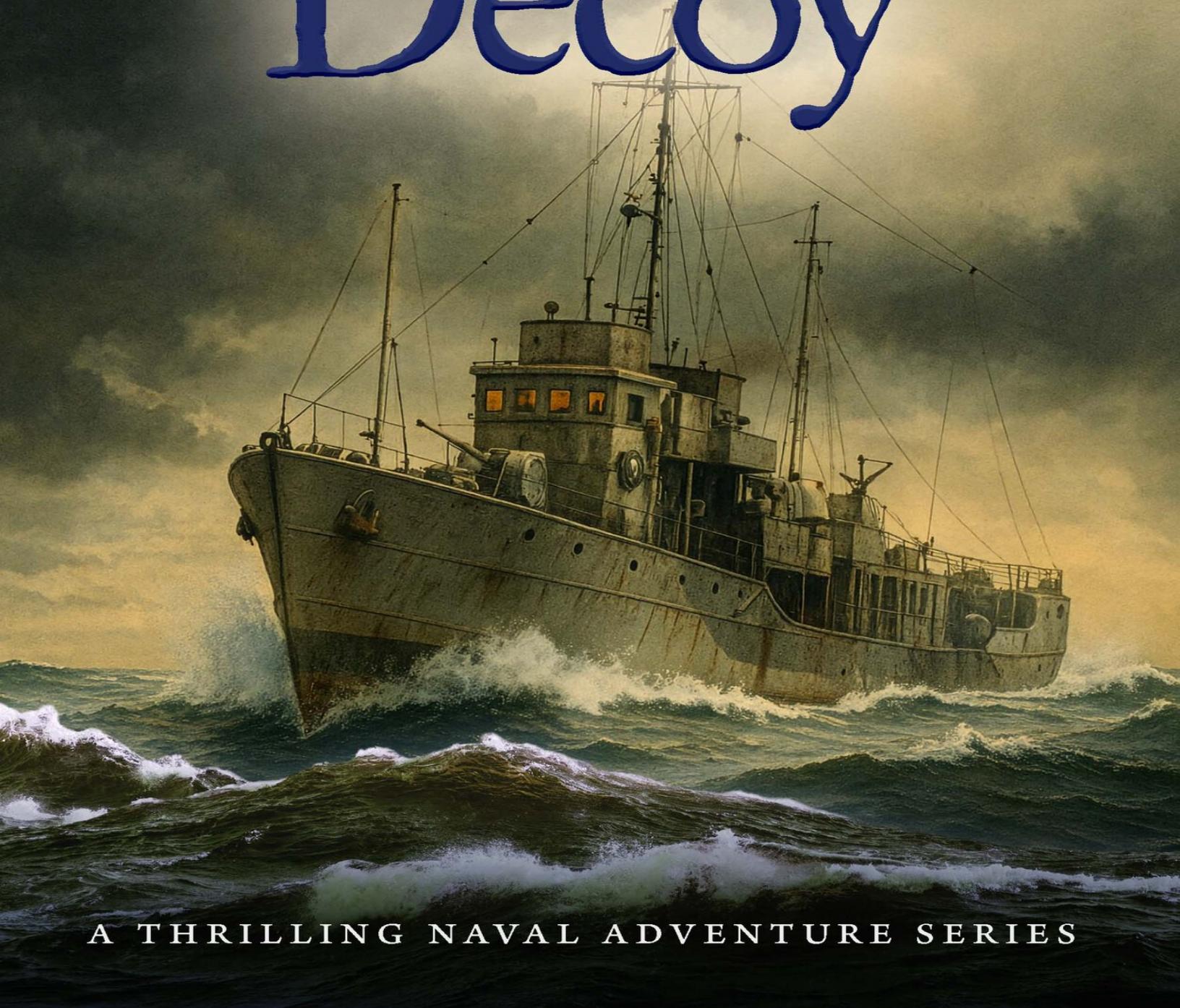


THE DECOY SHIPS, BOOK FOUR

CHRISTOPHER
C. TUBBS

Decoy



A THRILLING NAVAL ADVENTURE SERIES

DECOY

A thrilling historical WWII naval adventure

CHRISTOPHER C. TUBBS

The Decoy Ships Book 4



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Love Free Bestselling Fiction?



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This book is dedicated to all those who served in World War 2, especially the brave men and women of the SIS, OSE and MI6. There are few left, but their service will be remembered for ever.

A Note to the Reader

Decoy is a work of fiction set against a historical backdrop. While the narrative features certain well-known figures and events from recorded history, they have been fictionalised for the purposes of compelling storytelling.

Preface

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In the First World War, the Q-ships had limited success, but the same trick did not work in the Second World War. By then, the Germans had learned from their mistakes and their new submarines were faster and more sophisticated than their predecessors.

The Second World War led to a more subtle use of decoy ships, to deliver and support special forces and agents from the Special Intelligence Service (SIS) and Special Operations Executive (SOE). In this conflict, the decoy ships were predominantly fishing boats or old merchant ships, and operational in all theatres of the war.

This book fictionalises those real events. Our hero is an MI6 (SIS) agent, shanghaied into the service in 1941, whom we follow throughout his career. I just want to set your expectations, so I will tell you now that he is no James Bond and there are no super criminals in this tale.

The British and Australians had the commandos and SAS; the Americans had the Rangers. Without the support of the decoy ships, many of those forces' raids would not have happened. MI6 ran the ships and supported the special forces in many ways, including intelligence and delivery of their assets into enemy territory.

I hope you enjoy this book in the spirit in which it was written — as a jolly good yarn.

War Again

Hull, England

October 1938

The newspapers were full of Chamberlain's speech, which had been given outside 10 Downing Street.

My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British prime minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Go home and get a nice quiet sleep.

Tommy Keelson looked up from reading it and snorted. "If that bloody idiot thinks Herr Hitler will stick to the Munich Agreement, he's bloody well fooling himself."

Simone Keelson, his mother, looked at him in dismay. "Now Tommy, I am sure that Mr Chamberlain knows what he is talking about." Her French accent became more pronounced when she was upset. "After all, no one wants another war."

"No, no one does — except Herr Hitler. You mark my words, it will come to war sooner rather than later."

Tommy was a merchant seaman, one of that tough breed of sailors who had started in the trawlers out of Hull and now sailed cargo to the Mediterranean. He was a first mate, qualified as a master, and taking a few days' shore leave while his ship was in dock. That much his mother knew.

What his mother *didn't* know was that Tommy was also a smuggler. His ship, the *Penelope*, had hidden compartments where contraband was concealed and he knew every clandestine landing spot along the French, Spanish and Italian coasts. He had a network of contacts in France, Italy, Spain and all the islands in between, as well as in England. Tommy and his comrades smuggled everything that made a profit: cigarettes, booze, even guns for the Republican element in the Spanish Civil War.

They had been getting away with it for three years, and he figured they had a few more to come. And if war was declared, the profits would just go up and up.

"What do you want for dinner tonight?" his mother asked.

“No need to cook, Mum, I’ll go to Stoby’s and get us fish and chips. I saw old man Stoby bring in a fresh load of cod and haddock first thing this morning.”

“That will be lovely; it is Friday, after all. A nice piece of rock salmon, please, if they have it — or haddock.”

Tommy grinned and went to fetch his coat. His mum was predictable when it came to fish and chips.

Stoby’s was crowded and he joined the line of people waiting to be served. The frier was coal fired and they fried in beef fat — or dripping, as they called it locally — which sent out a delectable aroma.

“Hello, Tommy,” a delightful feminine voice said.

“Hello, Rose,” he said as she came and stood beside him. “Getting your dad his supper?”

Rose was, in his eyes, the prettiest girl in Hull — a redhead with the most attractive freckles. She was five feet three and prettily curvy.

“Yes, I need to get some food into him before he goes to the Trawlers’ Luck.”

Tommy chuckled; the Trawlers’ Luck was the haunt of older fishermen whose time at sea had ended. Full of old men and tall tales. His own preferred pub was the King’s Arms. The beer was better and worth the farthing extra.

“Will you be in the King’s Arms later?” Tommy asked.

She looked at him with promise in her eyes. “I will if you will.”

It was their turn to be served. “Hello, Tommy, what can I get you tonight?” Aldo Stoby said.

“Got any rock?” Tommy asked.

“I do. For your mum?”

“Yes. And haddock for me and whatever Rose wants.”

“You don’t need to do that, Tommy,” Rose protested.

“It’ll buy your dad a couple of extra pints,” he said with a wink.

His order was served up freshly fried, as rock and haddock were cooked to order — unlike cod, which was the most popular fish. It was cheap, too — a penny for a portion of chips and two for the fish if you had cod. Haddock was an extra ha’penny, as was rock.

* * *

After dinner Tommy made his way to the King’s Arms and ordered a pint of best. It was being pulled when Rose walked in. They embraced and

kissed each other on the cheeks.

“What can I get you?” he asked her.

“Gin and tonic, please. Are you home for long?” she said.

“Why, do you miss me?”

“Not really,” she lied with a mischievous look in her eye.

“Pfft, liar!”

Their relationship was one of what you might call *intimate friends*. But that was as far as it went.

* * *

Almost a year later, when war was declared, Tommy was back at sea. They had picked up a load of whisky and cigarettes in England which they took to Sicily. On the return trip they carried wine, which would be smuggled to avoid paying customs charges.

On 22 December 1939, they set out to rendezvous with the fishing boats off Margate. These would bring the cargo into the smaller, unmonitored fishing port for distribution inland.

“Any sign of them?” asked Dick Taylor, the skipper.

“No, they should be here by now.”

Then a lookout called, “Skipper, destroyer!”

* * *

The sleek grey hull of HMS *Warwick*, a First World War W-class destroyer, wore a glistening moustache of bow wave as she closed on the *Penelope*. As she slowed to come alongside, a voice boomed, “Heave to and prepare to be boarded.”

Marines came across in boats and the ship was searched.

“Where is the contraband?” the marine sergeant asked.

Tommy and Dick shrugged. “What contraband? We’re honest sailors.”

The sergeant was not impressed by their profession of innocence. “We will find it even if we have to tear this hulk apart bulkhead by bulkhead.”

The *Penelope*’s officers and crew were uncooperative, to say the least, so the destroyer captain ordered her to be sailed into Chatham. There, a platoon of marine engineers came aboard and tore the ship apart. They found wine, cigarettes, brandy and a case of guns.

* * *

Tommy soon found himself in Gillingham gaol awaiting trial at the assizes along with the rest of the crew. Mr Sutton, his solicitor, came to see

him.

“They have you bang to rights, Tommy. I advise you to plead guilty and take what’s coming to you.”

“How did they know we were bringing a load in?”

“Someone in Margate’s fishing fleet was caught with contraband in his boat and turned king’s evidence to avoid prosecution.”

Tommy shrugged; he would have done the same himself.

The judge was the Right Honourable Smithfield Tizard QC, and he was not known for showing mercy.

“The defendant, Thomas Keelson, has pleaded guilty to smuggling contraband into the United Kingdom. I see he has prior convictions for affray and drunken behaviour.” The judge paused and peered at Tommy over his glasses. “The maximum sentence for this crime is twenty years. However, as you have pleaded guilty and saved the court time, I am sentencing you to fifteen years in Maidstone prison. Take him down.”

Fifteen years! Fifteen fucking years! He’s having a laugh! Tommy silently cursed the judge and all men like him.

Maidstone held a mix of inmates, from petty thieves to murderers. It had a rough reputation but Tommy could hold his own — and after he had proved that, he was left alone by the tough nuts who ruled the place.

But all the same, fifteen years was a long time . . .

* * *

Apart from his mum, who visited once a month, only Rose came to see Tommy in prison. She had moved down to London and joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). She never talked about her work, and all Tommy knew was that she worked in Whitehall somewhere.

By the end of 1940, Tommy had settled into the routine of prison life. He woke up at six, washed, shaved and cleaned out his pot then went to breakfast, which was unvarying in its content of bread and scrambled (reconstituted) eggs. Then he would go to the laundry and work there until lunch, after which he spent an hour in the exercise yard before returning to his cell block. The prison library provided books, and there were classes he could attend. He exercised and boxed to keep fit and even made the prison boxing team, as a middleweight.

* * *

By spring 1941 the war was in full flow. Churchill was now prime minister and Britain's army was regrouping after escaping from France the year before.

"Keelson, you have a visitor," Officer Martlet told him one day, as Tommy finished his lunch.

That's odd, Tommy thought — his mum wasn't due to visit for another week and Rose for at least a fortnight. He put his tray and dirty crockery in the hatch and was led away. He expected to be taken to the usual meeting area, which was a room with desks — the prisoners sat on one side and their visitors the other. However, this time he was shown into a room with a single table.

"Sit there," Martlet told him, pointing to a chair.

Tommy sat — and waited.

Five minutes passed, and he was wondering what was going on, when there was a knock at the door. Martlet opened it and two people walked in. Martlet stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

"Rose!" Tommy exclaimed in surprise.

Rose was in uniform and had entered the room behind a man in the uniform of the Royal Naval Reserve. They sat in the chairs across the table from him. Tommy was confused. *Who is this bloke and why is she with him?*

"Hello, Tommy. I am Captain William Curry of MI6."

Tommy had never heard of MI6. "What's that?"

"The Secret Intelligence Service. We are the nation's foreign intelligence service. We collect and analyse information about our country's enemies."

Tommy looked at Rose. "You work for him?"

She nodded.

"Rose tells me you have extensive contacts in France and Italy and know the coasts of both countries well."

"Yeah, well . . . it was me business until they banged me up in here."

"You speak French and Italian?" Curry asked.

"French like a native and enough Italian to get by on."

Curry looked at him with an expression that was at once calm, assured and calculating. Assessing the man in front of him.

"You pleaded guilty."

“My solicitor said I would get a shorter sentence . . . If you can call fifteen years *short*.”

Curry smiled and took out a pack of Player’s cigarettes. He offered Tommy one. Tommy took it and accepted the proffered light — from a gold Ronson lighter — before Curry lit his own.

Curry blew out smoke.

“I can offer you a way to get out immediately.”

Tommy looked at Rose, who smiled encouragingly.

“What do I have to do?”

Training

1941

Tommy left the prison with Curry — much to the chagrin of the guards, who knew he still had fourteen years to serve. They ignored the taunts from other inmates as they collected Tommy's personal items from his cell. Rose — wisely — waited in the staff car, which was parked outside the prison gates. The admissions and deletions officer, as he was known to the cons, pulled Tommy's box from the store and read out the items one by one as he handed them back.

“One watch, one petrol lighter, a belt, fifteen shillings and six pence in change . . .” and so on.

Tommy changed into his old clothes — their loose fit showing that he had lost weight — gave back the prison overalls and signed the form to say he had received his possessions in good order. He gave the prison officer a hard look, which was returned, then said, “Come on, let's get out of here.”

He led Curry to the exit. They both heard the officer say, “You'll be back. They all come back.”

When Tommy got into the staff car, he was surprised to see Rose in the driving seat. “When did you learn to drive?”

“When I joined up,” Rose replied, looking at him in the mirror.

The Humber Super Snipe's four-litre, straight-six engine roared to life and she smoothly pulled out onto the road and accelerated away.

Tommy had rarely been in a car and had never driven one. The seats were comfortable and the ride smooth. “Where are we going?” he asked as he watched the hedgerows pass.

Curry glanced at him and winked at Rose, whom he caught looking in her mirror again.

“London to start with, then you will go to Gosport for training.”

“What will I be doing?” Tommy asked.

“All will be revealed.”

* * *

They soon reached Westminster and in due course pulled up in front of a large, imposing building on Broadway. It stood out because it had a prominent mansard roof with three rows of dormer windows. A brass

plaque identified it as the offices of the Minimax Fire Extinguisher Company.

Curry led Tommy inside, where they were greeted by a receptionist. Curry signed them in and led Tommy to an ancient lift. They alighted on the fifth floor and Curry led them into an office. It was a dingy room with frosted-glass windows. Curry hung his uniform cap and jacket on a coat stand and slumped into the chair behind a desk.

“Pull up a chair and sit.”

Tommy did as he was told and Curry opened a drawer, taking out a sheet of thick paper which he placed in front of Tommy.

“Read that and sign it.”

Tommy picked it up and read the title: *Official Secrets Act*. He read on and found that if he signed it he became bound by the Act, and if he broke the rules he could be executed or imprisoned for life.

“If I don’t?”

“Then Rose will be disappointed and you will go back to Maidstone.”

Tommy signed and handed the paper back.

“Good, that’s the first step. Now I can tell you that you have just joined the Secret Intelligence Service — otherwise known as MI6. You will be trained and become an operative of the type known as a courier. That is, someone who gets agents into and out of hostile territory and brings their reports back home.”

“Blimey, that’s a change.”

“Not really: you will have a ship to do this, but it will be heavily modified to suit the purpose.”

At this point Rose arrived with a tray, three glasses and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label whisky. She poured three glasses and handed them around.

“Welcome to the club,” she said and raised her glass.

Tommy looked at her in surprise. *She’s in MI6?* He had assumed she was just a driver.

* * *

Tommy was given a rail pass to Gosport and a month’s pay in advance. He would get 13s 6d a day — the same as a lieutenant in the navy. That was more for a day’s work than he had ever earned in his life, and he wondered exactly what he would have to do to earn it.

Curry told him to stay sober and report to Fort Monckton in two days' time . . . which gave him a day and a night with Rose.

* * *

Fort Monckton turned out to be exactly what its name suggested. Built in the 1880s, it was intended for coastal defence and was fully enclosed by a ditch and walls. Bastions marked the corners, and the walls were patrolled by armed soldiers.

Tommy's taxi dropped him off at the road that led to the gate, and he walked towards it with the feeling he was being watched. A small door opened in the bigger gate as he approached, and an army sergeant stepped out holding a clipboard.

“Name?”

“Thomas Keelson.”

The sergeant nodded and marked the paper attached to the clipboard.
“Let me see your orders.”

Tommy looked at him. “I’m not a serviceman; I don’t have any.”

The sergeant looked him up and down. “Show me your identity papers.”

Tommy rolled his eyes and took the papers out of his pocket and handed them over. The sergeant looked them over, then slid them under the clip on his board.

“Go in and report to the office, which is to the right — the grey stone building with a porch.”

Tommy looked at him. “My papers?”

“You will get them back, if you survive.”

* * *

Tommy walked through the gate and found himself in the tunnel of a gatehouse. On the other side was a large open area where military vehicles were parked; nearby were areas of grass, a sizeable barracks that ran along the seaward side and to his right a building that looked like a garage. On that basis, he figured that the building further on to his right was “the office”.

As he walked across the parking area, he noticed a group of men fighting on one of the grassy areas. They were being overseen by a large man who intervened to demonstrate different moves.

He reached the porch of the grey stone building, knocked on the door and stepped in, to find several girls sitting at typewriters. One stood up, then approached him.

“Hello, you must be Thomas.” Tommy was surprised, and it must have shown. “You are the only entrant today. Come this way.”

She set off towards an office at the back of the room. Tommy followed, taking a leisurely look at her backside as it swayed attractively.

“It’s Tommy,” he said.

“What?” she replied, glancing over her shoulder at him.

“My name, it’s Tommy. Only my grandma calls me Thomas.”

She reached the door and knocked before opening it. “Tommy Keelson,” she said to whoever was inside.

A voice said something unintelligible, and she stepped aside and waved Tommy in. She treated him to a grin, and he knew she was looking at his arse as he walked past her.

A man stood up from behind a desk as Tommy came in. “Tommy, pleased to see you. I’m Kim Philby and I run this place.”

Philby had a file on his desk, which he opened before sitting down. “Let me see now . . . father was killed in a fishing accident, mother is alive, living in Hull. Aah, she is originally from Normandy which explains how you are fluent in French. Former fisherman and merchant seaman. Convicted for smuggling and recruited by my old friend Bill.”

He looked Tommy over.

“We are going to train you to be a courier and general operative. You will learn to operate communications equipment, use weapons and engage in unarmed combat. When you leave here in six months’ time you will be prepared for whatever Bill has in mind for you. From now on you will only answer to your cryptonym, which is Edwin.”

Tommy looked a little bemused.

“A crypto-what?”

Philby grinned. “Your codename.”

* * *

Training was intense. Tommy sat through classes that taught him how to encrypt messages, send and receive Morse code and use a radio set. He was taught to drive a car and ride a motorcycle. He learned how to shoot a pistol, how to break it down and maintain it — he was good at that — and how to use various “long” weapons like rifles and machine guns.

Things got more personal when he was taught knife fighting and how to kill with a blade. Unarmed combat was brutally efficient and he learned the hard way — by doing it. The instructor was William Fairburn. He had served as a police officer in Shanghai, where he gained plenty of experience and developed his own fighting style. His body — even the palms of his hands — was covered in scars from knife fights. He had co-designed, with Eric Sykes, a fighting knife that was chosen for use by the British Army.

Tommy had been in knife fights before, but never with intent to kill. Now he learned that to kill with a knife took power, even with a blade that was properly sharpened. To cut a throat took a lot of effort; it was easier to plunge the knife into the side of the neck and rip it out forwards, severing the carotid artery and jugular vein in the same movement. The victim would be dead in around ten seconds.

The last thing Tommy learned was disguise and concealment — how to use dead drops, surveillance and counter-surveillance. At the end of his time, when the instructors deemed him ready to go, he returned to London.

The Sarah

Mid-1941

Tommy returned to Broadway and reported to Bill. Rose was nowhere to be seen.

“How was training?” Bill asked.

“Tough, but interesting,” Tommy said with a smile.

Bill sat back, lit a cigarette and flipped the packet to Tommy, who took one and lit it before tossing the remainder back.

“I want you to find a boat, or even a small ship, that can be used to get agents into and out of occupied territory. It should blend in with the local boats but be ambiguous enough not to get you blown out of the water by our own Coastal Command. You will be spending a fair amount of time in hostile waters.”

“Crew?” Tommy asked.

Bill was ready for that question. “The minimum, and they will have to sign the Act.”

Tommy nodded. “Men I can trust, then — and who can speak French.”

“A mix of languages would be beneficial. Italian, German, French.”

Bill took a moment to study his protégé. Tommy was now confident, relaxed and sure of what he was. Bill decided he was happy with him. His instructors had reported that their new recruit was deadly with a knife, and a crack shot.

“Your boat can be armed for self-defence in case you need to extract yourself from a situation. However, the weapons must be concealed. You will also be fitted out with listening equipment and you will carry cameras.”

Tommy nodded with pursed lips. He had a very good idea of what their missions would be.

* * *

Tommy scoured the ports from Margate to Poole looking for a suitable boat. The problem was that an English-built boat looked like an English boat, and would stand out in France or Italy like a sore thumb. What he sought was a boat built in France or Italy, or even Spain.

He was walking the dock in Poole — dressed in seaman’s gear so as not to stand out — and passing the local fishing fleet when a trawler caught his

eye. It was a German-built trawler that at some time had been registered in Saint Pierre et Miquelon, according to the badly painted-out registration numbers on her deckhouse.

“She’s perfect,” Tommy said to himself. The boat was moored stern on to the dock and he called out to a deckhand, “Is the skipper aboard?”

“Who’s asking?” came the reply in a broad Dorset accent.

“None of your business! Now is he aboard or not?”

“No, he b’aint. You can find him at the George.”

Tommy waved and walked away.

The George was just along from the dock, and he soon found himself within its dim interior. It was smoky and smelled of beer and fried food. A group of men sat together — from their dress, he knew they were skippers.

“Is one of you the skipper of the *Sarah*?”

One of the men, his bluff face lined from the wind and weather, looked up and assessed the intruder. “Who are you?”

Tommy lied easily: “Government shipping inspector. I want to requisition your ship.”

The man looked at him angrily. “And what am I supposed to do for a living after that?”

“Go fishing in a nice new trawler.” Tommy smiled. “You will get at least that in compensation.”

* * *

The *Sarah* was manned by a navy skeleton crew under Tommy’s command and taken to Portsmouth naval base, where she was upgraded by the Vosper shipbuilding company.

Vosper’s first actions were to refurbish the triple-expansion steam engine and change the boiler to one that was oil-fired. There was no point in changing the engine, as she had a displacement hull which set her top speed to nine knots no matter how much power you threw at it. Getting rid of coal meant Tommy was saved at least two crewmen, as the *Sarah* didn’t need stokers — only an engineer.

A new, concealed radio room was installed with a huff-duff (high-frequency direction finder) and sets for listening in on short-wave (SW), medium-wave (MW), high-frequency (HF) and very-high-frequency (VHF) channels. The different antenna for these were mounted in the rigging, and disguised.

Weapons were built in: a 3-inch quick-fire (QF) cannon mounted on a hydraulic lift in the forward hold and a similarly mounted Hotchkiss 13.2-mm heavy machine gun in a false deck box on the roof of the aft deck house. When they were not in use, the guns were hidden by false floors and a catch. When they were put into action, the floor clam-shelled up and dumped any fish into the bottom of the hold. Needless to say, they would normally only carry sufficient fish to cover the false floor. The crew would also have access to a Bren gun and sub-machine guns. They could carry several cases of weapons and several thousand rounds of ammunition in the aft hold.

This meant Tommy needed a pair of good radio men, a first mate, an engineer and assistant, and five crewmen who could also operate the guns.

* * *

The radio men were supplied by MI6. The rest of the crew were men Tommy knew from his smuggling days, all fluent in at least one language in addition to English. They were given a choice between volunteering or being conscripted into the navy. They all volunteered.

All the crew signed the Act. Then Tommy could tell them what they would be doing. And — to a man — they were all for it. They were given basic training and the *Sarah* was ready to go to war by the start of November 1941.

* * *

Their first job was to deliver an agent to Saint Nazaire. He was going there to assess the huge drydock, which was the only non-German drydock big enough for the German battleship *Tirpitz* to be repaired at. The SOE had been asked to blow up the fifty-metre-wide dock gates and were sending their man in to assess what would be needed.

While he was there, Tommy was ordered to contact the local resistance and obtain a detailed map of the town and local docks with the German strong points noted on it.

The agent was delivered to Portsmouth and brought onto the *Sarah* in the dead of night. He was taken below immediately and hidden in the radio room.

“Let go forward, hard to port, ahead dead slow.”

The bow swung away from the dock.

“Stop, let go aft. Ahead slow.”

The *Sarah* worked her way out into Portsmouth harbour, around past HMS *Victory* and out into the Solent. They passed the Isle of Wight to the east, circumnavigating it to end up heading south-west towards Ushant. They would stay in French waters from then on, right down to Saint Nazaire.

Navigating at night was second nature to the crew, who as fishermen would often sail in the dark. Once they were at sea, the agent came up into the wheelhouse.

“How long until we get there?”

“Well, we will push on at full speed, which is nine knots — about ten and a third miles per hour. The trip is around four hundred and thirty miles, so just under two days.”

The agent nodded. He had not given his name, nor had he asked theirs. Tommy told him, “We will arrive at night and drop you off on the beach a mile to the west of the docks. We will return there after two days at two in the morning and — if you don’t show — at the same time for the following three days. After that, we will assume you have been captured and return home. The place is crawling with Germans; it’s heavily patrolled and defended, so be careful.”

* * *

The radio shack, as they called it, was manned twenty-four hours a day. The radio operators constantly swept the airwaves for something interesting to listen to.

“Skipper,” said Ted, the on-duty radio man, “I’ve picked up a transmission from a U-boat. According to the huff-puff it’s dead ahead at about six and a half miles.”

“Thanks,” Tommy replied. That was a nuisance. He checked the chart, noting their present position. They were forty miles north of Roscoff. “Raise the French colours. From now on we are the French trawler *Kergroise*. Change the name plate.”

Tommy went out to the sides of the deckhouse. He moved the covers that hid their French pennant number — AD 134 — and then covered their British pennant number — BT-688. Their change of nationality was complete, and the agent was sent back to the radio shack.

* * *

Forty minutes later, a sleek grey shape emerged from the sea and they were ordered to heave to. Tommy stopped the boat and waited as a rubber dinghy was lowered from the submarine deck and three men rowed across.

A leutnant zur see and two sailors came aboard. All were armed. The leutnant stomped up to the wheelhouse and asked in terrible French: "Who is the captain of this ship?"

Tommy stepped forward with a cigarette hanging from his lips. "That's me."

"Papers."

Tommy handed over their French registration papers and licences.

"You are Captain Le Merk?"

"I am."

The leutnant looked the cabin over and stuck his head into the steps down to the lower deck. He recoiled at the smell of fish. "Ich dachte unser U-boot roch schlecht."

Tommy assumed that he was comparing the stink to his U-boat.

The two German sailors walked the deck, looking at their equipment. One glanced up at the rigging and Tommy held his breath. He looked away, focusing on a coil of rope. Then: "Do you have any fish you can sell us?" the leutnant asked.

"Surely," Tommy said, and turned to Seth, his first mate. "Get the leutnant some cod."

Three large cod were brought up, enough to feed the sub's entire crew. A few francs changed hands and the Germans left.

"I hope it gives them the shits," Seth said.

Tommy snorted a laugh and set the telegraph to ahead full.

* * *

The daylight part of the run was, ironically, the safest part. They could see other ships and avoid them. Likewise, other ships could see them and their flag; as they were in French waters, the only traffic they had to be wary of was British aircraft. However, the Brits were unlikely to attack a French fishing boat, and if they did, Tommy had a recognition signal he could flash to them. Things seemed to be going well, but he was wary of being overconfident, for that could get him killed. He kept his guard up and the lookouts vigilant: today was going to be very nerve-racking.

Saint Nazaire

They reached the entrance to the Loire estuary and travelled past the Phare (Lighthouse) du Grand-Charpentier and into the Channel following another fishing boat. Tommy slowed them to half ahead to stay behind it.

The crew looked as if they were lounging around, relaxing after a long fishing trip, but in fact they were noting every pillbox, gun emplacement and lookout post as they passed.

Tommy knew several people in Saint Nazaire, having done business with them in the past, and intended to look them up while he was there.

As they entered the estuary at dusk, he noticed that there was a lookout post at the old semaphore tower at Chémoulin. A challenge ran up the flagpole. Tommy watched the boat in front of them and copied its reply, putting their own pennant number in place of theirs.

“We need their signal book.”

The agent was in the radio shack with the two operators who were listening in on the German frequencies. All three men spoke German and French. “Any traffic about us?” Tommy asked them via a concealed intercom link.

“Only to report that we are entering the estuary; it was sent in plain language.”

By the time they had got halfway up the estuary, it was fully dark. The moon was already up and there were scudding clouds crossing west to east. Tommy suddenly realised they would be spotted if they stopped to let the agent off at the beach. Not only that, but there were German gun emplacements practically lining the shore. He went down to the radio shack.

“Change of plan. We’ll moor up at the fishing dock and get you ashore there. I’ll come and get you when we’re ready.”

“Is the beach not safe?” the agent asked, perplexed.

Tommy shook his head. “The moon’s bright, and the shore’s crawling with Krauts. Look on the bright side. It will save you a walk.”

* * *

They followed the other fishing boat to a dock in the Brivet tributary. It tied up next to a fish market. Tommy continued up the river a little further,

where he saw that boats were moored side by side rather than being unloaded.

They tied up alongside another trawler, which was on a buoy. It didn't look as if the owner was about to go anywhere anytime soon, and this seemed to be the way it was done here.

"Get the boat around to the side," Tommy told Ted Andrews in hushed tones. He turned to Seth. "I'm going to go ashore and scope it out. If it's clear, I'll come back and get our package. Make sure all the lights are out, but keep the boiler ticking over."

Tommy rowed himself ashore humming a French tune and pulled up at a wooden dock on the western shore. He climbed the slimy steps and tied the boat to a davit. He listened carefully. All he could hear was the normal night sounds of insects.

He walked onto the bank and deliberately lit a cigarette, allowing the flame to show, knowing if there was a German patrol he would be challenged immediately.

Nothing. He climbed back into the boat and rowed back to the *Sarah*.

"All clear, get aboard," he whispered in French.

The agent climbed down and sat in the stern. Tommy pushed them off and retraced his course to the dock. The two men then climbed the steps, pausing and listening intently before they headed towards the town.

* * *

There didn't seem to be a curfew, as lights were burning in the houses and the streetlights were lit. Tommy figured that if there was a bomber raid that would soon change.

"We will stay at the dock for two days pretending to make repairs to our engine. When you return, flash *TZ* on your torch," Tommy told the agent. They continued unchallenged and went their separate ways when they got to the Rue de Trignac.

Tommy's contact lived in a house on the Rue de Pas Nicolas and he made his way there, walking at a steady, normal pace while keeping a lookout for anyone following him.

The house was in the middle of a terrace, typical of one owned by a fisherman. A light burned in a downstairs window. Tommy knocked in a rhythm well used by the smugglers: *rat-a-tat* — *rat-a-tat-tat*.

A face appeared at the window, then someone hurriedly closed the curtains. The door opened and a hand reached out from the dark interior and

pulled him inside.

“Mon Dieu! Tommy! What are you doing here?”

Tommy grinned and embraced the man. “Jean-Pierre! I couldn’t stay away for another moment, I missed your wife’s cooking too much,” Tommy joked.

The wife in question appeared in the doorway and rushed forward to greet him.

“Margo, how are you?”

She insisted on feeding him — he had no intention of refusing anyway, as Margo was a superb cook and her cassoulet was to die for. Once fed, he sat in their living room and nursed a glass of local Loire valley wine.

“How is it here, with the Germans in charge?” Tommy asked.

“It is terrible,” Jean-Pierre replied. “They take all the food for themselves and we have to manage with what is left over. We have turned to smuggling food and wine into Nazaire. We make sure they get all the shitty stuff that is half rotten.”

“Are you aware of any local resistance movements?” Tommy asked.

“There are two. The socialists and the Gaullists. I know the leaders of both.”

Tommy grinned. “Can you introduce me?”

* * *

Didier Lejeune was the leader of the Gaullist resistance. He looked Tommy over.

“What are you?

“A member of the British Secret Intelligence Service. You can call me Edwin.”

The two armed men behind Didier relaxed. Tommy took out a packet of Gauloises and offered the Frenchman one. Then he took one for himself and lit it.

“Why are you here?”

“Because I need your help, naturally.”

“You can get it — for a price,” Lejeune said.

“That’s not very patriotic, but I can live with it. What do you want?”

“Guns and ammunition.”

Tommy laughed. “That is no problem. I have rifles, sub-machine guns, pistols and ammunition in my boat. You deliver what I want, and they are yours.”

“What is it you need?”

“I want a detailed plan of the town and the docks with all the German strong points and barracks highlighted. And I want it in less than two days.”

Didier pursed his lips in thought then smiled gently. “There will be a detailed plan in the office of the town clerk at l’hôtel de ville. We will get a copy and put all the information we have on it.”

Tommy held out his hand and the two shook on their deal.

“That sounds perfect.”

They agreed on how the plan was to be delivered, and Lejeune said they would work out how to get the guns and ammunition off his boat.

* * *

The following two days were tense. The *Sarah*’s crew kept a constant watch while pretending to mend the boat’s engine. The British agent didn’t show on the first night and there was a German patrol along the bank during the day.

On the second night the agent appeared at the gunwale, in a boat rowed by Jean-Pierre.

“I found him at the dock,” Jean-Pierre said. “He was about to shine a torch and there was a German patrol on the other bank.”

The agent harrumphed and climbed aboard. Jean-Pierre climbed up behind him. “Here is the plan,” he said, and handed over a map tube. “Transfer the weapons to that boat’s hold.” He indicated the boat they were moored alongside. “It is owned by one of the Maquis.” Maquis was a generic term for French resistance activists.

Tommy rolled his eyes — all this time they had been tied up alongside a Maquis member’s boat!

The crates were carried across and placed in the forward hold. It was done stealthily at night, with minimal noise, as they were all aware how well sound travelled across water.

That done, they said goodbye to Jean-Pierre and started the journey downriver to the sea.

* * *

“Skipper, there is increased chat on the channels that the German navy use,” reported Gary Stone, one of the radio men.

“Are we mentioned?”

“Not specifically.”

Tommy kept their speed down to half ahead, or four to five knots. Once they exited the Brivet and joined the Loire, they turned on the lights.

Ahead was a jumble of other boats' lights, seemingly dancing above the water. "That looks like the fishing fleet," Seth said.

"Best we join them, then," Tommy said, and rang for full ahead.

They caught up with the fleet and dropped in at the back, reducing speed to match them. They hadn't been with the fleet for more than five minutes when a German motor torpedo boat roared out of the darkness and painted them all with a searchlight.

The schnellboot was thirteen feet shorter than the *Sarah* but very fast and very well armed. The light played on them from stem to stern before moving onto the next boat. Tommy breathed a sigh of relief. The schnellboot stayed with them until the river emptied into the Atlantic, then roared off.

"Jesus, but they must be doing close to forty knots," Seth gasped.

"They aren't hanging around, that's for sure. Let's hope we don't see them on our way back," Tommy said.

The fleet sailed east by south-east towards their fishing grounds. Tommy turned off the lights and turned north-west, ringing up full ahead as he did so.

* * *

After talking with the agent, who had by now introduced himself as Oscar, Tommy decided to steer for Plymouth. There, he and Oscar would go ashore and proceed to London by train. That was at least twice as fast as travelling by sea, and safer. The most important thing was to get their joint intelligence to London.

"Take the *Sarah* to Chatham," he told Seth. "I'll join you there and let you know what's next."

Tommy and Oscar took the train — a first-class compartment — from Plymouth to Paddington. They were both armed. The train took the morning to get them to London, and they entered the building on Broadway together in the early afternoon. Bill Curry welcomed them both with a glass of Johnnie Walker.

"Well, I see that the mission went well," Bill said as he examined the plans and reports. He looked at Oscar. "In your opinion, could the dock gates be destroyed by a team of agents?"

Oscar shook his head. "Absolutely not. They would need to bring in a truckload of explosives and they would never get that past the guards. The dock is absolutely crawling with Germans, including SS. I almost got caught a couple of times."

"Tommy, what about the resistance?"

Tommy also shook his head. "I only contacted the Gaullists, but there's not enough of them to make a raid on their own."

"Right. It is clear that if the powers that be want those dock gates destroyed, the navy or the air force will have to do it."

* * *

Tommy got to spend Christmas with his mother. There was no sign of Rose, and he wondered where she might be. Bill had not mentioned her for some time and Tommy knew that if he asked, Bill would say nothing.

Tommy and his crew had a couple of delivery jobs and a pick-up in the new year, but otherwise spent their time travelling along the French and Dutch coasts, listening in to German transmissions. They were recalled in mid-March 1942. Bill met them at the dock.

"I want you to go back to Saint Nazaire. Be there before the twenty-sixth and on that day find a buoy mid-stream, upriver of the docks. As soon as you hear any explosions or cannon fire, set a beacon on the buoy and head further upstream, as things will get mighty hot anywhere near the docks from then on."

Tommy nodded grimly. "The navy's going for it, then?"

Bill nodded. "Personally, I don't expect many to survive, but see if you can pick any up on your way out afterwards."

* * *

Tommy got the *Sarah* provisioned, brought on extra ammunition and replaced the rifles with Thompson sub-machine guns. They had got hold of M1928A1 versions that could take either the fifty-round drum, the twenty-round box magazine or the new thirty-round box magazine. Tommy liked the thirty-round magazine best, as the drum was heavy and it rattled.

They set off on the twenty-third of March and arrived in the Loire river by the twenty-fifth. The sky was overcast, and they felt their way upriver. They docked in the same place as before.

At 22:00 on the twenty-seventh, Tommy called out, "Cast off ahead slow." He had decided to set the beacon before the river went up in flames.

He steered down the River Brivet into the Loire and found the buoy he had chosen for the beacon. Harry Stepson hung over the side to attach and activate it. The beacon was directional and pointed straight downriver. That done, they headed upstream.

There was a nervous wait until around midnight, when air-raid sirens began to howl. The sky was still overcast, with few breaks in the cloud cover, and only a few bombs fell. In the distance they heard gunfire from the direction of the estuary.

“Jesus Christ! It sounds like someone is getting hell,” Seth exclaimed. It was 01:28. The sound of machine guns and cannon continued until almost dawn, when it finally stopped.

As the sun rose, they could see they weren’t the only fishing boat to have taken refuge upriver. Most of the boats in the fishing fleet were there. The *Sarah* and her crew stayed put, knowing that the Germans would be trigger-happy and on edge now.

Tommy wondered why there had been no large explosion, no sound of something blowing up the dock gates. He had assumed that that would happen soon after the raid. In fact, it was just before midday when the air was rent by the biggest explosion Tommy had ever heard. They felt the shockwave four miles up the Loire.

* * *

The next day, the fishing fleet headed downstream after being told that it was safe to do so. Tommy joined them. The buoy and the beacon had gone — probably detected by the Germans and destroyed. As they passed the docks they saw the stern of an old destroyer in front of the ruined dock gates. The raid had been successful, but at a cost. Wrecks of motor launches littered the river.

“Bugger, did any of them survive?” Seth asked.

Tommy took that as a rhetorical question and didn’t answer. He was looking at a row of bodies laid out on the shore, all dressed in khaki uniforms. A huge price had been paid to close the dock — it had cost many lives, but it would save a hell of a lot more.

Rose

Spring 1942

Tommy did not know it, but Rose spoke French. Her mother had met her father while serving as a nurse in the First World War. He was a French junior infantry officer who had been wounded in one of the many futile attacks on the German lines. His wound was severe enough to get him sent to a hospital in England and, when the war ended, he opted to stay. He looked for and found Irene, and they were married in 1920. He died in 1938, when Rose was eighteen. Tommy had never met him.

When Rose joined the ATS in 1939 at the outbreak of war, MI6 noted the fact that she was a fluent French speaker, and she was recruited and trained as an agent. Her codename was Lisette. She was soon on detachment — MI6 speak for being in France — working for the Special Operations Executive (SOE) F section. Her job was to carry messages from the Deuxième Bureau, the French intelligence service that remained loyal to the Allies, despite being run by the Vichy government.

Now she was in Paris, an employee of the Bureau, carrying intelligence that would ultimately be delivered by courier to Le Havre, where it would be smuggled aboard a fishing boat and carried to England. She had a radio but, as the Germans were adept at tracking transmissions using direction-finding sets, it was only to be used in emergencies.

Today, in the spring of 1942, she visited a café near the Théâtre du Châtelet, sat at a table on the pavement and ordered a coffee. She had a copy of *Le Monde* which she read while she drank. She left it on the table when she had finished; the waiter picked it up when he cleared the table.

“Excuse me, is that today’s paper?” a man asked from another table.

The waiter glanced at the date. “Why yes, it is.”

“May I read it?”

“Of course.”

The paper was handed over.

* * *

Rose had heard about the attack on Saint Nazaire. Even though the Germans claimed it was a failure, she knew that the dock gates had been damaged to such an extent that the dock was rendered useless.

Convinced that the attack must have been supported by French resistance elements, the Gestapo stepped up their counter-intelligence work across France. They suspected the Bureau's sympathies lay with the Allies and Free French — and so it became a focus for their attention. However, they took an unusually hands-off approach and put the Bureau under surveillance rather than raiding it.

Rose avoided making regular intelligence drops, as these would have stood out. She visited the café most days and sometimes enjoyed a croissant with her coffee. Sometimes she also left a paper on the table, sometimes not.

It was a sunny day in June when she noticed a black Citroën parked across the street with two men in it. Both were wearing hats. She tore the front page of her paper from the top down through the title and left it on the table. The café would no longer be used for drops.

A dead drop, a broken-down pipe on the side of a derelict building, was the fallback location and she left a message there for her contact, saying the café had been compromised.

Three days later she was warned by her Bureau boss that she had attracted the attention of the so-called French Gestapo — the Carlingue — who were French auxiliaries. They were asking questions about her and looking into her background.

Deciding to do one last drop, Rose took a message to the dead drop. It was a huge mistake. The Carlingue were following her and arrested her as she made the drop. She was bundled into the back of a black Citroën and taken to their headquarters.

* * *

In early May 1942, Tommy got a message asking him to report to Broadway. He dutifully showed up as requested and entered Bill's office to find Bill there with another man dressed in civilian clothes.

“Edwin, this is Sir Charles Hamblow, head of the SOE.”

Tommy noted the use of his codename and nodded in greeting. Bill looked uncomfortable and Tommy also started to feel uneasy as he detected the tension in the room.

“Rose has been on detachment in Paris working for the SOE,” Bill said.

Tommy went cold and a knot of fear tied itself in his stomach.

“She was captured by the Carlingue a week ago, and is being held at their headquarters.”

Tommy took a long slow breath to calm himself.

“And?”

“I understand that you know her,” Sir Charles said.

Tommy took out his cigarettes and lit one. He was surprised to find his hands were not shaking.

“We both come from Hull.”

“We want you to get her back.”

Tommy treated Sir Charles to a direct look. “Who gets to go with me?”

“Three former French soldiers who are now in the SAS.”

Tommy nodded. “When can they leave?”

* * *

Tommy was briefed on the location of the Carlingue’s headquarters and given what little information there was available on its layout. The three French commandos — who considered themselves to be, above all, fighters for the Free French cause — were tough but so nondescript that out of uniform they would pass unnoticed. Tommy briefed them on the way to Chatham and the *Sarah*.

“We will cross over to Honfleur on the Seine in our fishing boat. It is on the opposite bank to Le Havre, and a lot quieter. We will pick up a full load of fish in Whitstable. When we get to the other side, we will offload that fish into a truck, which will take it to Paris for the fish market. We will go with it.”

“And when we get to Paris?”

“We visit the Carlingue and get Lisette and any other resistance members they have taken.”

“How do we get out?”

“Not by truck. They will be watching the roads and setting up roadblocks. We will go down the river. The *Sarah* will be waiting for us as far up the river as she can get. I have contacts in Paris who will help us.”

* * *

The *Sarah* was ready to sail when they reached her. The commandos stowed their gear and one of them gave Tommy something wrapped in oiled paper. He unwrapped it and looked at the soldier quizzically.

“It’s a suppressor. You screw it on the end of your barrel, and it quietens the gun.”

Tommy took out his Browning Hi-Power and fitted it. It made the gun nose heavy, but he could get used to that. He aimed at a wooden mooring post and fired.

Pop! There was no muzzle flash. The action sliding back and ejecting the cartridge made more noise than the shot had.

They set sail and turned east after exiting the Medway to reach Whitstable, where a load of fish was waiting for them. The fishermen knew there was something odd about the *Sarah* but didn't ask questions — especially as the man who bought the fish paid a premium for them. They did notice that the boxes that the fish were put into were French, which caused an eyebrow or two to be raised.

Loaded up, the *Sarah* wasted no time in heading for Honfleur. Tommy pushed the engine to its maximum, covering the 190 miles in twenty hours. He was worried that Rose had been a prisoner of the Carlingue for long enough that they could have hurt or even killed her by now.

* * *

In Honfleur they were met by a member of the resistance, who had organised a truck for the fish. Suppressed Sten Mk II(S)s were hidden under the fish, wrapped in oiled paper. These simple sub-machine guns had built-in suppressors and fired a 9-mm round at between 500 and 600 rounds per minute. Tommy and his colleagues would need the additional firepower when they got to Paris.

The truck, an old Renault, chugged out of the town and along roads that did not intersect with main highways, to avoid checkpoints. It would take at least four hours to get to Paris, so the men dozed.

Three hours later, Tommy became alert when they entered the suburbs of Paris and a column of German trucks passed them going in the opposite direction. They were forced to pull over by motorcycle outriders to allow the convoy to pass.

One of the commandos swore, but the sergeant told him to hold his tongue. They were too close to the city now. As they approached the centre, more and more German troops could be seen patrolling in squads.

“This is not going to be easy,” Tommy said.

“Mon ami, nobody said it would be.” The sergeant grinned at him.

They arrived at the fish market at midnight; a German soldier waved them in after checking their cargo. They pulled up at a stall and the crates were unloaded. Several were taken into a processing room, where the fish

would be filleted. It was there that their Sten guns were recovered and hidden in shoulder bags.

Tommy and the three Free French commandos were hidden in the back of the truck when it left the market at three in the morning. Their faces were blacked and they wore dark overalls. The guard at the entrance ignored the truck as it rumbled out.

The driver took them east through the city past the Arc de Triomphe. As they reached the junction of Rue Boissière and Rue Lauriston, the men jumped out of the back without waiting for the truck to stop.

Number 93, the headquarters of the Carlingue, was the third building along on Rue Lauriston, and they moved quickly.

There was a *pop* . . . and a streetlight went out. The guard in front of the building looked up to see what had happened. *Pop-pop* — he fell to the ground.

Tommy went to the door and tried the handle; it was not locked. He held up three fingers, then two, then one. At that moment he shoved the door open, and two of the commandos went in fast. Tommy followed with the sergeant.

They eliminated anyone they saw. The Sten guns were quiet but the sound of the shell cases hitting the wooden floor alerted some of the night shift who were on duty.

Tommy opened every door until he found one that led to the cellar. He moved quickly down the steps. A man in a black uniform appeared at the bottom and Tommy gave him a burst from his Sten. The man dropped, a row of holes across his chest. Tommy shot him in the head for good measure as he stepped over him.

In the centre of the cellar room was a chair. It had leather shackles fitted, to restrain whoever sat in it. It was stained with blood. Tommy swallowed his rage.

There were cells along one wall, and each held a person. The sergeant had followed Tommy down and searched the dead Carlingue officer. He tossed Tommy a set of keys.

Tommy quickly unlocked the first cell. It held a man who was bruised and battered from the interrogation techniques of the French Gestapo. Tommy helped him out and passed him to the sergeant. Then he moved to the second cell — and as he unlocked it, he caught a glimpse of red hair. It was Rose, but she was in a bad way. Her face was purple and red with

bruises and her fingers were missing their nails. What other damage had been inflicted upon her he didn't wait to think about; instead he picked her up and carried her out.

One of the commandos came down and took the first prisoner up the steps. The sergeant took the keys and opened the third cell. There was a pause and then a *pop*.

"He was dying, and too broken to move," the sergeant explained. "We need to go. Everything is set."

They went up the stairs. Tommy carried Rose and one of the commandos helped the man. They exited the building into the street and headed south-west to the river. The Eiffel Tower stood out as a landmark to aim for.

An air-raid siren started up and the lights went out. The sound of aircraft passed overhead and searchlights painted the clouds. Tracers swept up and soon there was the rattle of shrapnel landing on the roofs. From behind them came the sound of breaking glass and a column of flame rose into the air, further illuminating the clouds. Bombs fell.

They hurried on until they reached the river at Port Debilly. A man waved from the bank, and they headed straight for him.

"She is fully fuelled," he said and led them down the steps to where a fast river boat was tied up. She must have been owned by someone wealthy, as she was wooden hulled and powered by an onboard engine. The seats were covered in leather.

"Nice," said one of the commandos.

"The owner will not miss it, he is a collaborator and will die," the man said, then spat.

Tommy got Rose into a seat and took the helm. He looked around for a few seconds until he found the starter and pressed it. The engine came to life with a satisfying sound.

"Bonne chance," the man said, and disappeared.

The moorings were loosed and they moved out to the centre of the river. This was the tricky part, as the Seine looped back on itself several times before leaving Paris. Tommy increased speed, staying in the centre of the river, and soon they were making ten knots. Tommy resisted the temptation to go faster as the noise of the engine would certainly attract attention.

They made the first loop, and were passing through Saint-Denis when a soldier on a bridge started shooting at them as they approached. The commandos replied by sending a hail of 9-mm bullets in his direction. The Sten wasn't accurate at range but the amount of lead they delivered was enough to make him duck.

Tommy threw caution to the wind and shoved the throttles all the way to the stops. The boat surged forwards, accelerating to around forty knots and leaving a silver trail behind her. They passed bridge after bridge then saw headlights catching them up on the northern river road. The sun was coming up . . . and the car was catching them.

Tommy glanced across and saw that there was a man with a machine gun leaning out of the rear passenger window. Despite his vehicle doing more than fifty miles an hour, he opened fire.

“Fuck! Shoot that bastard!” Tommy cried as bullets flew over his head.

Two Stens opened up and returned fire. Tommy edged over to the south bank, to open the range as they curved around the sharp right-hand loop at Orgeval. They were out of Paris and in less than an hour would pass Vernon and move into the wider part of the Seine. More bullets were incoming, and the car came right abeam of them. Now all three commandos fired as the boat stabilised in a straight line. The car stuttered and a cloud of steam came from the engine. It slowed and they left it behind.

“Good shooting,” Tommy said.

They passed Vernon and now they only had to worry about the south bank of the river, as the north was heavily wooded. Tommy knew that the Carlingue would have put out an alert by now.

“Edwin, look at this,” the sergeant said.

Tommy glanced back and saw that he was holding a satchel.

“Is that what I think it is?” Tommy shouted over the engine.

“Yes, a satchel charge.”

Tommy thought fast, adrenaline coursing. *We need to make them think we're all dead. Can we do it?*

They were approaching Rouen when he spotted a boat tied up at a dock ahead of them. It was a working boat. He throttled back and pulled up beside it.

“Get into that, leave the charge here. Make your way downriver, keep it slow . . . as if you are just doing a job. Rendezvous with the *Sarah* and tell them to keep an eye open for me in the water.”

Before anyone could ask what he was going to do, he had opened the throttles and left them.

* * *

Tommy pushed the boat to its limit, tearing down the river at a ridiculous speed. He saw and passed the *Sarah* at Jumièges, waving and pointing upriver. Not long after that he was rounding the turn at Port Jérôme and coming up rapidly on Le Havre. He set the boat mid-channel and looked ahead. Two fast, armed motor launches were blocking off the river.

That's why you gave up the land chase, he thought — and pulled the fuse on the satchel charge. He took the mooring rope that was hanging in the cockpit and used it to tie off the wheel, so the boat headed straight for one of the launches.

He waited until the last minute before throwing himself over the side.

* * *

The *Sarah* met the work boat and took the commandos, Rose and the other prisoner aboard, concealing them in the radio shack. Soon after, the commandos became part of the crew.

“Tommy said to wait until dusk to move out of the river.”

They hid among other, similar boats moored along the bank and prepared to wait. Rose and Phillippe, the other prisoner, were made comfortable, and the radio men treated their wounds.

Then there was a loud explosion from downriver.

The sergeant sucked his teeth. “That’ll be the satchel charge.”

The sun was at the horizon when they cast off and chugged down the river at five knots. They passed out of the estuary with no sign of Tommy.

Evasion and Escape

August 1942

Tommy awoke. The satchel charge had gone off earlier than he expected, just as he threw himself over the side. The blast had thrown him some one hundred feet away from the boat and onto a mud bar. He shook his head as he sat up. He was lying on his back on stinking mud which covered him from head to foot.

He rolled to the side and vomited. His head hurt and his ears were ringing. It was dark and he checked his watch: 04:25. The *Sarah* must have gone already. He tried to stand but the mud was too soft, so he rolled onto his belly and started to crawl. He hurt from head to toe, but especially at his right shoulder.

It took him an hour to reach the shore, and he realised he must look an absolute horror. A top-to-toe inventory revealed that his clothes had been shredded and he had numerous small wounds, including a piece of the speedboat embedded in his shoulder. He needed help — fast.

He staggered into the outskirts of the town. The houses were dark and the streets empty. He was aiming for the house of a smuggling contact but was disoriented and none too steady on his feet. He staggered into the porch of what he thought was the correct house and banged on the door. Before anyone came, he fainted.

* * *

He woke to find himself lying face down on what seemed to be a table. He groaned.

“Lie still, I need to get this out of your shoulder,” a man’s voice said.

A sharp pain made him gasp and then he felt the cold edge of a blade. Strong hands held him down.

“That’s got it! A piece of teak, if I’m not mistaken.”

He realised the voice was speaking French.

“Now all I have to do is stitch it up.”

A needle was applied, and Tommy counted seven stitches being put in.

“Done. You can sit him up now.”

Tommy was helped — by the same strong hands — to roll over and sit up. He realised that he was in the kitchen of a house. Then he found himself

looking into the face of his smuggling contact, Raymond Bescond. Someone touched his face and he swivelled his eyes to see another man.

Raymond introduced him. "Tommy, this is Dr Faucher."

The doctor smiled at him. "So far, I have treated the back of your body." He indicated a tray, on which lay one large splinter of wood and half a dozen other smaller ones.

Tommy suddenly realised he was naked.

"Luckily, you were unconscious for most of them. Now all I have to do is treat the abrasions on your front."

Tommy winced as the medic applied an alcohol-laden swab to his forehead.

"It must have been you who blew up the boat on the river," Raymond said.

Tommy resisted the temptation to nod, as the doctor was still treating the wound on his head. "Yes, the charge must have gone off early. To be honest, I don't remember anything after tying off the steering."

Raymond grinned at him. "Well, the debris killed two Germans and the blast seriously damaged two of their boats. They are saying you killed some of those bastards in the Carlingue in Paris and freed some prisoners. They think you all died in the explosion."

Tommy snorted a laugh. "That's a leap — they won't find any of our bodies."

The doctor chipped in: "They do not want to appear inefficient to their German masters. Raise your arm."

Raymond's wife, Manon, came into the kitchen at that point. "Are you almost finished? I need to make breakfast."

Tommy looked down at his nakedness and then at Raymond, a little wide-eyed. Raymond smiled and gave a very Gallic shrug. "Do not worry, she is the one who washed all that mud off you. She has seen everything."

Manon cackled a laugh as she started making coffee.

"All done," Doctor Faucher said.

Raymond helped Tommy down off the table, but his legs buckled. The doctor stepped up to his other side and held him up. "You need rest. You lost a fair amount of blood."

Raymond steered him towards the stairs. "Let's put him to bed, he can eat something there."

* * *

Raymond told Tommy the doctor had stitched up half a dozen wounds, all in his back, and Tommy believed him because they all pulled. The only painkillers he had were some aspirin, so he just had to put up with it. The upside was that Manon was a good cook, and he was fed nourishing food. After three days he felt well enough to get up.

He was sitting at the kitchen table dressed in some of Raymond's old clothes when Raymond rushed in.

"The Germans are making a house-to-house search of the area. Come with me."

Raymond went into the hallway and kicked the skirting board at the same time as pressing on the upper part of the wall. A section opened and Tommy could see stairs leading down into the darkness.

Raymond handed Tommy a torch. "Hide down there. I will fetch you when they are gone."

Tommy went down the stairs by torchlight and found himself in a cellar that was much larger than he expected, given the size of the house. It was full of crates, and he examined a few that were open. Brandy and whisky, cigarettes, tins of peaches. He recognised the whisky as some that he had brought over.

From above he heard banging and a shouted command. The Germans had arrived. More shouting followed; *Christ, can't they do anything quietly?* He perched himself on a crate and dipped into the one beside him for a pack of cigarettes. He put one in his mouth, then stopped. *The Germans might smell it.*

The banging and shouting continued for some time, then ceased. Ten minutes later the door opened and Raymond called to him, "You can come out now."

The house was a mess and Manon was busy putting things back where they belonged.

"I need to get back to England," Tommy said.

Raymond disagreed. "The doctor said you had to wait until the stitches were taken out."

"Well, I can't stay here and put you and Manon at risk."

"Oh, do not worry, they were not looking for you. They were after smuggled goods."

"All the same, I need to get back."

* * *

Shortly after the Germans' visit, Raymond left the house to talk with friends of his in the resistance. When he returned, he told Tommy, "They cannot get you out of Le Havre or any other port on the Loire. The Germans have effectively sealed the river. They want to move you to Calais."

"How are they proposing to do that?"

"You will walk, guided by members of the resistance."

Tommy looked at him with his mouth open. "That is two hundred and fifty kilometres!"

Raymond laughed. "Relax, mon ami. They will take you to the neutral zone and then into Spain."

"Funny, ha-ha!" Tommy snapped, as he realised it was a joke.

Raymond grinned. "You must be ready to leave in two days."

* * *

Tommy was collected by a resistance fighter, who did not give his name, and bundled into the back of a truck. He was hidden under the canvas cover. The truck was stopped twice at checkpoints before they got into the countryside; from what he overheard, he gathered this was a resistance courier service that did a regular run to Paris.

They stopped at Oissel and he was handed over to another resistance member, a girl of about seventeen years old. She guided him south across country and via back roads to Dreux by bicycle, which took six hours. He overnighted there, hidden under hay in a barn.

In the morning, he was put on a horse and cart driven by, he assumed, the farmer. There was a moment of drama when a Messerschmidt BF109 buzzed them, and another when a truckload of Germans forced them off the road. However, in due course they rendezvoused at another farm with another man. This one actually talked to him.

"You are the one who shot up the Carlingue headquarters in Paris?"

"Me and others," Tommy said.

The man shook his hand. "You gave us all hope."

"I heard the reprisals were severe," Tommy said sadly.

The man nodded, looking grim. "They killed two for every one you killed. It was lucky you didn't kill any Germans — then it would have been four to one."

Then it was bicycles again and they continued south for two days until they came to the border between the free zone and the occupied zone.

“How do we get across?” Tommy asked, looking at the well-patrolled border.

His guide didn’t answer, just got on his bike and rode away. Tommy was about to follow him when a woman stepped out of the bushes.

“Come with me.” She had a gun and pointed it at him.

Tommy put up his hands. “Anything you say, madam.”

* * *

The woman told him to walk ahead of her and took him into the bushes. “Stand still, hands above your head.” She patted him down most thoroughly.

“Like what you feel?” Tommy asked with a grin as she finished.

She smiled and put the gun away. “Come with me.”

She led him through a field and into a wood. Tommy could see the border and noted that the Germans had cleared a killing zone on this side of it.

She continued further into the trees and stopped near a huge, ancient beech. Tommy looked around but could see nothing. Then she scraped a layer of leaves away with her foot and bent to grab a metal ring. She pulled it and a trap door opened.

“Well, bugger me for a blind man,” Tommy exclaimed as he looked down into what was obviously a tunnel.

“We use it to smuggle goods from one side to the other,” the woman explained. Then she handed him a candle and some matches. “After around three metres you will find a rail track. There is a trolley at this end; lie on your back and pull yourself along with the rope above you, below the roof. The tunnel goes for six hundred metres. Someone is waiting at the other end.”

He thanked her and stepped down into the darkness. She closed the trap door as soon as he was inside.

He lit the candle and made his way forward. The track and trolley were just where she said they would be. Tommy lay down on the trolley and looked for somewhere to put his candle: he ended up sticking it to the trolley, by his head. He looked up; the tunnel was lined in timber and there was a rope slung six inches below the ceiling.

He braced himself and started to pull himself along, hand over hand. The wound in his shoulder pulled and burned after a minute or so but he kept on, gritting his teeth against the pain.

It felt as though he was pulling for hours, but in reality it was only ten minutes. The trolley stopped suddenly and his candle broke free. He scrambled to pick it up before it went out. But he need not have bothered, for light streamed in as a hatch was opened further along and a voice said, "Welcome to Free France."

* * *

A doctor was called, as his shoulder was bleeding. The family he was staying with were farmers and smugglers, supplying items that were in short supply in the north. The doctor was all business and asked no questions. Tommy had torn the stitches in his shoulder, and the doctor told him he would take out all the old ones and restitch to repair the damage.

Tommy asked, "Can you take out the other stitches?"

The doctor looked at him. "What other stitches?"

"Can you ask the ladies to leave us?" Tommy asked his host. The man's wife and two daughters left the room.

Tommy stripped off and turned his back to the doctor.

"My God! What happened to you?"

"A boat blew up under me."

The stitches were removed and the wounds inspected; he had a slight infection in one, which the doctor treated.

As Tommy was being treated the farmer, who was called Jean-Marc, told him: "If the Vichy get hold of you, they will turn you over to the Germans. We will get you to the Spanish border at Andorra. False papers are being prepared so you can travel by train to Foix. There, an agent at the apothecary will get you across the border into Andorra. She is called Marie and your recognition code is, 'I am looking for some liquorice for my great-grandmother.'"

* * *

Tommy was taken to the station and put on a train to Toulouse. He sat in the second-class seat with his lunch, a baton filled with salami and salad, in a paper bag. His papers passed inspection, and once his ticket had been checked he was generally ignored.

From Toulouse he took a further train to Foix, where he went to find the apothecary. It was closed, so he yanked on the bell pull beside the door. The bell rang somewhere inside.

A woman came to the door and when she saw him she opened it a crack. "What do you want?"

"I am looking for some liquorice for my great-grandmother."

She opened the door and looked up and down the street before pulling him inside. She took him straight through to a back room.

"You want to get to Spain?"

"Yes, please," Tommy said, a little amused.

She shook her head and muttered something as she gathered a coat and scarf. "Come," she said. She led him through the house and into a garage where a Peugeot sat. "Open the doors."

Tommy did as he was told, then got in the passenger seat. She drove out and as they left the town he could see the Pyrenees ahead of them.

"Where have you come from?" she asked.

"Northern France," Tommy answered.

"Are you a flyer?"

"No I am a . . ." Tommy hesitated.

"If you are an agent of the SOE it is all right, you do not have to tell me."

"I am a courier. Or I was, until I got blown up."

She nodded and put her foot down, driving fast on the narrow roads.

"Aah, are we in a hurry?" Tommy asked as she shot around a corner, almost brushing the bank.

"I need to get back to my shop."

Tommy let her concentrate.

* * *

She pulled up abruptly after about thirty miles. They were in the foothills of the mountains. "From here you walk. Andorra is that way, about two kilometres. From there they will direct you over the pass to Spain."

Bordeaux

Tommy got back to England — via Gibraltar and a Royal Navy destroyer — at the end of October 1942. He reported to Broadway.

“Welcome home,” Bill said and shook his hand. “The resistance told us you were on your way back.”

“Yes, I took the scenic route via Spain. How is Rose?”

“She and the other fellow you rescued are out of hospital and she is recuperating in sunny Cornwall.”

“Will she be sent back?” Tommy asked, concern in his voice.

“No, the Germans know her now and it would be a death sentence,” Bill replied reassuringly. “She can still serve, but not in France.”

Tommy thought that sounded like she might be used somewhere else.

Bill looked Tommy over. “You’ve lost weight.”

Tommy shrugged. “That’s what being on the run for six weeks does to you.”

“Are you up to a new mission?”

“I am if I can have a week of decent grub.”

“Well, you can go to Southsea for a week and visit the marines.”

Tommy gave him the side-eye. “And what are *they* doing that they need me for?”

“Their boss, Major Herbert Hasler, will tell you everything.”

“Should I take the *Sarah*?”

“Yes, she will be useful.”

* * *

Tommy went to Chatham, where the *Sarah* was tied up. “Ahoy the ship,” he shouted as he boarded.

“Skipper?” Alec Jones said, his head appearing out of a hatch.

Within seconds the crew were crowding around him, patting him on the back and asking where he had been. He told them of his adventure and finished with: “What have you lot been up to?”

“Well, when we got back Rose and Phillippe were collected by an ambulance that was waiting on the dock for us. They just took them away, they didn’t say where to,” Seth said. “After that they sent the crew home on leave. It wasn’t until we were recalled — end of last week — that we heard you were on your way home.”

Tommy shrugged. "Well, we have another job. Is she ready to sail?"

"Yup. Where are we going?" Seth asked.

"Portsmouth — or more exactly, Southsea."

* * *

Upon reaching Southsea, they docked in Lock Lake, in the shadow of Fort Cumberland. The Royal Marines were housed at Lumps Fort, a mile down the Esplanade, and trained there too. Tommy walked down to it and reported to Major Hasler.

"So, you're the chappie from MI6 they've given us. What's your name?"

"Edwin. What do you want me to do?"

"They tell me you have top-secret clearance, so I will tell you this. We are planning a raid on Bordeaux; how and when I will not say. I want you to find out how much military traffic there is on the Garonne, where the shore defences are and how many ships are typically in port. And finally, if you have contacts in the resistance, you must prepare them to help with escape to the Spanish border."

Tommy looked at him, puzzled. "Can't you get most of that from reconnaissance photographs taken by the RAF?"

"I can, but they are two weeks old by the time I get them. I need the information to be fresh."

Tommy still didn't understand, but decided that he knew enough.

* * *

They dressed the *Sarah* up with a full load of fish from Camber Quay. The fishermen thought it odd they were buying fish and one even noted, "Your hold is shallow for your draught."

Tommy tipped him a wink. "Fish ain't where the money is."

"Oh, you're into *that* game are you?" the fisherman said disapprovingly.

Tommy left him to his own conclusions. Anyone spreading rumours that he was a smuggler would only reinforce their cover.

In the dead of night, several cases of Scotch whisky and London gin were secreted on board, along with some Sten guns and ammo. They could be used for bribes, as cash was increasingly worthless.

Once at sea and in French waters, they changed their vessel's name from *Sarah* to *Evelyne* and changed the pennant number on the deck house

wall. Someone had got hold of a French signal book, and they had the daily recognition signal.

* * *

Two and a half days later they were in the Bay of Biscay, which was its normal choppy self, especially near the coast. The Cordouan Lighthouse guided them into the Gironde estuary, just as it had guided shipping since the mid-nineteenth century. Tommy had timed their arrival to meet an incoming tide which, on that day, was just before dawn.

Other lights showed that more boats were returning to harbour after fishing all night, and they joined the line progressing up the channel on the Charente Maritime side of the river. Some boats — mainly smaller ones — docked at Saint-Georges-de-Didonne, the others carried on upstream to dock at Bordeaux, where there was a large fish market.

As the sky brightened, they started to make out the defences that protected the estuary. Gun batteries and pillboxes were marked on a chart as they chugged at five knots upstream. The shoreline was mainly marshy, which meant that any artillery was set back where the ground was firmer. Tommy made a note on the chart that the banks were covered in tall reeds.

He could see vineyards on the sides of the hills to the west and flat farmland stretching to the east. As they sailed further inland, the shore defences seemed to peter out. Patrols were in evidence — they waved to several German soldiers — but they saw few fortified positions.

At Patiras Island he saw that there was a German lookout tower on top of the old lighthouse. The shoreline changed as well, becoming tree lined and less marshy. The river split where the Dordogne joined it and they took the southern fork to stay in the Garonne. After that they spotted several merchant ships offloading cargo along the riverside.

The fishing dock was in the district of Bacalan, on the north side of Bordeaux, and the basin was accessed by heavily guarded lock gates. Once inside, they saw why. The Germans had constructed a submarine pen in the inner basin. This made their mission a lot riskier.

They started unloading their fish and were inspected by a German army official, who noted their number and catch. Tommy left the boys to it after that, and made his way into the nearby town. He went straight to a fish shop in the Rue Lucie Aubrac and asked the girl at the counter, “Is Georges here?”

She went to the door at the back of the shop and yelled, "Father, someone here to see you."

Georges bustled out of the door with a frown on his face which quickly turned into a beaming smile. "Mon ami! I have not seen you for a lifetime! Welcome!" He enfolded Tommy in a bear hug and kissed his cheeks. "Come, come!" he said and led his visitor into the back rooms.

"We have to be careful," Georges said, suddenly serious. "The Germans are watching everyone."

Tommy pulled a bottle out of his coat pocket and gave it to Georges, who looked at the label and grinned. "I have missed being able to get this." Tommy knew he had a fondness for single-malt Scotch. "Why are you here now? Surely not smuggling."

"No," Tommy replied. "I want to contact the local resistance."

Georges looked at him pensively for a moment. "That can be arranged. Why?"

"Escape routes to Spain — and I have some guns for them."

Georges' eyebrows shot up at that, and he looked out of the window before closing the curtains. "Are you mad? You know there is a submarine pen right next to where you are moored!"

"Oh, calm down. I'm not going to offload them here. But I can set up a rendezvous somewhere along the river."

Georges opened the whisky and took a swig, looked at Tommy and then took another. Fortified, he calmed down.

"Come back tomorrow evening before curfew."

* * *

They waited in port for a day, counting submarines as they came and went, pretending to fix nets and maintain their boat. Tommy left the boat at 17:00 and went to Georges' shop. He got there just as Georges was closing up and sluicing the floor down with a hose.

The two of them made their way across the basin to the old town of Bordeaux proper. They walked until they came to a house on the Rue Gouffrand. Georges knocked, a woman answered the door and, after scanning the street, beckoned them to come in.

She had long fair hair and brown eyes that were serious beyond her years. She was small, about five feet two inches, and slim. Georges introduced her as Jeanne.

"Georges tells me you are English and have some guns for us," she said.

"My name is Edwin and I work for the SIS. Yes, I have twenty Sten guns and a crate of ammunition. I am also interested in setting up an escape route to Spain for men stranded in Bordeaux."

"What men?"

"Airmen that are shot down," Tommy extemporised.

She looked at him suspiciously. However, the RAF had already been bombing the submarine pens, and several planes had been shot down. Those survivors who had avoided capture had been collected by the resistance and helped to get to Spain. And yet . . .

"I do not think that you are telling me everything."

Tommy shrugged.

She gave him a hard look. "If they are able to avoid capture, they should make their way north to the town of Ruffec. There they should go to the Hotel de la Toque Blanche and contact Mary Lindell or her son, Maurice. She is the leader of that portion of the escape line."

Tommy committed those names to memory. "Where do you want me to deliver the guns and ammo?"

"You have seen the carrelets, the fishing huts, along the river?"

Tommy had. The huts were built on stilts and had huge square nets operated by a pulley system.

"Just before the town of La Grange is a hut that is still in use — you can tell by the net hanging from the beam. Flash a sign" — she paused to think — "SG, and wait for the reply, AB. They will send out a boat to get the crates. Be there at dusk the day after tomorrow."

* * *

Tommy and the crew spent the next two days logging all the ships they could see along the river and where they were. During the afternoon of the second day, as they were preparing to leave, they had an unwelcome visitor.

A shout from the dock brought Tommy on deck. A German, in a long black leather coat and accompanied by a pair of soldiers, stood looking at their boat. Tommy recognised his cap badge. He was SS.

The soldiers came aboard without asking permission and the officer stood looking around the boat. His men looked dangerous and carried sub-machine guns.

“Why are you still in dock?” the man barked in heavily German-accented French. “You have been here a week.”

“We are about to leave, we had to wait for parts for our engine,” Tommy replied, giving a Gallic shrug.

The officer looked at him, eyes full of suspicion. “I want to see your engine and the new parts.”

Tommy nodded and led him aft and down to the engine room. “It is that part there, on the boiler,” Tommy said while pointing to a section at the bottom.

“I cannot see it.”

“There.” Tommy pointed with his left hand while picking up a large spanner with his right.

The officer took a torch and shone it down on the pipes, then bent to get a better look — at which point, Tommy hit him on the back of the head with the inch-and-a-half Whitworth spanner. It crushed the back of the German’s skull and he fell to the deck.

“Bugger,” Tommy said, and went up on deck. “Oi, you! Your officer wants you,” he shouted to the soldiers.

The soldiers walked around the deck housing on the seaward side and were hidden from the dock momentarily. *Pop. Pop. Pop.* They fell to the deck and Seth stepped out from the deckhouse door, pistol in hand.

Tommy grinned at him. “Cover them with a net; we will dump them out at sea.”

They left the dock and chugged out into the river, turning downstream on the outgoing tide. La Grange was marked on their chart of the river so Tommy knew exactly how far it was. They spotted the fishing hut and flashed the signal. There was a delay, and they were about to try again when the reply came.

They hove to and a boat came out, rowed by two men. It drew alongside and they handed the crates down. Tommy gave the men each a bottle of whisky and a bottle of gin. Then they made their way out to sea.

* * *

The *Sarah*’s crew fished with the fleet, and as they did so transmitted short message bursts that the German listening trawlers did not have time to locate. This way they got their report to the marines without being detected.

The dead German soldiers were sent to the bottom of the Atlantic with chains around their bodies to stop them popping up. The radio men saw an

increase in transmissions for two days but by the time they were on their way back, the level had returned to normal.

By the end of November, they had revisited the area four times. Then they got a message: *RETURN TO CHATHAM*.

“That’s it?” Seth said as they read the message, which they had received while out fishing.

“Yup. Pull up the net and let the catch go — we’re going home.”

On their way back they spotted one of the German armed trawlers, a vorpostenboot, that was used for spotting convoys. Tommy and Seth studied it through binoculars. It was just coming up to full nightfall and the German vessel was to the west of them bathed in the last of the light. The *Sarah* was already in the earth’s shadow.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Tommy said.

“If you’re thinking we board it and sink it, I am.”

“Issue all the boys with Stens and grenades and prepare a satchel charge.”

The two trawlers were almost identical apart from the conspicuous 88-mm cannon and array of anti-aircraft guns on the German ship.

The Bren gun was brought up and mounted on the bridge. Gary and Dick, the radio men, would man that. The rest of them would slip aboard the German trawler as soon as they were alongside.

Tommy steered an arcing course that would bring them upcurrent of the German vessel. He cut the engine and glided up alongside the fenders, preventing excess noise. A silenced Sten *pop-popped* and the German lookout was killed. Ted and Alec leapt across and swiftly tied the *Sarah* on. Music came from below; the crewmen were having their dinners.

Everyone boarded except the radio men, who provided cover with the Bren. A pair of ventilation cowls provided air to the men below and also provided an easy entry point for grenades.

Half a dozen Mills grenades were dropped into the dining area . . . and screams replaced the music. Tommy and the boys knew the German ship as well as their own and covered all the exit points. As men emerged, they were gunned down. Many did not understand what was happening. The Bren opened fire on the German bridge, tracers painting trails across the gap.

Then the Germans got organised and started fighting back.

Tommy knew they had to finish this quickly. He had two grenades left and worked his way to the 88-mm cannon. He looked at it and quickly found the traverse wheel. Winding it furiously, he spun the gun so that it was pointing at the bridge.

Seth appeared beside him. "Get everybody back, away from the deck housings and bridge," Tommy told him.

He found the elevation wheel and turned it first one way — the barrel went up — and then the other, so that the barrel was at its maximum ten-degree depression. Seth had found the ammo locker and shoved one of the large shells home in the breach.

"Here goes nothing. GET DOWN!"

Tommy pulled the trigger.

The shell hit the bridge about halfway up, went straight through and exploded as it hit the funnel on the other side. The blast did a lot of damage. He loaded and fired again. This time the shell exploded inside the after-deck housing. He fired a third for good measure.

He left the gun and ran forward screaming "At 'em, lads!"

The firefight was short and vicious. Ultimately, they sank the German trawler by blowing her bottom out with the satchel charge, having captured the code books and encryption machine. These were not the first the British had captured, but they would help to identify any modifications the Germans had made recently.

* * *

The *Sarah* returned to port. Harry and Ted sported wounds, and they carried ten prisoners — all that was left of the fifty-man German crew. In Chatham they were met by Bill, who watched the handover of the Germans to the marines. He also noted the scorch marks on her upperworks where the flash from the exploding 88-mm shells had singed her.

"You've been busy," he said to Tommy when he came ashore.

"A little. It was too good to miss. Their lookout must have been asleep as they didn't challenge us or go to action stations when we passed. So, we just turned around and, well, the rest is in the report."

But Bill turned on him angrily. "You are not paid to take on armed German trawlers! You and your crew are too valuable to risk in that way!"

Tommy was unrepentant and replied, equally angrily, "It was no riskier than sitting in bloody Bordeaux harbour for the best part of a month next to a submarine pen!"

At this, Bill calmed down: he could understand the tension that had built up over that time and the need to release it. “All right, exceptional circumstances, I know. Anyway, you and the crew have been rewarded with a £2,000 prize award. The *Sarah* is registered with the navy as a special service vessel.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It was necessary to buy her in.”

* * *

Tommy found out later that their work in Bordeaux had been used by the planners of Operation Frankton. Twelve men from the Royal Marines Boom Patrol Detachment (the forerunner of the Special Boat Service) were dropped some ten miles off the Gironde estuary by the submarine HMS *Tuna*. They had six Cockle Mk II folding kayaks (codenamed *cockleshells*), each manned by two men, which would be used to row up the estuary and attach limpet mines to as many ships as they could.

On launch, one was damaged, leaving five to make the trip. The first night the weather and tide was against them and another disappeared, another was lost when it capsized, the crew being carried by the other kayaks to within swimming distance from the shore.

The missing kayak reappeared and the four made their way up the estuary, slipping past four German frigates. Unfortunately, one became separated from the others and ended up ashore. Four days later, on their way to Spain, those men were captured.

The other three continued on, landing near Saint-Vivien-du-Médoc. Here another of the crews was captured, leaving just two to carry on.

In the end they sank two ships and seriously damaged four more. Only two of the men made it to Ruffec and Mary Lindell. The rest were captured and executed.

Norway — Operation Crackers

February 1943

Things were relatively quiet over Christmas and New Year, and the weather in January was awful. So, Tommy wasn't that surprised when he was summoned to Broadway.

“Did you have a good Christmas?” Bill asked.

“I did. I spent it with Rose and my mum.”

“What did your mum think of that?” Bill asked with a grin.

“Oh, she wasn't bothered; she and Dad lived together for four years before they wed.”

“Right, well,” Bill said — trying not to laugh because Tommy's expression was so serious — “I have another job for you, with the commandos.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Not another suicide mission?”

“No, this is much simpler.” Bill unfolded a chart and laid it on his desk. Tommy stood next to him as he explained: “This is the Sognefjord in Norway. It is the longest and deepest fjord in that country, extending 127 miles. It is obviously very useful to the Germans for hiding ships and picking up cargoes of materials for shipment to Germany.”

“Right. What are the commandos going to do?”

“This is codenamed Operation Crackers. You will carry sixteen soldiers from a mix of units led by 30 Commando. Ian Fleming is their commander. Their task is to attack a defensive position and take prisoners at the observation post here” — he pointed to a location on one side of the fjord — “and take a look at another here.” He indicated a spot on the opposite side.

“Sounds easy enough, where do I pick them up?”

Bill pointed to the east coast of Scotland. “Peterhead. You need to be there by the twenty-second of February.”

* * *

The *Sarah* docked at Smith Quay in Peterhead on 21 February and took on fuel, oil and provisions. A pair of trucks pulled up the following night and the commandos came aboard. The aft hold was used to store their gear and set up their bed rolls. The commander, Lieutenant Graham Whatley,

met Tommy on the bridge. "I'm surprised they're sending us in an unarmed trawler," he observed critically.

Tommy didn't take offence; quite the opposite, in fact. "Don't let her looks fool you. She's a special service vessel and belongs to the secret service."

"What does that make you, old chap?"

"If I told you, I would have to kill you," Tommy said, and laughed.

The lieutenant was amused. "Oh, I see. You can call me Ginger."

"Edwin," Tommy replied.

Tommy offered him a cigarette and the two lit up. Tommy pointed to the chart. "It's about three hundred and thirty miles to the Sognefjord from here, which will take us around thirty-eight hours if we can keep up top speed. The Met Office boys are forecasting that the high-pressure system currently lying over the southern part of the North Sea will move away and be replaced by a frontal trough coming in over the Sognefjord area."

The lieutenant flicked his cigarette butt out of the window. "What does that all mean?"

"A fair crossing, but it will get rough as we get to the fjord."

"Can we leave now?"

"In three hours, when the tide turns."

* * *

They left as planned when the tide turned, the moonlight glinting on the water. Tommy took the first watch and turned north-east soon after leaving Peterhead. Seth took over at 08:00 and Tommy went to sleep.

He woke at 14:00 and went to the galley to get some food. Ted was duty cook and knocked him up bacon, eggs and fried slice. Having eaten, Tommy got himself a large mug of coffee and went up on deck.

"Skipper," Seth said in greeting.

"Have the boys exercised the gun?" Tommy asked.

"Not since they came back from leave."

"Action stations!" Tommy yelled, and sounded a claxon.

The commandos, who had been lounging around on deck, were unceremoniously moved off the forward hold hatch, which was slid aside. The lever to open the clam-shelled false floor was pulled; their QF 3-inch and the Hotchkiss rose majestically from their hiding places.

Ginger watched in wonder. "Not as it seems at all!" he murmured.

Tommy grinned and asked, "Is that better?" as the Bren was mounted on the deck wall and he was handed a Sten.

Ginger looked at the Sten. "Same as we use. How do you find them?"

Tommy grimaced. "When we first got them, they were horrible. Jammed one minute, ran away the next. But we took them apart and cleaned up the workings and put a few hundred rounds through them. Now they are as good as gold."

Ginger nodded. "We were the same, now you can't get the chaps to take a new one. They trust theirs."

"STAND DOWN!" Tommy shouted.

All the guns disappeared, and once again the ship appeared to be merely a trawler.

* * *

They were spotted by a British submarine halfway across the North Sea. The sub surfaced and warned them there was a flotilla of German destroyers to the north — just off the coast of Norway — that were heading south.

Tommy changed the *Sarah*'s identity to that of the *Senja* and revealed their new pennant number, TF-33. He and the crew dressed as a Norwegian crew would. They looked the part, but none of them spoke Norwegian. That problem was solved by two of the commandos, native Norwegians from No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando.

The commandos found their ride to be relatively comfortable. Alec, who was the duty cook for this trip, provided constant cups of tea and fed them freshly cooked food. They spent their time cleaning and servicing their weapons.

Ginger was surprised to learn that Tommy and his crew had gone through what was effectively commando training, and he asked to hear how they took and sank the German trawler.

"How did you know about that?" Tommy asked.

"I heard your boys talking about it."

"It was simple really, we got lucky when their lookout wasn't paying attention and we were able to hit them by surprise. After that it was a case of hitting them hard and fast enough to stop them getting organised."

"Lots of grenades?"

"Yes, and we used their own 88s against them."

"Nice."

They chatted for a while, then a lookout called, "Ship ahead. Smoke on the horizon."

The weather was turning and closing in as the front passed through, and visibility was reducing. Tommy climbed up on the monkey island and had a look for himself. He could make out a single funnel and lower upperworks.

"It's not a destroyer; they all have higher bridges than funnels and it's too small. We will maintain our course. Get the marines below."

The ship would pass behind them if both maintained their present courses, and that suited Tommy just fine. As it closed with them, he used a copy of *Jane's Fighting Ships* to identify it as a German weather ship. They were closer to the Norwegian coast now and the Norwegian flag flew from their stern. Several lookouts on the German ship studied them. Tommy studied them back and then gave a perfunctory wave.

"That wasn't very friendly. Definitely lacked enthusiasm," Seth said, and grinned.

"How would you feel if your country had been invaded?" Tommy replied, turning his back on the German.

All must have been as the Germans expected, for they maintained their course. Forty-five minutes later, the Norwegian coast came into sight.

* * *

They made the entrance to the fjord as the sun dipped to the western horizon, just visible below a layer of clouds. It was just bright enough to see the lighthouse on Holmengrå, which was not lit, and they steered to pass it 1,500 yards to the north. Now came the tricky part, as the weather was veering around to the west and the waves were rolling straight into the fjord.

As they proceeded into the fjord, they discovered that it had its own microclimate. The wind swirled, bouncing off the cliffs, and the waves seemed to come from every direction. With the cloud came dark and rain. Tommy realised they would never find the defensive position, let alone get the men ashore. He asked Ginger what he wanted to do.

"You are absolutely sure about the chances of getting ashore at the drop zone?" Ginger asked.

"I'm sorry, but I am," Tommy replied.

"Can you get us ashore at all?"

"If we go into one of the inlets there will probably be a dock. We can tie up there."

“All right. My orders are to take prisoners and observe what traffic is using the fjord. We will set up an observation post and observe for a week. Can you come back and get us?”

“Certainly, if the dock is hidden; we can wait there or go back out to sea.”

Tommy steered them into an inlet; as soon as they entered it the waves and wind reduced, as they were sheltered by the cliffs. Tommy risked a quick sweep of the shore with a powerful light they had on board and spotted a local fishing boat tied up at a wooden dock on the north side. He steered them in and pulled up alongside the dock. The marines were ashore in a trice and disappeared into the dark with a promise to be back at midnight in seven days.

Tommy sent Ted and Gary across to look the other boat over.

Ted reported: “It’s got a German radio in it and there were German ration packs.”

Gary grinned at him and took a screwdriver from his pocket. He waved it at Tommy. “Radio doesn’t work anymore. It will take them ages to fix it.”

Tommy laughed. “What did you do?”

“I broke a wire off inside it by wiggling it, then set it so it looks all right.”

“Good. Well, we can’t stay here, let’s get going.”

* * *

They cast off and went back out into the fjord proper. Tommy decided the weather was bad enough to justify going deeper in. But the sound of their engine must have been heard, as a spotlight suddenly swept the water from a hill above them.

It found them and they were pinned. Tommy left the bridge and waved in the direction of the light, painfully aware that he was probably in the crosshairs of a German gun. The light went out and he breathed a sigh of relief.

The front passed and they left the fjord to wait out at sea. They towed a net during the day, keeping the cod end untied so as not to catch any fish. However, they did attract the attention of a German S-boat, which came close to have a long hard look at them. Tommy decided it was time to go elsewhere and hide.

That night they went back into the fjord and made their way into the mass of islands that made up the southern side of the entrance. According to

the charts there were no towns there, but plenty of sheltered places where they could anchor.

* * *

Six days later, they prepared to go and fetch the marines. They were about to exit the maze of islands when a light passed the inlet, heading west. Tommy stopped the motor and waited. A flare was fired and shot into the air, leaving a blue streak behind it. A moment later another went up, leaving a green trail.

By their light they could see it was a destroyer. It passed — and another followed about two hundred yards behind.

Seth appeared on deck as the second flare dropped into the sea. “Christ, Skipper, where did they come from?”

“They must be the ones the sub warned us about. Look, there’s a third.”

By the time all three destroyers were safely away, they were running at least an hour late. Tommy couldn’t rush — he was in unfamiliar waters and there were a lot of rocks that could ruin the unwary. They made their way calmly to the dock. As they came alongside, the marines appeared out of the dark and were quickly aboard.

They were about to cast off when a voice hailed them in Norwegian. One of the Norwegian marines called back and a man came onto the dock. Tommy whispered, “Ask him if this is his boat.”

“Er dette din båt?”

The man replied, “Ja og dokken min.”

“He said that it is, and so is the dock.”

Tommy pulled his pistol from its home in its shoulder holster and jumped ashore. He stepped up to the man and grabbed his arm before pressing the muzzle of the gun into his cheek. “Come,” he said.

He brought the man aboard and gave him to the marines for safe keeping. Then he sent Ted over to open the sea cocks on the other boat.

“Why did you do that?” Ginger asked as they turned out towards the North Sea.

“Well, you said you needed a prisoner.”

“A German, not a Norwegian!”

Tommy lit a cigarette. “He’s a collaborator. His boat had a German radio set and rations on board. I bet he was sailing into British waters and monitoring shipping. Why don’t you ask him?”

* * *

They headed back to Chatham. The prisoner started talking halfway back and didn't stop, even after he was collected by MI6 at the docks. The Norwegian commandos had treated him roughly.

Norway — Operation Roundabout

The *Sarah*'s crewmen were ordered to stay in Chatham. There were worse places to hang around in and they all spent time ashore in the pubs. Two weeks later, Tommy got a message advising him to attend a briefing at the barracks.

Upon arrival he found the correct room and entered. He was greeted brusquely by a captain, "You must be Edwin."

"I am, and you are . . . ?" Tommy replied in an equally rude manner, which made the other marines grin.

The captain realised he had been a tad rude and held out his hand. "Gilcrest, 12 Commando. Pleased to meet you."

Tommy shook the proffered hand and took a seat. The captain uncovered a board: on one side was a map of a fjord with a bridge and on the other side, a map of Norway. He pointed to the map of Norway.

"Here at Stavanger, this bridge is the only way to get raw materials from the north-east of Norway to the docks, from where they are transported to Germany. Our mission is to destroy this bridge." He paused and looked at Tommy. "Your job is to get us in and out."

Tommy looked around the room. "A mixed bag . . . You aren't British," he said to a lieutenant in American battledress with a strange patch on his shoulder.

"Lieutenant Koslowski, 29th Rangers."

Tommy nodded in greeting and turned to another group of four. "And you?"

"Sergeant Nils Andersson, Norwegian army."

Tommy nodded and stood up. The captain gave way to him. "Three days to get from here to there. Where do you want to be landed?"

"Here, on the island of Sølyst. We will proceed to the bridge here and lay charges to demolish it. Our American colleagues are demolition experts and will mine the bridge while we cover them from either end."

Lieutenant Koslowski looked up. "What ship do you command?"

Tommy enlightened him. "Not a ship per se, but an armed fishing trawler."

"Skipper, I was brought up in Maine; a trawler will make nine knots flat out. Why don't they send us in on a torpedo boat?"

Tommy looked around the room, taking in the curious faces. "It would certainly be quicker and get you there in a day. But — and here's the rub — you want to land quietly, sneak up to the bridge, eliminate any sentries and lay your charges." The lieutenant nodded, wondering where this was going. "An MTB or MGB has three Merlin aircraft engines which, even on tick-over, make enough noise to be heard for miles across water. The *Sarah*, on the other hand, has a triple-expansion steam engine that makes barely a whisper of noise at slow ahead. Now, I agree, if you lot cock it up and we have to run for it, nine knots is not a lot. Which is why we will be met by a destroyer once we leave the fjord and are out to sea, and that ship will escort us home."

* * *

They met at the *Sarah* and loaded the team and their gear on board. The Yanks had enough explosives to blow up the Severn Bridge and they put them all in the rear hold. The guns were out of their concealments and were being looked at curiously by the soldiers.

Koslowski came to the bridge. "Hi, my name is Bill, by the way."

Tommy replied, "I'm still Edwin — or Skipper."

"Gilcrest says you and your crew are all MI6."

"He talks too much."

Bill snorted a laugh. "I badgered him into it. You know this is an experiment to see how the different parts work together?"

"I guessed as much," Tommy admitted.

Bill was watching Ted clean the 3-inch. "My boys have never been behind lines before."

Tommy put a hand on his arm. "We will get you ashore and cover your retreat and recovery. We have Stens and plenty of bullets to supplement the big guns. All you have to do is blow up the bridge."

* * *

They left on 20 April 1943 at midnight. Their aim — to get to the landing point at 01:00 on 23 April. The sea was calm, the weather dull and overcast with a light wind from the west.

Tommy took the direct route, a course of 015° from the mouth of the Medway, heading directly for Stavanger. He had fuel for ten days and food for a month if needed.

A Catalina overflew them and flashed a signal.

“What was that?” Gilcrest asked.

Tommy watched it disappear to the north. “He said — *good fishing.*”

* * *

They reached the entrance to the fjord, just north of the Bragen Island Light, at dusk. A signal from the lighthouse asked for the recognition signal, which they gave. Tommy slowed them to five knots and turned south-east towards Hundvåg bydel. Two miles from the island they turned east to circumnavigate it clockwise to reach their objective. Finally, they turned so that they bisected the lights of Buøy and Grasholmen, and slowed to two and a half knots. The engine made hardly any noise at all.

Tommy spotted the beach they would land the men on and brought them in gently. “Good luck,” he told the officers. As soon as they had gone he ordered: “Man the guns.”

The crew armed themselves and took to their stations. Ted, Gary and Chris were at the 3-inch, Alec and Dick took the Maxim and Tommy took the Bren. The rest all grabbed Stens.

They waited . . . and no more than thirty minutes later, all hell broke loose over by the bridge. Gunfire and explosions tore the night air apart.

“Fuck it! They’ve been rumbled. Seth, take the Bren; Harry, Ernest, Mike, you’re with me.” He grabbed a SCR-536 Handie-Talkie and his Sten.

Tommy leapt ashore, holding his Sten, which had a firing rate of five to six hundred rounds a minute. He was followed by the others. They made their way towards the bridge, where a tremendous firefight had broken out. A shout warned them that a German patrol was approaching from behind. Tommy set up an ambush with himself and Mike on one side of the road and Harry and Ernest on the other.

The German patrol was advancing at the double towards the bridge, hoping to catch the raiders in a pincer movement. Tommy waited until they were just ten yards away, then: “Murder them, lads!” he yelled, and opened up.

Two thousand rounds a minute ripped through the German troops, who, at that range, couldn’t be missed. The Germans didn’t stand a chance, and it was all over almost as quickly as it had started. The boys changed magazines and started towards the bridge.

As they approached, Tommy could see the commandos were pinned down at the eastern end. Tommy pressed the button on the Handie-Talkie.

“Seth, lay down fire from the 3-inch on the middle of the bridge and walk it west. If the Maxim can reach it, use that too.”

“No sooner said than done, Skipper.”

Shells started to land on the bridge every few seconds and Maxim tracers poured across from the boat, making the Germans duck.

Tommy ran forward. “Come on!” he shouted. “Let’s get out of here!”

Covered by the barrage, the commandos retreated, and Tommy and the boys poured fire across the bridge to cover them. Three men had been wounded and were being helped. As soon as they were twenty or so yards behind them, Tommy started a rolling retreat. Two of the boys dropped back, then covered the other two as they fell back behind them.

The lead commandos reached the boat and set up cover fire, first for the wounded to get aboard and then for Tommy and the boys.

Tommy was last to board and as soon as his feet hit the deck, Seth had them backing away from the beach. The Maxim and Bren were raking the shore as they turned.

“Cease fire!” Tommy shouted, and the *Sarah* sped up to full ahead.

“Thank you,” Gilcrest said. He had his arm in a sling.

“We’re not out yet,” Tommy said, and spun the wheel to point them north-west up the fjord. Searchlights criss-crossed the water ahead of them. “Come on, old girl,” Tommy murmured.

A spotlight swept over them, then came back to pin them. It was soon joined by others from the shore to the west. Guns opened fire and waterspouts were thrown up.

“Get those lights!” Tommy yelled.

The Bren barked — once, twice, three times — and a light winked out. Tommy looked around. The lieutenant was holding it like a rifle.

The *Sarah* shuddered as a shell hit the after-deck housing. Everybody was firing, and the 3-inch’s barrel was so hot it was glowing.

Another searchlight fell at exactly the moment a shell went through the side and exploded in the forward hold, wrecking the lift that held up the 3-inch. Chris caught the full force of the blast and was killed instantly. Ted was blown up in the air and landed on the foredeck. Gary was unhurt as he had been fetching ammo from the locker.

* * *

It was four and three-quarter miles to the open sea and they took fire all the way. By the time they got there they were ablaze, taking in water and

struggling to stay afloat. Tommy turned south-west and radioed for help.

*MAYDAY. MAYDAY. MAYDAY. FISHING BOAT SARAH
BADLY DAMAGED 58° 97' N 5° 36' E. SINKING.*

He hoped the destroyer would hear them and come running to the rescue.

“We can keep her afloat for maybe another hour,” Seth said after making an inspection of the damage. “There are two holes in the hull, below the waterline. We’ve tried to plug one, but the other is in the forward hold.”

The roar of heavy diesels echoed through the night.

“Oh shit, that’s an S-boat,” Seth said.

“Man the guns!” Tommy yelled. He knew it was hopeless, but they would go down fighting . . .

As the boat got closer, the engine noise became louder. Then, suddenly, it turned away and there was the sound of a big gun.

Out of the gloom came the unmistakable shape of a British destroyer, and a voice blared through a loudspeaker . . . “Ahoy the *Sarah*, I hear you need a hand.”

* * *

The destroyer took them off as the *Sarah* finally succumbed to her injuries and went down to Davy Jones’ locker. Tommy watched her go from a wing of the bridge. The captain came and stood beside him.

“Sorry we couldn’t save her.”

“She did her bit and got us out of the fjord,” Tommy said. Then he sighed. “But she was mine.”

The captain laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder and passed him a cup of Bovril. Tommy sipped the hot, nourishing beef broth and felt better.

“I hear they didn’t blow the bridge,” the captain said.

“No, although we did make a mess of it with our 3-inch. They were rumbled when one of the Norwegians dropped the magazine out of his Sten onto the road. It made enough noise to alert the Germans that something was up. I also lost one of my crew.”

Sicily

July 1943

Tommy and the team were dropped off at Chatham. The wounded were taken straight to hospital — one of them was the Norwegian who dropped his magazine.

Tommy went home to Hull and had a few weeks to rest and recuperate. One evening he went out to the pub and had several pints with a mate. He was found there by a policeman, who told him he had to report to the office.

Tommy was picked up by a staff car at King's Cross station, taken to Broadway and deposited at the door. He went up to Bill's office and was met by Rose, who was as pretty as ever. She looked into his eyes and saw the sadness behind them.

"I heard what happened. I'm sorry about Chris."

He kissed her on the nose and put his arms around her. "We all know what we signed up for."

Just then the door to Bill's office opened and he stepped out. "Put her down, she's government property." He grinned.

"So am I, so that makes it alright," Tommy joked back. The three of them went into his office and sat down. Rose had a notepad in front of her.

"I'm sorry to haul you in so soon after the last mission but something very urgent has come up. How many of your men are still able to operate?"

"Chris is dead and Ted will be out of action for months if he returns at all. The rest are OK; minor wounds on a couple but otherwise fit."

Bill nodded. "Good, that's enough."

He turned to a folder on his desk; it was marked *TOP SECRET* in red ink. "What do you know about Calabria in Italy?"

"I have 'traded' there in the past."

"Where, exactly?"

"Taranto, Canne, Reggio."

Bill nodded. "You have contacts in all three?"

"I did; they should still be around."

"Excellent. There is an RAF flying boat waiting at Southampton. You and your men are to go to Sicily. You will report to General Montgomery at the Allied headquarters. He will fill you in on what you are to do and give you the names of agents we already have in Italy."

Tommy stood up. "Can I borrow Rose?"

Bill didn't look up from the folder he was now reading. "As a driver, yes."

Tommy gave Rose a look that said, *We both know that you can do more than drive a car . . .*

* * *

Tommy, having rounded up the boys, requisitioned a second car and driver from the motor pool. They drove to Southampton and pulled up at a dock used by the RAF. A Sunderland, the property of 210 Squadron RAF, was moored to a buoy a hundred yards out. A tender waited at the dock to take them across.

Rose kissed him goodbye, and Tommy stepped down into the tender. They only carried small packs as most of their sea gear had been lost when the *Sarah* went down. They all had new papers, which Rose had given them, and understood that they would probably get new ones in Sicily.

The inside of the Sunderland's passenger compartment was huge. They all took seats and were told to strap in, as they would leave immediately. The big plane growled to life as the engines started one by one. Tommy looked out of the window and saw Rose and the other driver standing on the dock, waving goodbye. He didn't think she could see him but waved anyway.

Once they had taken off and reached their cruising altitude, they headed down the English Channel and the crew served tea and biscuits.

"First stop will be Gib, as we have to go around the long way," the corporal told them.

Tommy undid his seatbelt and made his way up the ladder to the upper deck and cockpit. The flight engineer and radio operator were at their stations; they were busy and ignored him. He went forward to the pilots. "Captain," he said, greeting the pilot in the left seat.

"You must be our VIP cargo," the captain said. He was probably close to forty years old and was in his shirtsleeves.

"How long to get to Sicily?" Tommy asked.

"In seven hours we will be in Gib, where we will refuel, and then it's another ten hours to Catania in Sicily, where we will land."

Tommy pondered that as he watched the clouds pass by. "How long will we be in Gibraltar?"

“Overnight we rest up and start first thing the next morning. Why?”
The captain was clearly curious.

“We have been in the clothes we stand in for two days and don’t have changes, so we could all do with a bath and new clothes.”

“Getting a bit itchy, what?” the co-pilot chipped in.

“Something like that.”

The co-pilot nodded. “There’s a men’s clothes shop right by the dock that sells everything from fishermen’s clothes to suits. Two doors down is Fanny’s. You can get a bath there.”

Tommy gave him the side-eye. “Fanny’s?”

“It’s a whore house, but she has a bathroom with four baths in it. You can get a girl to wash your back too.”

“And you know all this how?” Tommy asked, a teasing glint in his eye.

“Go there regularly,” the co-pilot freely admitted. “Clean girls and hot water.”

The captain shook his head and rolled his eyes.

* * *

They landed at Gibraltar and moored just off the town. A tender took the crew and the boys to shore. The co-pilot, Flight Lieutenant Allan Greaves, showed them to the clothes shop.

“Fanny’s is two doors that way. I’ll tell her you’re coming.”

They bought typical Mediterranean fishermen’s clothes, including boots to replace the sea boots they had been wearing. Then, with their new clothes in bundles, they went down and knocked on the door of Fanny’s.

“’Ello, loves,” a frizzy-haired woman said as she opened the door. “Allan said you was coming.” She giggled as if she had made a huge joke and led them inside. They entered a large sitting room where several semi-naked girls lounged around. Tommy happened to notice that each girl wore little more than stockings and a corset.

“It’s a tanner for the bath, and” — she wrinkled her nose — “if I might say so, you all needs one. If you want a girl to wash your back it’s thruppence extra. Anything other than that, the price list is pinned up there.” She pointed to a large, typed page pinned to the wall that gave . . . let’s just say *honest* descriptions of services and the cost.

Tommy gave her three florins. “Eight baths with back washes. If the boys want anything else, they pay for it themselves.”

* * *

Tommy was one of the first four to have a bath. The room was full of steam and the water was clean and hot. The girls came in while the boys were undressing and *oohed* at the wounds some were still sporting. Tommy had hidden his gun in a pile of clothing before the girls arrived.

A girl named Rachel attended to Tommy. She looked him up and down as he stepped into the bath.

“How’d you get that scar?” she asked, running her finger over the mark on his left side.

“Knife fight in Barcelona,” Tommy replied honestly. “It was a long time ago.”

She then asked about the other scars on his back. He slid down into the water with a sigh, thus hiding them, and didn’t answer.

Rachel took some soap and washed his hair. He lay back and let her. “How did *they* get hurt?” she asked, looking around at the other lads.

“We had a disagreement with some Germans.”

“Rinse,” she said. “Where?”

Tommy ducked his head under the water and rinsed the soap out. He didn’t answer the question. Then he sat up and leaned forward so she could wash his back. Her fingers were gentle.

“You want a shave?”

“Is it extra?”

“Nah, I’ll do that for free.”

She produced a straight razor and a brush. She worked up a lather as Tommy washed the rest of himself, then he sat back again, and she brushed the soap into his stubble. The blade glided expertly across his cheek.

“I used to shave me dad before he went and got himself killed. That was before I moved out here, mind,” she told him as she worked. She pinched his nose between her fingers and lifted it so she could shave his top lip. “He got killed in a gang fight in Stepney before the war. There you are, all done.”

Tommy washed the last of the soap from his face and ran his hand over it.

“Smooth as a baby’s bum!” Rachel laughed. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Not today, maybe next time.” Tommy laughed and gave her another tanner as a tip.

The men who didn't stay at Fanny's overnight got rooms in the seamen's hostel. It wasn't as clean as Fanny's, but it did the job.

* * *

The boys met the tender as it came alongside the dock first thing in the morning. Several had taken the girls up on their offers and now had satisfied and somewhat smug looks on their faces. They all carried their old clothes wrapped in the brown paper that their new ones had come in.

The pilots turned up and the tender took them across. The rest of the crew were already aboard.

"Sicily, here we come!" Tommy said as the big aircraft clawed its way into the sky.

They were fed sandwiches that a crewman had made in the galley — a choice of corned beef and mustard or cheese and chutney. Tea was on tap.

"Did you stay at Fanny's?" Tommy asked Seth.

Seth got a soppy grin on his face. "I did. Two bob for the night."

"You know it will shrivel up and fall off," Tommy joked.

"Aah, but it was worth it! Sweet Jeanie. What a girl!"

* * *

Catania was in the shadow of Mount Etna, which had a thin trail of smoke issuing from the summit. The British headquarters was in Messina and the team were transported up there in the back of an army truck. They dismounted outside a villa on the outskirts, which was heavily patrolled and guarded. Tommy went inside and was taken straight to an office on the upper floor, where he was met by General Montgomery and Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey.

"Good afternoon," Monty said in his nasal voice. "You are the chap from the SIS?"

"I am, sir."

"They tell me that you have a lot of experience in working behind enemy lines and speak Italian."

"Yes, sir," Tommy said.

Dempsey sat on the edge of the desk. "We want you to go over there." He pointed out of the window where the coast of Calabria could be seen. "To find out the disposition and strength of the Germans."

"Do we have any recon photos?" Tommy asked.

“We do, but the problem is the Germans are damn good at hiding their stuff, and we can’t tell what’s German and what’s Italian.”

Tommy was confused. “Does that matter?”

“It will. We expect the Italians to surrender as soon as we land.”

Tommy opened his mouth then closed it in surprise. Monty walked over to a large map of Italy on the wall.

“The Italians will surrender but the Germans will try to hold Italy for all they are worth. We need to know where they are and where the Italians will give up their positions. Especially here and here.” He pointed to two towns on the map.

Tommy nodded. “I need a boat. A fishing boat with an engine, preferably.”

“We have one for you, a *Lampara* fishing boat with a diesel engine. Your superior said you would want one and goods to smuggle as well.”

“That would strengthen our cover.”

“I have instructed the quartermaster to supply anything you want,” Monty said. He walked to the desk and rang a bell.

A lieutenant entered. “Show Mr . . . You didn’t introduce yourself,” Monty said.

“Edwin, just Edwin,” Tommy replied.

“Show Edwin to the *Re del Mare* and then introduce him to the quartermaster.”

* * *

They collected the boys en route and made their way down to the docks. There they found that the *Re del Mare* was a sardine-fishing boat. She was a bit over thirty feet long and had a diesel engine. Alf went straight down to the engine room to take a look at it.

Tommy looked at the lieutenant, who stood patiently waiting.

“What’s your name?”

“Steven Everett. I’m the lieutenant general’s adjutant and your main point of contact.”

“My name’s Tommy.”

“I thought—”

“Edwin is my codename, which I will use in transmissions.”

“That makes sense. I will keep your real name to myself. Can I call you Skipper?”

Tommy laughed. “If you want, the boys do.”

“You’re from Yorkshire . . . Hull?” Steven said.

“Yes, does it show?” Tommy grimaced.

“Your accent.”

“Oh. Where is the quartermaster?”

Steven took him, in an American jeep, to a sprawling supply depot. They came to a tent so large it was almost a marquee, and parked outside. Inside was an administration centre, full of army clerks. Steven went straight to the back, where a bespectacled man sat at a desk with a stack of requisition forms in front of him.

“QM, you look busy,” Steven said.

The QM looked up and took off his glasses.

“Ah, it’s the LG’s hitman. Good afternoon, Steven.”

“This is Edwin, he has some requirements that need fulfilling immediately.”

“And I suppose there will be no requisition forms.”

Steven smiled urbanely. “Afraid not, old chap.”

The QM looked annoyed and addressed Tommy directly. “Which lot are you with? SAS? SIS? SOE?”

Tommy grinned. “If I told you—”

The QM interrupted: “You would have to kill me. Heard it all before. What do you need?”

Tommy handed over a sheet of paper, on which he had listed his requirements:

4 x Browning Hi-Powers with silencers

9 x Mk II(S) Stens plus 15,000 rounds ammo, four mags per gun

A Bren plus ammo and six magazines, two spare barrels

Gun-cleaning kits x 9

A box of grenades and five satchel charges

A VHF radio set

Nine fighting knives

A week of day rations

2 x crates of whisky

4 x crates of grappa

4 x crates of Italian cigarettes

“We lost all our stuff when we got sunk by a German shore battery in Norway,” Tommy said by way of explanation.

The QM looked at the list and sighed. He would have to enter it all in the books as lost or destroyed, but then he smiled — it would give him the opportunity to lose some other stuff.

“You came in a jeep?”

“We did, old boy,” Steven drawled. Tommy realised he was putting it on.

“Well, go back to it and get out of my way. I will have it brought to you.” He looked at Tommy. “And you keep your sticky fingers to yourself. I know you Special Operations types, you’re all former thieves.”

Tommy grinned at him.

* * *

They waited outside the tent. Luckily it was approaching dusk and not so hot as during the day. As they sat waiting, Steven asked what had happened in Norway. Tommy told him.

“Not easy, losing men,” Steven said, and sighed.

“Have you lost any?” Tommy asked.

“I was in charge of a platoon of mechanised infantry, from the 30th Battalion Dorsetshires, in the desert. We were ambushed by a German long-range patrol. They had two Panzer IV tanks, half-tracks and heavy machine guns, as well as mortars. We had three Valentine IIIs, Universal Carriers and a five-ton truck. We put up a hell of a fight and chased them off, but it had a high cost. Two of the Valentines were destroyed and I lost half my men. I copped three in the thigh.”

“Is that when Dempsey took you on as adjutant?” Tommy asked.

“Yes; the previous one was killed during an air raid.”

* * *

The stores were brought to the jeep then piled high and tied down. Tommy spotted a crate of oranges and diverted it while no one was looking. They drove to the docks and the boys loaded up the boat. Ernie and Mike were missing, having gone to the market for fresh meat and veg. When he heard that, Steven asked, “Why do you need the rations?”

Tommy checked a Sten and handed it to Alf. “They are there in case we need to scuttle the boat and lie low on land.”

Meanwhile, Alf had started stripping the Sten to its component parts and was tutting loudly.

“What’s he doing?”

“He’ll clean up the action and then we’ll put a few hundred rounds through it. It’s the only way to make them reliable.”

Calabria — Taranto

July 1943

By 21:00 they were ready to sail and were about to cast off when someone ran down the dock and jumped aboard. Tommy came out of the bridge, pistol in hand.

“What the fuck — Steven?”

Steven, who was dressed in civilian clothes, carried a kit bag and a Tommy gun. “I’m coming with you!”

“The fuck you are,” Tommy said, fearing he had deserted.

Steven placed his Thompson on the deck housing and took out a slip of paper. “I have the boss’s permission.”

Tommy took the paper and scanned it. It was an official order, tasking Steven with accompanying the reconnaissance to Calabria as their military advisor. It had been signed by Monty himself.

Tommy shook his head. “Stow your gear.”

They were out in the Messina Strait when Steven reappeared. “Where are we going?”

Tommy looked at him, trying to decide if he was joking or not. He decided the man was serious. “Monty didn’t tell you?”

“No. I just told them that I wanted to get back into action and that going with you was an opportunity I didn’t want to miss.”

“You’re crazy. We’re going to Taranto first, then Reggio.”

Steven looked at the Italian coast as it passed and Tommy realised that he was seeing something from his personal history. “Are you looking for something, by going on this trip?” Tommy asked.

Steven snapped back to the present. “Why?”

“If you are, then I’ll take you back to Messina. People with agendas have no place in this line of work. Cool objectivity is needed. If you’re looking for redemption, this is not the place to find it.”

Steven didn’t answer for a long moment as he examined his feelings. Then: “No, I’m not looking for redemption, forgiveness or anything of that sort. My men got killed and I was wounded, but it wasn’t my fault. I’m looking to test myself and see what my limits are.”

“Do you speak Italian?”

“Yes, I learned in Rome before the war.”

Tommy looked at his clothes. "You look like a British tourist. Go below — there are some fishermen's clothes down there and something should fit you."

* * *

Steven changed into the clothes, which smelt like sardines — presumably thanks to their original owner — and were a poor fit. As he dressed he looked at the puckered scars where the German bullets had passed through his thigh. They were completely healed, but he remembered the pain from being transported in a Universal Carrier — otherwise known as a Bren Gun Carrier — across fifty miles of desert, then arriving at the first-aid station, where they packed the wounds and sent him on to hospital in Alexandria. There it was discovered that one of the bullets had nicked the artery just enough to cause a bleed without killing him outright.

It was in hospital that he met her. He was lying in bed, delirious from an infection. They were treating him with penicillin and a nurse was bathing his forehead. Apparently, he was raving about the attack. But he had a moment of lucidity and saw her for the first time. Oval face, blue eyes, a halo of fair hair with a strand hanging over one eye.

She was there still when his fever broke and he regained consciousness. She was leaning over him, wiping the sweat from his brow. He looked into her eyes.

"Am I in heaven?" He knew that line was corny the moment it left his mouth.

"You can do better than that," she replied.

"Will you have dinner with me?"

She laughed. "One, you don't even know my name, and two, you aren't going anywhere for a while."

"Well, it would be an excellent start, to know your name," he replied.

"Staff Nurse Porter," she said. "And that makes me a lieutenant."

"That's good, so am I," he chirped.

She looked at his chart. "So you are, Lieutenant Thompkins. You boys all look the same without your uniforms."

"My name is Steven," he said, and laid his hand on hers. It was cool and soft.

She looked at him — evaluating him? "Ellen." Then she walked away. Was he imagining a swing of the hips?

As he recovered, he was allowed to get up, first in a wheelchair then with crutches. He persuaded Ellen to escape with him and took her into the town, where he found a place for them to have dinner.

He was discharged from hospital after ten weeks and placed on the general's staff, received the Distinguished Service Cross and was mentioned in dispatches.

He soon realised he had fallen in love with Ellen, but their relationship would have to wait. She was dedicated to her job and stuck in Alex, while he was now heading behind enemy lines.

He stopped, and snapped back to the reality of the present. "What was I thinking?" he muttered aloud, and shook his head.

* * *

The Stens rattled as Tommy's men fired magazine after magazine through them. Sometimes they jammed. Sometimes they kept firing even when the trigger was released. But gradually they were run in and became more reliable.

Tommy took Steven's Thompson away and gave him a Sten. The Thompson was given to Alf. Tommy also gave Steven a Browning and silencer to replace his Webley.

"Do you know how to kill with a knife?" Tommy asked the new recruit.

"I've had some rudimentary training," Steven admitted.

"Well, if you have to use a knife, mean it. Give it everything and rip it out. It's harder than you think. Go for a stab to the neck, here." Tommy pointed to a spot below his ear. "Rip the knife forwards. If you can't get to that, go for the kidneys or heart."

It was dusk as they approached a beach to the west of the docks. Other boats were pulled up on it and they ran the *Re del Mare* up onto the sand so that Tommy, Steven and Dick could go ashore. Seth backed the boat off and anchored out in the bay. This was common practice with the bigger boats that were not local and stopping over.

The three of them made their way into Patemisco and took a table on the terrace of the only osteria in town. They ordered wine and waited.

A fisherman arrived and stood on the road outside the terrace. He scanned the drinkers and smiled when he saw Tommy. He made his way to their table and sat down.

"Hello, my friend. It's been a long time," he said.

"Hello, Federico. Yes, about four years," Tommy replied.

“Is it that long?”

“Almost. How are you doing? Business is good?” Tommy asked.

“Fishing keeps me fed but doesn’t make any money. The German pigs take half my catch.”

Tommy grinned. “Fed up with them?”

“And their puppet Mussolini.”

“Is that a common sentiment?” Steven asked.

Federico looked at him then at Tommy. “Who is this with the Roman accent?”

“A new man on my team, he’s still learning the ropes.”

Federico looked at Steven. “Be careful, my friend, we do not like new faces here.” Steven had the good sense to avoid any kind of challenging look. “But to answer your question, yes, it is, but it’s not spoken of as there are many ears that lead back to the police.”

Tommy poured him a glass of wine from a bottle the waiter had brought. “I hear that the Italians are going to surrender if the Allies land.”

Federico shrugged. “That will only happen if Mussolini is removed — and the only person who can do that is the king.”

Someone came and sat at a table next to them. Federico made a sign with his hand. Tommy changed the subject. “I will sail south to find sardines.”

Steven noted the change and looked at the man. He was ostensibly reading a paper, but his eyes didn’t move down the page. He was dressed in a black suit and dirty white shirt.

Steven’s attention came back to the table. Tommy was telling Federico something about the boat’s engine and Federico said he knew a mechanic.

“He will be in his workshop now,” Federico said, and stood.

* * *

They walked through the town. The man in the suit stood up once they were twenty yards away and followed them. Tommy said something to Dick, who turned down an alley, leaving the rest of them to carry on. They came to a building with large double doors at the front and went inside.

The owner, a large man by the name of Antonio, wiped his greasy hands on a rag as he greeted them. Federico introduced Tommy as *Tomasso*. Tommy started talking about supplying whisky and cigarettes, which surprised Steven, who suspected their follower was listening outside.

The door opened and the man stepped through; he was holding a pistol.

“Well, *that* was unexpected,” Steven said, oozing sarcasm.

“Not really.” Tommy grinned as Dick stepped in behind their visitor and placed the barrel of his Browning against the back of the man’s head.

It turned out that Tommy knew the garage owner and they were old friends. The policeman was soon tied up and suspended from a chain winch in a very uncomfortable position.

“This one is well known,” Federico said.

“Yes, he turned in my brother to the Gestapo,” Antonio said. “I owe him for that.”

“What will you do with him?” Steven asked.

“Kill him and throw him down an old well.” Federico grinned. “He has been a thorn in my side for long enough.”

The man made a pleading noise through the gag they had placed in his mouth. Everyone ignored him.

“Are there many defensive positions along the coast?” Tommy asked.

“A few, not many, and they are all manned by the Italian army,” Federico said.

“What about the Germans?” Tommy asked.

“They have what they call a *mechanised division* here. From talking to the Italian soldiers, I understand they are supposed to stay mobile to counter any threats as they come up.”

“If the Italian government gets rid of Il Duce and surrenders, what will they do?” Steven asked.

“They will not leave Italy, that is for sure,” Antonio said. “But whether they will spend their men on defending Calabria is another question.”

Steven looked into space, imagining a map of Italy. “The heel of the boot going up the east coast is pretty hard to defend as it is largely flat and ideal for an armoured enemy to attack. The Germans like mountains. If I was them, I would pull my troops back to the mountains north of Naples and set up a line of defence there.”

“That is a good theory, but we need to know for sure what their orders are,” Tommy said.

Antonio looked at him. “You are more than just a smuggler now.”

“I am, but I still have some good stuff to sell.”

“You have cigarettes?”

“I do — and some hard liquor.”

* * *

Tommy decided they needed a prisoner to take back to Messina. "Actually, the intelligence chaps would love one of each," Steven said. "You mean an Italian and a German?" Tommy said. "Yes."

Tommy pursed his lips in thought. "OK, we will do that."

He went to talk to Federico alone and then called the team together.

"The Germans have a barracks and headquarters just to the north of Taranto, at Statte. The officers have dinner in the city every Saturday night and Antonio tells me he knows what route they take. The commanding officer goes separately in his Mercedes staff car. The other officers go in kübelwagens. It might be something to do with German manners, but the commanding officer always leaves ten minutes after the others with a pair of motorcycle outriders, and a motorcycle and sidecar armed with a machine gun following them."

"How do we stop the car?" Seth asked.

"First we need to take out the outriders and the sidecar," Tommy said. "The road goes through some hills two miles out of Statte, and that is where we will hit them. A wire will be used to take out the outriders and these will stop the car." He tossed a couple of caltrops onto the table. "The sidecar must be taken out with concentrated fire. It carries an MG 42, which must be put out of action — fast. Seth, Gary, Alec and Harry will do that while Steven, Dick, Mike and I grab the colonel. The rest of you will provide cover further up the road, to make sure we are not disturbed."

"That's clear. Where do we get an Italian?"

"That's easy. The commanding officer lives in the suburbs; we snatch him from his house."

"What could go wrong?" Steven said.

* * *

They set up the ambush, once the kübelwagens had passed, with the help of a couple of local partisans and Antonio, who drove them to the site in his truck.

"String the wires across there, between those trees," Steven said. He had taken over some of the planning. "No, lower!" He crouched into a passable impression of someone riding a motorcycle. "About this height," he said, pointing to his upper chest, "and the second a foot lower."

The caltrops were scattered under the wire and for about eight feet beyond it. Then they waited . . . until the sound of motorcycles echoed off

the hills.

“Here they come!”

They hid behind hedges, four of them twenty yards back up the road to take out the sidecar, four men down from the caltrops to go for the commandant and four further down, in case the first four missed.

The motorcycles came around the corner doing about forty miles an hour and hit the wire, which was invisible. One man was decapitated, his helmeted head sailing through the air to tumble down the road as his motorcycle crashed into the hedge. The second must have spotted the top wire and tried to duck, but the second wire caught him on top of his helmet and plucked him out of the saddle.

The sidecar ran off the road into a ditch as four Stens rained down holy hell on the rider and passenger, the *pop-pop* of the guns drowned out by their engine noise.

The Mercedes hit the caltrops and snapped the wires. Tommy and Steven poured bullets into the engine to make sure it wasn’t going anywhere. It swerved back and forth across the road before hitting a large rock. Tommy sprinted over to the car and yanked open the rear door. The commandant was in shock, his face covered in blood where his face had hit the back of the driver’s seat. Steven opened the other side and shot the adjutant, while Mike put two bullets through the driver’s head.

Tommy dragged the commandant out and took his weapon, then placed an old flour sack over his head.

“Let’s go,” Tommy said and dragged the unfortunate man along behind him.

About a quarter-mile back up the road, there was a track off to the side where they had hidden the truck. Antonio drove them at breakneck speed in the gathering dark, without any lights, to the Italian major’s house. This time Tommy simply walked up to the front door and knocked. When a woman opened it, he pushed inside, holding her at the point of his gun. He forced her into the dining room, where the major was enjoying a bowl of pasta.

“Greetings, major.”

“What is the meaning of this?” the great man demanded, puffing out his chest.

“I’m here to extend an invitation for you to meet the commanding officers of the Allied forces in Sicily.”

The major looked at him in surprise.

“You will not be harmed and will be returned here in a short while,”
Tommy reassured him.

The major was a fussy man and insisted he put on his best uniform jacket and a hat which had a cockerel’s tail feathers in the brim. Once he was ready, he calmly followed Tommy out to the truck.

Antonio drove them to the beach via little-used tracks and back roads, as by then the alarm had been raised that the major was missing. They boarded the *Re del Mare* immediately.

Antonio kissed Tommy on the cheeks. “I hope all this means—”

Tommy stopped him. “I don’t know.”

Antonio grinned. “What I do not know I cannot tell?”

“Something like that.”

Calabria — Reggio

They deposited the officers with the British Military Police in Syracuse with instructions for them to be taken to headquarters. Tommy got the team ready for part two of their mission.

“The last job we got away with because they weren’t expecting us. It could have been a lot worse. This one will be a lot harder; the Germans and the Italians will be on full alert, not least because we are going just across the strait. This is an observation job: we need to identify which of the defences are Italian and which are German. We also need to contact the local anti-fascists and partisans, if there are any.”

He paused, collecting his thoughts.

“Latest intelligence is that the Italian king has sacked Mussolini and put Marshal Pietro Badoglio in as prime minister. He has dissolved the Fascist Party and looks to be playing a double game. On the one hand he has announced that Italy will continue to fight with Germany, on the other I am told he is negotiating an armistice with the Allies. Personally, I don’t trust him or the Italians as far as I can spit them, so we will be undercover and make sure we stay that way.”

He turned to a map.

“We will land at Santa Catarina, which is where the main fishing fleet works from. Steven, Gary, Dick and I will go ashore as we all speak Italian. The rest of you will stay on the boat. Steven and Gary will work their way north, mapping the defences and location of any reinforcements while Dick and I go south. I will try and contact the anti-fascists in the process. We do not need prisoners but if you trip over a high-ranking German, you can bring him back.”

That caused a laugh.

“Alf, as we approach the dock I want the engine to sound like a bag of nails and to give off smoke. That explains why we don’t have any fish aboard. Keep your guns close. Talking of which, we will only be taking sidearms ashore. Make sure you have plenty of full mags and your suppressor.”

He handed papers to the other three men who were going ashore. “I am assured that these are as good as the real thing. Memorise your names and background details. Remember that if you get caught you will attract the unwelcome attention of the Gestapo and will be shot as a spy.”

* * *

They approached the landing with the engine backfiring and blowing smoke. Tommy didn't ask what Alf had done to it but assumed it was temporary. They swung up to the dock and tied on. An Italian harbour master marched up and shouted, "What the hell are you doing? Get that pile of shit away from my dock!"

Tommy walked up to him and took him by the arm, walking him past the *Re del Mare*, which still had a trail of smoke rising from the exhaust pipe. He noticed nicotine stains on the harbour master's fingers.

"My friend, let me offer you a gift," Tommy said, and pulled a carton of a hundred cigarettes from his pocket. "My engine is fucked, and I need to repair it. I can buy parts and do it a lot quicker if we are tied up alongside."

The harbour master took the cigarettes and looked at Tommy expectantly. Tommy sighed and pulled a second carton from his pocket.

"You can stay for a week. If you stay longer, you make another donation."

"Understood. Have a nice day." Tommy called out to the boat: "Let's go and get those parts."

Steven, Gary and Dick came ashore, chatting away in Italian. They joined Tommy and the men set off together towards the town.

* * *

As soon as they were out of sight of the harbour they split up and headed in opposite directions. Tommy headed south towards where they knew there was a military airfield butted up against the southern edge of the town.

They all kept encoded notes as they spotted fortified positions. Size, number of men and armaments were all written down. Tommy was somewhat surprised by the lack of security, given that the Allies were just a few miles away over the water. They were only stopped once by a member of the Polizia di Stato, the national civilian police.

A few older aircraft were dispersed around the airfield's perimeter. A pair of ME 109s in Italian livery, a trio of Fokker triplanes in German colours, a solitary Stuka JU 87B and an SM.95 four-engine transport. The perimeter was ringed with anti-aircraft guns, mainly emplacements with four 20-mm Breda surrounding a fixed 75/46 CA modello 34 cannon. The

crews were sloppy and ill-disciplined as far as he could see, and far more interested in eating and drinking than in being vigilant.

They moved inland a couple of miles or so and started back north. They were now behind the airport and closer to the hills that backed the town. They found a path that wound back and forth up the escarpment and followed it to the top.

“Now that’s what I call a view,” Tommy said as they reached the summit.

“You can see almost everything from here,” Dick said, and pulled a pair of binoculars from his shoulder bag. “There’s a battery of five artillery pieces on the ridge overlooking the airport.” He scanned around to the south. “There’s another behind a line of trees on one of the terraces. Here, have a look.”

Tommy soon spotted them, mainly because German half-tracks were parked in a row behind. “Those are Flak 88s. Nasty buggers and manned by Germans.”

A bell told them they were not alone. Tommy turned, only to come face to face with a goat that was placidly chomping on a piece of greenery. Behind it was a young boy.

“Hello,” Tommy said. “Is this your goat?”

“Emilia,” the boy said.

“She is a fine animal,” Tommy said, then realised a whole flock surrounded them.

The boy looked concerned. “Did you know there is a German patrol heading this way?”

Tommy immediately became alert. “Where?”

The boy pointed down the slope to the north-west. Tommy took a look through his binoculars. The patrol was strung out in a line as if looking for something or someone. He looked to the south-west and saw a similar patrol.

“We need to get away from them.”

The boy held out his hand — Tommy at first thought he was asking for money — and took Tommy’s. “I know a place for you to hide, come.”

Tommy and Dick followed the boy further up the hill and then down into a gully and behind a large rock. The rock hid the entrance to a cave. They went in.

“Stay here,” the boy said, and left them.

Tommy took out his pistol and fitted the suppressor, Dick did the same. Tommy grimaced as a thought popped up in his head. "Mind you, all they have to do is lob a couple of grenades in here and we are toast."

They sat and waited, listening intently. They heard German voices and the tinkling of the goat's bells. The Germans questioned the boy; they had an interpreter with them. Then their blood froze as they heard the barking of a dog.

Tommy slowly cranked a shell into the chamber of his pistol. He would shoot Dick and himself rather than be captured. Then there was an angry bleat followed by a yelp and laughter. Shortly after, the boy appeared in the entrance to the cave.

"It is clear now, you can come out."

Tommy went first, his pistol at the ready in case it was a trap. It was not; all was clear. He removed the silencer and put the gun away.

"Are you English?" the boy asked.

Tommy looked at him, calculating the risks. "What is your name?"

"Dante."

"Well, Dante, my name is Edwin and yes, I am English."

"That is good; will you invade and kill all the Germans?"

"Do you not like them?"

"No! They treat us like their servants and one of them raped my cousin."

"We will invade sometime soon. Will the Italians here fight us?"

"No, they are tired of fighting. They want peace. Calabria is not a rich place. My father says we just want to be left to live our lives."

"Is your father a fascist?"

Dante spat on the dirt. "No, he hates them. They have brought nothing but trouble to our country."

Tommy switched subjects rapidly. "How did the Germans know we were up here?"

"They said they saw a flash, like from the lens of a looking glass."

Tommy felt sick. They had given themselves away. He took a deep breath. "Do you know if there is an anti-fascist organisation in the town?"

Dante grinned. "There is. My father is a member."

* * *

Tommy and Dick followed Dante down into the town and to a smallholding where the goats were corralled for the night. The boy took

them into the house, where his mother was preparing dinner. She looked at the men and added more macaroni to a pot of boiling water. Meanwhile, Dante's father was sitting in a chair fixing an eel trap.

"Papa, these men want to talk to you about the anti-fascist league. They are English."

Papa put down the trap. His hand stayed down beside his chair. "English?"

Tommy nodded.

"Who won the FA cup in thirty-nine?" the man asked in reasonable English.

Tommy grinned. "Portsmouth, by four goals to one against Wolverhampton Wanderers at Wembley. Cliff Parker scored a pair."

The man lifted his hand to his lap. He held a sawn-off shotgun, and his finger was on the trigger.

Tommy opened his jacket and showed him his own gun, then took it out with his fingertips and gave it to Dante, who took it to Papa. Papa turned it over in his hands then held it out for Tommy to take back.

"A Browning, made in Canada," Papa said. "The Germans' are made by FN — or they use the Luger or Walther."

"Where did you learn English?"

"I was a fisherman when I was younger and worked aboard several different English boats out of Portsmouth and Hastings. My name is Marco."

"I was based in Hull," Tommy said.

"Why are you here?"

"To evaluate the Italian will to keep fighting a war that Germany will lose," Tommy said.

"We have no will to fight anymore. Mussolini pushed us into Africa with his dream of a new Roman Empire. We have lost that, and Hitler only sees Italy as a buffer against the Allies attacking him from the south. He has no interest in Calabria."

His wife put a pot of steaming pasta with meat sauce on the table and set out five plates. "Eat with us," Marco said.

* * *

Tommy and Dick got back to the *Re del Mare* to find Steven and Gary already there.

"You missed dinner," Steven said.

“Oh no we didn’t,” Tommy said, and smirked. “We had the best maccheroni con il sugo si capra that I have ever tasted. Cooked by a beautiful Italian mama.” He took a salami from one coat pocket, and something that looked positively dangerous, wrapped in waxed paper, from the other.

“Is that ’nduja?” Steven asked.

“Home-made and as hot as hell,” Tommy answered. He put both items on the table. “Let’s get out of here.”

Headquarters

Tommy and Steven walked from the port to the headquarters building. It was early August 1943, and the sun beat down. Tommy had a map case in his hand and Steven a shoulder bag containing their report. As they approached the building, a dispatch rider roared up on his motorcycle. He wore the insignia of the Dorsetshires.

As he pulled his bike up onto its stand, he looked at Steven and snapped a salute. "Lieutenant Thompkins, sah!"

"Private Stockley! Still rushing around on your motorcycle?"

"Headquarters courier, sah."

Steven leaned towards Tommy. "Private Edwin Stockley here has a reputation as a brawler, which is the reason he is still a private." He turned to Stockley. "Have you been broken again?"

"Last month, sir. Got into a fight with some Yanks who didn't think we were proper fighting men."

"And what did they get?"

"Two broken noses and a broken arm."

Tommy nodded in appreciation.

"Sounds like you are wasted as a courier."

"Not at all, sah. I like bikes."

The two of them laughed at this and Stockley saluted before rushing into the building with his satchel full of messages.

Steven led them up the stairs to what he called "the boss's office". A clerk, who was seated outside, went in to announce them before returning and holding open the door.

Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey sat with his staff officers and commanders. "Well timed, gentlemen. You have your report?"

Steven opened his bag and took out their joint report.

Dempsey took it. "Please give it verbally for the benefit of the command."

They were ready for that, and Tommy took maps of both towns out of his map case.

"In summary, most — but not all — Italians are fed up with the war and are likely just to throw down their guns after an honour-saving shot or two. The Germans are more than happy to fight us, but the feeling is that they

will fall back in an organised retreat and blow up as much infrastructure as they can in the process.”

He pointed to the two maps. “As you can see, we have marked the defences manned by German troops in red, the Italians’ in green. The airfield at Reggio is well defended and has a number of fighter aircraft. We did not see any bombers, but they have the range to come from anywhere. There are a number of German transports there; our contacts think these are being held for the top brass in the region to get away if we invade.”

The officers examined the defences and Dempsey asked, “Which troops do you think will resist?”

Steven had that titbit of information at his fingertips. “The 185th Regiment’s paratroopers. They are a proud bunch of bastards. They are attached to the 211th Coastal Division and won’t give up without a fight—”

Tommy interjected. “I talked to one of the locals, who knows someone in the regiment. He says that in the case of an invasion they would take to the hills and resist from there. They are experienced mountain troops, apparently.”

Dempsey looked at the map. “Well, the most defendable place near Reggio is this mountain here.” He used a magnifying glass to check its name. “The Aspromonte.”

“The rough mountain,” Steven said.

* * *

The order for the attack on Reggio came from the joint command; the stated intent was to tie down the German forces in Calabria and gain a bridgehead in the toe of Italy. Montgomery didn’t think that the Germans would stick around to be pinned down and believed the whole operation, codenamed Baytown, was a waste of time and men. He wanted to prioritise Operation Avalanche, the invasion of Salerno. But orders were orders, and on 3 September 1943 a massive artillery barrage was launched from Sicily upon the coast of Reggio.

Tommy met up with Steven on the top of the Peloritani Ridge and watched the guns laying down the barrage on the coast just ten miles away.

“I feel sorry for the Italians,” Steven said. “Their government is about to surrender, and they don’t know it.”

Tommy looked at him from the corner of his eye. “When?”

“Today, probably.”

Tommy shook his head; someone's son, husband or brother was about to die for nothing.

The artillery barrage was followed by landing craft, which were in turn supported by airstrikes. Notably, there was almost no sound of shooting.

"Want to go and have a look?" Tommy asked.

"Yes, why not?" Steven said, and grinned.

* * *

They took the *Re del Mare* and crossed the strait. The shoreline was full of landing craft of different types. The 8th Army men were casually offloading tanks, guns, trucks, M3 half-tracks and stores, but noticeably *not* loading any wounded to go in the other direction. There was, however, no shortage of prisoners.

They stepped ashore and the rest of the crew followed. Steven, who was in uniform, was saluted and a military policeman asked, "Who are the civvies?"

Steven said they were SAS, which, given their unshaven and generally slovenly appearance, was believable. "Easier than explaining that you are SIS," he explained later.

The military policeman walked away. Steven led them to the temporary HQ where Dempsey and his staff were set up.

"Ah, Edwin and crew. Your assessment was correct. The Germans *are* retreating in an orderly fashion, blowing up bridges and making life difficult. The Italians are generally giving up without resistance, except the ones on that mountain. The Canadians are taking care of them."

There were grins all around and shortly afterwards Steven took them to an osteria, where he bought wine. Tommy suddenly noticed something different about him.

"Where has the gold braid gone?"

Tommy then noticed the sand-coloured beret that was tucked through one of Steven's epaulettes. He could see the cap badge, the flying dagger with the motto *Who Dares Wins*.

"You didn't . . . ?"

"Afraid I did, old chap."

The rest of the boys were looking confused, so Tommy raised his glass. "To Steven, the latest member of the SAS."

* * *

They were kept in Sicily until Operations Slapstick and Avalanche were complete. Slapstick was another operation at Taranto which had been offered to the Allies by the Italian government, along with Brindisi. Again, the landing on 9 September was unopposed, as the Italian surrender had been announced the day before. However, the German 1st Parachute Division carried out a textbook fighting retreat to the north, with ambushes and roadblocks to hold up the Allied advance. The only casualties during the landing were caused when HMS *Abdiel*, a minesweeper, hit a mine in the harbour.

* * *

Tommy sent a message to Bill, telling him that he and the crew had finished their work in Italy, and got a reply that told him to bring his men home and report to Broadway.

Finding transport was the main problem and they ended up cadging a ride on a British destroyer escorting a hospital ship back to the United Kingdom. The journey took just over a week. Tommy and the boys relaxed and topped up their suntans.

They landed in Portsmouth, and while the boys got to go home, Tommy headed to London by train. He reported as required and found a new girl in the outer office. He didn't have time to get to know her — Bill had his door open and called, "Hello, Tommy. Congratulations on a job well done in Italy."

Tommy went in and sat in his usual chair. Bill didn't beat around the bush.

"I have had a request — via Australian intelligence — from the head of the Z Special Unit in Australia for someone with clandestine maritime operations experience."

Tommy grimaced. "Seriously?"

Bill was unrepentant. "Stop whingeing, you've just had a week off! You leave tonight from Croydon. Here are your credentials and orders. Julia will drive you to the airport."

"Do I have time to go shopping?"

"Read your credentials."

Tommy opened them. "A Royal Naval Reserve officer?"

"Yes, you have been enrolled."

"What? I really am in the RNR? A commander?"

Bill laughed. "Yes. If there's anything else you don't understand, read your orders."

Bill took out his bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label whisky and poured them both a glass.

"Here's to the end of the war."

Australia

Tommy climbed aboard the DC-3, dressed in his new uniform. It felt strange, as if he was in disguise. He had a suitcase full of new clothes courtesy of Broadway, and he carried his Browning in a shoulder holster. *I must have pleased someone*, he thought.

The route Tommy was to travel consisted of a number of hops, each of around one thousand to fifteen hundred miles, or seven hours. The first was to Gibraltar. Then came Tripoli, Cairo, Dubai, Bombay and finally Madras. After that they would go by Royal Navy Auxiliary ship to Darwin. A grand total of ten days with stopovers.

The DC-3 only carried seven passengers, all military personnel of one service or another. A couple of army officers got off at Gibraltar and two more joined in Tripoli. One of the newcomers was a major with the cap badge of the Fusiliers, the other a colonel from the 1st Army Tank Brigade; they very much kept to themselves. A Royal Air Force squadron leader was much more friendly.

The friendly one, Bob Doe, had the Distinguished Flying Cross and a scar around his nose that made him look rather roguish. He was twenty-three and a good-looking man, heading to Burma to form an Indian Air Force squadron. Two other passengers made it a four for bridge to give them something to pass the time. One was an entertainer, singer and dancer, who was a member of the Entertainments National Service Association, better known as ENSA. Sandra Hayward was a vivacious blonde who was heading to Darwin. The other was Lieutenant Brice Sadler of the Australian Army Commandos, returning from training in Scotland.

Bob had them all laughing when he described how he got his scars. "In the winter of forty-one I was flying a Hurricane night fighter sortie. It was bloody cold, and it had been snowing. I got off OK and was pootling around waiting for command to vector me in on a target when my bloody oil cooler froze up. Next thing I know, the oil pressure drops and the engine temperature goes through the roof. Just then Command comes on the line and says, 'Target, angles fifteen 3, 1, 0 degrees.' Of course, I can do nothing about that as my engine was about to seize up. So, I replied, 'Black 1 responding. Sorry, old chap, but my engine just cut out. Am trying to put her down.' Squadron Leader Poppy Lambert, the controller, was an old

friend of mine and replied, ‘Try to land at Warmwell, old chap; they are all tucked up for the night but I will rouse them.’

“Well, with no engine, and it being dark, I had to guess where Warmwell was. Luckily someone fired up the lights and I spotted the runway over to port. I was too low and just made it over the fence, but my rate of descent was miles too high. I crashed rather than landed and the undercarriage collapsed, the nose dug in and she stopped rather abruptly. My seat harness broke and I headbutted the reflector sight. Nearly chopped my damned nose off! Broke my arm, too. Must have looked an absolute sight when they came and pulled me out.”

Sandra chuckled. “You must have looked like the red death!”

“Luckily the chaps at Park Prewett Hospital got my face back to some semblance of normality. Gillies performed miracles over twenty-two operations.”

“Gillies?” Tommy asked.

“Harold Gillies, the resident plastic surgeon at Park Prewett, he works wonders on the boys that are burnt up.”

They whiled away the hours playing bridge and Tommy partnered Sandra. They turned out to be a killer combination, somehow on the same wavelength.

* * *

While the crew was changed at every stop, the passengers only got a couple of hours’ layover while the aircraft was serviced and fuelled. That was spent close to the airports. Cairo was interesting, as they landed there in the morning. There was a market right outside the airport and they walked around it, stretching their legs and taking in the sights and smells. Tommy had been to the North African coast before but had not been to Cairo. The smell of spices, leather and local cooking were all new to him and he marvelled at the sight of camels. Children — street waifs — surrounded them begging for chocolate or cigarettes. They asked in English, and some of their language showed that they had learned it from soldiers.

“They can curse as well as any soldier,” Sandra joked, having just been asked for a “fucking fag”.

Tommy shooed them away then checked his pockets. “Check yours,” he advised.

“Little sods have stolen my ciggies!” Sandra gasped, checking her handbag.

Tommy laughed. “Your money still there?”

It was, and Tommy gave Sandra a pack of his Player’s when they got back to the plane.

* * *

They landed in Madras in the dark and were taken to a hotel. Tommy had just finished having a bath and was dressed in his pyjamas when there was a knock at his door. He opened it to find Sandra standing outside with a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. She was dressed in a silk robe. She said nothing; just tilted her head to one side. Tommy stood back and bowed as he let her in.

They explored Madras together over the next two days, sharing a bed at night. Then it was time to board the liner *Aquitania*, which was had been converted to a troop ship. She had been thoroughly gutted to accommodate 7,500 soldiers, including officers. She could cruise at twenty-three knots, which would help keep her safe from submarines. Tommy was given a cabin of his own, as was Sandra. They soon figured out a way to share.

* * *

Tommy had an awkward moment when, over dinner, the captain of the *Aquitania* asked him what ships he had served on. Tommy thought fast.

“I served on the good ship *Desk*,” he said. “I am a member of the naval intelligence service.”

This was close enough to the truth to be comfortable. He hoped they would assume he pored over maps and reports.

“And what will you do in Australia?” a brigadier asked.

“More of what I did in London, I expect,” Tommy replied.

Sandra came to his rescue by asking the captain to tell them some of his sea stories. The captain was well aware of their nocturnal shenanigans and didn’t miss the smile that Tommy and Sandra exchanged.

* * *

Tommy found that his feelings for Sandra had developed into something quite serious. He thought about Rose, but their relationship had been different because they were friends first and opportunistic lovers second. They had never said they loved each other, and he had not heard from her for months now. That probably meant she was off being an agent somewhere, or something equally clandestine.

On the other hand, Sandra *had* professed her love for him, and he had told her he loved her too. The irony was that he would probably not see her again unless they found themselves in the same place by coincidence. She was scheduled to join a touring party, and he had no idea where he would end up.

* * *

They made the most of the cruise and Sandra entertained the troops by singing for them. Tommy got used to saluting Royal Navy style, with the palm down, and being called *sir*. But all too soon they were docking at Darwin.

Tommy and Sandra were asked to disembark before the troops and told they would be met on the dock. They said their goodbyes before they walked down the gangway. Sandra was met by members of ENSA and Tommy by a man in military uniform. The ENSA types were loud and welcoming and swept Sandra away. Tommy's man greeted him and took him to a car, which in turn took him to an aerodrome, where he boarded another DC-3. Five and a half hours later he landed in Sydney, where he was met by a major and a lieutenant.

Tommy's new friends were somewhat subdued. One took his bag and the other led him to a car without any introduction beyond confirming who he was. Once in the car, they loosened up. "Commander Keelson, I am Major Ivan Lyon of the Allied Intelligence Bureau, and this is Lieutenant Hubert Carse, Royal Australian Navy. We are members of Special Operations Australia's Z Special Unit. We have been told you have extensive experience in infiltrating enemy ports with fishing boats."

"Well, I go by the name of Tommy and I'm a member of MI6, and yes, I have carried out several such missions. I'm guessing you fellers are thinking about doing the same?"

"Call me Ivan, and he is Hub," replied the major. "And yes, we are. We are going to your quarters first, then to headquarters."

Quarters turned out to be a house in Patonga. It was the home of an older couple, Mr and Mrs Clemens, who let out rooms. Headquarters was in a tented camp, and he was introduced to the men who made up Z Force. One was a civilian, Bill Reynolds, who was probably in his late fifties or early sixties.

"Bill and I came up with the idea to launch a raid on Singapore like those commandos did at Bordeaux, using canoes," Ivan explained.

Tommy looked at him seriously. “I was there when they did that.” A murmur rippled around the room. “I did the initial reconnaissance and set up their escape route. My team and I infiltrated the river in a former German trawler several times prior to the attack.”

“So that’s why they sent you! We have a seventy-foot Japanese coastal fish carrier called the *Krait*.”

“*Krait*?”

“A krait is a small but deadly snake in India,” Bill explained.

Operation Jaywick

*New South Wales, Australia
Mid-1943*

Tommy, dressed in tropical whites, was taken to the *Krait*, which was tied up alongside an old dock. Seventy feet long and eleven feet across the beam, she had a cabin amidships that was extended back to the stern by a roof which covered almost half the deck space and an awning over the foredeck. She looked to be drawing about five feet of water.

“What’s her engine like?” Tommy asked.

“A Gardner LW6 diesel,” Ivan said, and led him down to the engine room.

Tommy noticed the engine was of 2 x 3 construction. The LW engine was designed to be modular, with separate cylinder blocks and heads, which came in two- or three-cylinder variants and could be mixed and matched as required. This one had two three-cylinder blocks to make it a six-cylinder engine of 8,370 cubic centimetres, making 102 horsepower at 1,700 revs per minute.

“That isn’t standard,” Tommy said.

“No, we took it out of a busted boat and installed it here. She will go eight thousand miles with a full fuel load.”

Tommy was impressed; that opened up all sorts of possibilities. Her hull was sound — she was a good ship.

* * *

They returned to the headquarters tent and sat around a table.

“You have a nice boat there, what’s your plan?” Tommy asked.

Ivan responded: “We will use the *Krait* to take us to Singapore, where we will use folboats to enter the harbour and mine as many Japanese ships as possible. After the mines are set, we will row back to the *Krait* and make our escape.”

“What are folboats?” Tommy asked.

“Collapsible kayaks, folding boats,” Hub answered.

“Ah, we call them cockleshells. OK, who crews the boat and who paddles?”

Ivan pointed to each man in turn as he named the rowers. The men raised their hands or nodded to Tommy as they were named.

“I will be partnered with Houson, Captain Davidson with Falls and Lieutenant Page with Jones. The rest will crew the boat.”

“Well then, how do the rest of you feel about fancy dress?” Tommy said. The men looked at him as if he had gone barmy, so he explained: “To pass the *Krait* off as a Japanese fishing boat it has to look like one. That means that anybody on deck has to look like a Japanese sailor so that any Japanese warship that looks at you sees what it expects to see.”

He let that sink in.

“That means the crew get to dress up in Japanese clothes and, looking at your pearly white complexions, I think you’ll be dyeing your skin to a Japanese fisherman’s shade of brown.”

That set off a whole bunch of teasing and mickey taking.

“Another thing is that you will have to eat Japanese-style food. The smell of a steak being grilled will alert any ship downwind of you that something’s up.” There were groans all around.

“And last but not least, you cannot throw any rubbish overboard that identifies you as anything other than Japanese. It’s a favourite tactic of Japanese subs to follow the trail of rubbish from Allied ships in order to find and target them.”

* * *

Japanese-style clothing was sourced by going to Sydney and buying suitable cloth, which was made up into quilted coats and trousers by local ladies. Various dyes for their skin were tried to get the right shade and they settled on walnut oil. It did not cause an immediate allergic reaction in any of the men, the colour could be regulated by the number of coats applied, and it lasted a couple of weeks. However, prolonged use would irritate the skin and become uncomfortable.

The folboat crews had been training in the river prior to Tommy’s arrival and had developed their skill and stamina. They would need plenty of both as the plan involved a fifty-mile row across open sea.

For this operation, Tommy’s job was done. He could go to Sydney to rest while the others prepared to fulfil the mission.

* * *

With everything ready, they departed New South Wales and sailed the *Krait* to Thursday Island, which is the nearest land in Australia to Papua New Guinea. Unfortunately, the *Krait* suffered some damage during a storm and they had to sail on to Exmouth Gulf in Western Australia. Repairs were made and they took delivery of the folboats Ivan had ordered from England. The first thing they did was assemble them and in doing so they found that parts were missing and some were faulty. Luckily, they had some talented engineers who could carry out on-the-spot modifications and repairs to make them fit together.

On 1 September the USS *Chanticleer* arrived to help with repairs to the *Krait*'s prop shaft, which had broken at the tail. Her engineers brought their equipment aboard to fix it. It was a tricky job as the tail shaft went through the stern tube in the hull and connected to the prop. However, being on a submarine support ship meant the *Chanticleer*'s men were used to solving difficult problems.

While the work was being done, Captain Leland invited them aboard for dinner. They were fed roast turkey with all the trimmings and given hot showers, their first in six weeks. That done, the *Krait* refuelled and they set off for Singapore on 2 September 1943.

* * *

The sea was heavy and the weather bad from the outset. Then they sailed into a violent storm.

“Get the pumps working!” Hub shouted over the screeching wind. They were heavily laden, and the waves were beginning to swamp them. The men grabbed anything that could hold water, and bailed. They nearly foundered and Horace Young was thrown out of his hammock. By 4 September the sea had calmed, and the storm died down.

On the sixth, Ivan announced, “Boys! Listen up! From now on we are flying the Japanese ensign, only ship's crew to be on deck and no toilet paper to be used in the head — water only, like the Japs do it.”

* * *

8 September 1943

“That's the Lombok Strait dead ahead,” Hub announced as they caught sight of their first objective. “We pass through that into the Java Sea.”

They ambled along until sunset and saw sharks — big ones — then at 18:00 took the *Krait* up to full ahead. The lights and fires of native villages

twinkled in the dark. A lonely searchlight speared out and swept the sea, missing them by some margin.

As they approached the strait the current picked up against them, and even at full ahead they were only making around one knot at most. In the morning, they spotted a Malaysian prau, which sailed serenely past them.

By 11 September they were in the Java Sea and turning north-east to head up through the Kangean Islands towards Singapore. They followed the coast of Java, coming close enough to take photos and for some butterflies to follow them. Then visibility decreased and the temperature went up as they entered the tropics.

An unexpected gust of wind sent a hat and a towel over the side.

“Bugger, turn us around — we have to recover them.” Thankfully, the offending articles were recovered before they could become incriminating.

On 12 September, a Sunday, they spotted Borneo. At four degrees south of the Equator, it was hot and humid. They heard on the radio that the Italians had surrendered. Even in that location they could still hear Australian short-wave broadcasts if the Japanese were not jamming them. They decided to anchor for the night.

* * *

It was sticky and hot: 83 per cent humidity and 82 °F. The crew were finding it hard to sleep so they up anchored and left at daybreak. Sea traffic was picking up; they passed two more praus and a Chinese junk got very close.

By the fourteenth they were sailing into the teeth of a gale, which slowed their progress. On the morning of 15 September, Hub announced at 07:30 that they had crossed the Equator. They chugged ever onwards.

* * *

16 September 1943

Just after midnight, the wind dropped and the sea became eerily calm. Ivan knew what was coming and ordered, “Batten down the hatches and make this ship as watertight as you can. Shake a leg, we don’t have much time!”

The typhoon hit them at 01:30 with a peculiar shriek. For forty-five minutes they rode it out — then it was gone. It had passed them by, leaving behind only a disturbed sea as a souvenir.

They reached the Lingga Island group before noon and were just sixty miles from Singapore. Hundreds of islands surrounded them, along with

some fine local sailing craft. The fishing here was good and the fishermen were working their boats and nets.

The islands beckoned to men who had been at sea for so long; coconut palms swayed in the wind and each island was heavily forested. The scents and sounds reached them across the water as they hunted for a suitable inlet or bay to hide the *Krait*.

In the afternoon they were buzzed by a Japanese floatplane. The *Krait*'s crew stood on deck and waved to it while the kayak team dived for cover. It passed at 2,000 feet and swooped away towards Singapore. That night they saw searchlights, away towards the middle of a group of islands. They had anchored close to a Japanese floatplane base.

At dawn, more floatplanes passed overhead. At 08:30 three natives in a canoe approached the *Krait* and Ivan ordered them to get underway.

* * *

18 September 1943

“We can’t find anywhere to hide the *Krait*, so we will just sail around looking busy and hide in plain sight,” Ivan announced at 01:00. He had chosen an uninhabited island at which to drop off the kayaks.

“Can you get us fifty yards from the shore?” Ivan asked Hub.

Ultimately, three kayaks and crew made it to the beach, and the *Krait* set off towards Borneo and relative safety.

* * *

19 September 1943

The kayak team paddled all night to establish a forward base on a small island near Singapore harbour. When they got there, they were lucky and found a cave to hide in. They planned to make the attack on the night of 25 September and it turned out to be quite straightforward. They paddled into the harbour, stuck their limpet mines on a number of targets and then paddled back to their island cave.

Just after dawn on 26 September, the mines went up and six ships sank or were damaged. The *Shosei Maru*, *Nichiren Maru* and *Nasusan Maru* were all damaged and the *Arare Maru*, *Hakusan Maru* and *Kizan Maru* sank.

Needless to say, the attack generated a certain amount of commotion, and they decided to stay put until it died down. Ultimately, the kayak men

returned to the drop-off island and were picked up by the *Krait* on 2 October.

* * *

Tommy met the *Krait* as it docked at Exmouth Gulf on 19 October 1943. Reconnaissance planes had confirmed the sinking of the three ships and that the other three had been damaged. A claim by the team that they had hit a seventh ship was unconfirmed.

The Japanese never believed that a commando raid had sunk the ships and set about torturing and killing many Chinese and Malay Singaporeans in an attempt to find out who did it — and as an act of retribution.

The *Krait*

November 1943

Tommy was kept in Australia, his expertise still needed by Z Force. He took over the *Krait* and used it to train commandos in covert insertion. Then he got a request to recover someone described as a *coastwatcher* from one of the Makur Islands, which were part of the Caroline Islands.

The coastwatcher was a rugged Australian, Ben Masters — a former forestry manager who had volunteered to be coastwatcher on the island of Onoun. He had become ill and had to be replaced.

Tommy was briefed by Major Roger Trafford. “Ben has been on the island since forty-one and, with the aid of the natives, been able to keep one step ahead of the Japs. But now he is too sick to carry on and needs to be brought home. We want you to take his replacement with you and bring Masters back.”

“Who is the replacement?” Tommy asked.

“CPO Wilfred Oakfield.”

“CPO? A navy man,” Tommy said.

“He was the master-at-arms on HMAS *Australia* and is island born and bred. He can speak Carolinian and knows the locals’ habits. He is fully trained in evasion, concealment and radio communications.”

Tommy could appreciate the value of such a man. However, he had a problem. “I don’t have a crew right now and the *Krait* would normally have at least half a dozen, including an engineer and a radio man.”

“Don’t worry about that, we have recruited a number of islanders who are ideal for this, and I have nagged the navy into giving us a PO engineer and a radio man.”

Tommy looked at a large map on the wall and located the Caroline Islands. They were a tiny speck due north of Port Moresby. “Do the Japs come past there often?” he asked.

“They come down through the Bonin Islands, Mariana Island and Caroline Island towards the Marshall, Gilbert and Solomon Islands. The coastwatcher in the Caroline Islands is vital for early warning of convoys and reinforcements.”

Tommy nodded — he could see the extent of Japan’s control by a line drawn on the map. Now he could visualise their convoys of supplies and

reinforcements coming down from Japan to replenish the garrisons on the islands they had taken.

* * *

The crew for the *Krait* arrived in Exmouth Gulf. Four dark-skinned men from the Lesser Sunda Islands, each wearing not much more than a loincloth, arrived first. They brought with them what Tommy initially took to be Sten guns but found out were in fact Mk I Austens. *Austen* stood for Australian Sten and was a design that took the barrel, receiver and trigger mechanism of a Mk I Sten and added the firing pin and telescopic cover (over the return spring), folding stock and bolt from a German MP40. Added to that were twin (fore and aft) pistol grips. Tommy learned that the folding stock contained a screwdriver and cleaning rod, and the pistol grips contained spare parts.

The guns were suppressed and Tommy thought them a significant improvement on the basic Sten. He got his hands on one and made sure they had plenty of 9 x 19-mm ammunition on board.

The other two crewmen soon showed up with their passenger, Wilf Oakfield. PO Mason Grant was a thirty-year-old stoker who had oil for blood. There was nothing anyone could teach him about diesel engines, as he had been brought up by a father who ran a trucking company. In his own words, "After mother died, me dad would leave me with the mechanics when he was driving. Me toys were pistons and injectors." The second man was a slight, wiry specimen of a man — Leading Seaman Oliver Cartwright, radio man and electrician. They had both volunteered for special duty. Now they looked at the *Krait* with some amusement.

"Where's the bloody guns?" Cartwright said, grinning.

"Anything more than a pop gun and she'd sink from the recoil," Grant quipped.

A deep, gravelly voice came from behind them. "Don't knock her, she's practically bloomin' perfect," Wilf Oakfield said, and threw his kit bag onto the deck.

Mason and Wilf looked at each other and shrugged before stepping aboard.

Tommy got the crew and their passenger together. "I'm told you all know what we're about to do, so I won't go over that again. As soon as we enter Japanese-controlled waters, only the local boys will be on deck in the open. If you want a smoke, then do it under cover of the after-deck roof and

never at night, as a fag end can be seen glowing for miles. If we get stopped by a Jap patrol boat, we'll try to kill all the Japs and sink the boat. We're armed with Austens and grenades to defend ourselves. If we're stopped by anything bigger we can put up a fight, but we're not expected to be taken alive. So keep one bullet for yourself or have your pills to hand."

They had all been issued with cyanide pills as part of their standard packs. Tommy looked at their faces and saw calm acceptance.

"One last thing. Tito" — one of the local boys raised a hand — "is a trained medic. He is to be protected at all costs as we need him to look after Ben Masters once we pick him up."

Tommy then turned his attention to Wilf Oakfield. "We have a new AWA 3BZ radio set for you here. Check it over before we leave."

The radio set came in parts: mic, headphones and speaker in one crate, receiver in a second crate, transmitter in a third and aerial tuner and key together in a fourth. A team of native helpers would be needed to get it to the coastwatcher's hut.

Once Wilf had checked his radio set, he took a seat and they pulled out of the gulf. Their course would take them north by north-east through the Sunda Islands, through the Banda Sea around the western tip of West Papua, then north-east to the Carolines and the Namonuito Atoll and Onoun.

It was a journey of some 3,500 miles, to be made at nine knots. It would take fourteen and a half days at best.

* * *

They were making good progress when they got hit by a storm — one that verged on being a typhoon — just north of Maluku. They managed to get behind one of the small islands to the north of Misool Island.

"Of all the damn luck! How long do you think it will last?" Wilf said to Tommy.

"This one? Probably a few hours. Generally, the stronger they are, the faster they pass."

Visibility during the storm was down to practically zero due to the driving rain, and by the time it had passed it was dark. Tommy decided the prudent thing was to wait for daylight to navigate out of the islands.

He was just laying himself down to sleep when he heard voices. He grabbed his Austen and slipped up onto the deck.

"Do you hear them too?" Wilf whispered.

“Yes, they are speaking Japanese.”

The rest of the men had come up by now, and all were armed. A laugh crossed the water . . . and then music. A man started to sing.

“It must be a patrol boat,” Tommy whispered.

“Do we take it out?” Wilf asked.

“No, that will bring every Japanese ship in the region here to find them. We will slip out before dawn.”

There was no sleep for anyone that night. They were about to start the engine a half-hour before dawn when they heard another engine start, and shouting.

“Wait,” Tommy told them.

The men lined the side, guns at the ready. A light appeared from behind the island. A searchlight played across the water; in its reflection they could see the profile of the patrol boat. The light probed and the profile changed as the boat turned.

“They are going away from us,” Oliver said, then sighed.

He was right. The patrol boat was heading east towards Papua. Tommy heaved a sigh of relief too.

* * *

A little after sunrise, having given the patrol boat time to get away, they started up and moved out. The sea was oily calm, and the wind had dropped to an almost insignificant breeze. The humidity, however, rose exponentially. Mist ascended from the island and surrounding sea, and soon the morning sun was just a glow to the east as they chugged through the gathering fog.

Tommy kept their speed down to five knots and had two men in the bow. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a boat appeared beam on, directly ahead of them.

“Guns!” Tommy ordered as he swung the wheel.

It was too late; the *Krait* hit the patrol boat just aft of dead centre. Tommy killed the engine and grabbed his Austen. A face appeared at the side and Tommy fired a short burst.

“Board them! Kill them all!” he yelled as the *Krait* turned under her own momentum and settled alongside the Japanese boat. His men responded and swarmed the side, guns spitting, empty shell cases rattling on the deck. Tommy was right there with them, and killed another uniformed Japanese with a five-round burst.

He smiled; the Austen really was better than the Sten it had been modelled on. It had roughly the same rate of fire, but the action was smoother. Putting that aside, he headed for the bridge. A shot rang out as he tried the door and a bullet slammed through the thin wood, taking him in the left bicep. He swore and kicked the door open, spraying the bridge with bullets one handed until his magazine emptied.

* * *

It was all over almost as soon as it started. Grenades were used to finish off any men below decks. Tommy ordered the seacocks opened to scuttle her, and they returned to the *Krait*.

Tito noticed Tommy's arm hanging uselessly and the blood dripping from his fingers. "Skipper's hurt," he said, and went to Tommy's side.

"Get us away from here," Tommy said, and the last he saw of the patrol boat was its bow slipping under the water.

* * *

Tito got Wilf to help him take Tommy's coat and shirt off. The gash was ragged and there was no exit wound.

"How did this happen?" Tito asked.

"I got shot," Tommy snapped.

"No, what I meant was, did you get shot direct or did the bullet bounce off something?"

"It passed through the bridge door."

"That explains it. The bullet flattened before it hit you." He grinned, showing white teeth. "I don't suppose you want morphine?" Tommy shook his head and Tito's grin got wider, if anything. "Bite on this." He pushed a leather strip between Tommy's teeth, then took a probe and delved into the hole. Tommy went cross-eyed with the pain. Having located the bullet, Tito took a pair of long-nosed forceps and slid them in. Then the pain *really* started as he drew the deformed bullet out.

He held it up. It was a 7 mm and the nose had been flattened and splayed. Tommy glared at it, but it wasn't over yet.

After depositing the bullet in a tin dish, Tito sterilised the wound — which was still bleeding freely.

"I need to stop the bleeding. Get me a soldering iron."

Mason, who had been watching from the sidelines, fetched a large iron and a blowtorch. He heated the iron until it glowed cherry red and handed it to Tito.

“Sure you don’t want to have some morphine, Skipper?”

“Get the fuck on with it!” Tommy swore around the leather.

Timo pushed the glowing iron into the wound. Tommy went rigid, then passed out.

“Thought that would happen,” Tito said.

* * *

As Tommy came to, his first impression was that his world was full of pain. His second was that he wanted to be sick. He rolled to one side and threw up. Someone had put a bucket there just for this purpose, and 90 per cent went in.

Tito heard his retching and appeared in the doorway. “It gets most people like that.”

Tommy swore at him. Tito disappeared then reappeared with two tablets and some water in a glass. “Take these. They will help.”

Tommy swallowed the pills and drank some water. Then he stood and grabbed the door frame as his head spun. He braced his shoulders and stepped outside, taking several breaths of the hot, steamy air. Then he realised the fog had gone and the sun was descending towards the west.

“Where are we?”

“North-west of Waigeo. We have just turned to course 0, 5, 0,” said Ralf, who was at the wheel.

“How long was I out?”

“About seven hours,” Tito told him. “You lost a fair bit of blood.”

* * *

Sixteen days after departing the Australian mainland, they arrived at Onoun. The island was shaped like a pistol with the barrel pointing north-east. Their landing was on the west side, at the only village on the island, where they were met by a half-dozen local men. Wilf soon had them carry his radio and supplies ashore. Tommy and Tito were taken to see Ben Masters.

The man was a wreck. He had been sick for a month with malaria and hepatitis. He was dehydrated and delirious. Wilf looked in on him.

“Bugger, he’s in a worse way than I expected,” he said.

Tommy agreed. “Yes, he is. We’ll get him to Darwin as quickly as we can.”

“I’m going up into the hills, so I’ll say goodbye now,” Wilf said.

Tommy shook his hand and watched him go, with the local lads carrying the crates of supplies and the new radio.

“Skipper, we can take Masters to the boat now,” Tito said. “I’ve put in a saline drip.”

Darwin

December 1943

Once they were out of Japanese waters, the *Krait* radioed ahead that they would put into Cullen Bay. They were met by medical personnel from the hospital, which was only a couple of hundred yards from their mooring.

Ben was taken straight to a ward but the doctor in charge stopped Tommy from leaving.

“I can see you have been wounded; I want to take a look at it.”

Tommy, who had been feeling ill for the last few days, agreed to go with him.

The hospital had been bombed at some point and still showed the scars. The doctor, who introduced himself as Michael Talbot, took Tommy to a treatment room and undid his dressing. He wrinkled his nose. “That’s not good. Didn’t your medic change the dressings?”

“Not for the last week, he has been looking after Ben Masters.”

“Well, your wound is infected.”

Talbot called a nurse and asked her to clean the wound while he got the operating theatre ready. Tommy was alarmed at this, but what also alarmed him was the smell and the colour of his arm.

“This was cauterised,” the nurse said.

“Yes, we were deep in enemy territory and couldn’t hang around.”

She shook her head. “There’s a lot of necrotic tissue — the wound has stopped healing.”

“Oh,” he said.

Talbot returned. “Get him ready for the table. We need to sort that mess out right away or he will lose that arm.”

“What’s your name?” Tommy asked the nurse as she put an IV into the back of his hand. She had already had him strip and put on a surgical gown.

“Nurse Gloria Crutchlow.”

“So, Nurse Gloria, what’s he going to do?”

“Cut away the dead tissue and stitch this up properly so your blood can get to the wound and heal it. When was the last time you ate?”

“Last night.”

“What do you weigh?”

“About fifteen stone.”

She led him to a scale and had him stand on it.

“Fourteen stone four pounds. Good.” She had him lie on a gurney, then took a syringe and filled it from a bottle, having referred to some tables. She pushed the needle into the IV and pressed the plunger. “This may feel cold,” she said.

Tommy started to feel light-headed. “Ooh! Happy juice,” he said, and chuckled.

Nurse Gloria fussed around him. Her preparations for him to be moved to the theatre included starting a saline IV. Two porters soon arrived and Tommy watched the ceiling go by.

* * *

He awoke some hours later. His arm was heavily bandaged and immobilised. A nurse immediately spotted that he had opened his eyes and came to him. She laid one cool hand on his forehead and took his pulse with the other. She appeared satisfied, and thrust a thermometer under his tongue. “Still running a fever. Well, penicillin will take care of that.”

“What did they do?”

“Dr Talbot removed the necrotic tissue and fixed the blood vessels so that blood flows to the wound. Then he stitched you up from the inside out. Wiggle your fingers.”

Tommy tentatively did so.

“Excellent. Here, sip some water.”

She passed him a glass of water and he drank it down. He hadn’t realised he was so thirsty. She went away and returned with a fresh jug of water.

“Do you know how Ben Masters is doing?” Tommy asked her.

“The man you brought back? He has chronic hepatitis and is in a poor way. He was a heavy drinker and his liver may fail.”

* * *

They only kept Tommy in for a week. Once the doc was satisfied that he was healing properly, he discharged him. “Come back in a week and we will take out the stitches,” he said in parting.

Tommy was officially on light duties, but the first thing he did was make sure the *Krait* was serviced and ready to go. The second thing he did was go out and have a beer. Darwin wasn’t a large town, but it had been made bigger by the influx of military personnel from both Australia and

America. The Americans had built a large naval base to the south of the city, which was home to both submarines and patrol torpedo (PT) boats. Consequently, there was a higher density of bars than a city of its size would normally have.

He chose one at random and sat down. He was dressed in his white uniform shorts and short-sleeved white shirt with his rank on the epaulettes. Before long an American lieutenant, with the insignia of a PT boat man on his arm, asked if he could join him.

“Peter Walters, PT boat skipper. We don’t see many British navy here.”

“Edwin, Royal Navy.”

An enlightened look came into Walter’s eyes. “Aah — you’re the one with that old fishing boat.”

“That’s me.”

“Wouldn’t you rather be on a destroyer or PT boat?”

Tommy smiled gently. “Actually, no. The *Krait* has been responsible for the sinking of seven Japanese ships and will be responsible for many more.”

“Shoot! That’s more than any of us have done. Did you get wounded sinking one?”

Tommy gave a heavily redacted account of the attack on the patrol boat. Walters was impressed. “Shot through a door! Well, darn me. I never want to get that close to the Japs.”

Tommy finished his beer and Walters insisted on buying him a second. They were chatting when a familiar voice said, “You shouldn’t have too many, they thin the blood.”

Tommy stood up and turned around. “Nurse Gloria Crutchlow, are you checking up on me?”

She smiled. “Not at all. That might make you think you were important.”

Tommy grinned and offered her a seat, which she took. He introduced her to Walters: “This is my guardian angel, Nurse Gloria.”

“Just Gloria, I’m off duty,” she told Walters with a smile. “We kicked him out to make room for properly wounded men.”

“I would have left earlier if you had asked me,” Tommy quipped.

“So you can get back on your boat?”

“She’s got you there,” Walters said. He had been watching the pair’s wordplay with amusement. He stood and bowed. “I’ll leave you to your

banter. Tommy, I'll catch you later."

Dinner followed, once Gloria had had a chance to go home and change out of uniform. After dinner, they attended a dance. After the dance they said goodnight and went their separate ways.

At least they should or would have done that. That was what Tommy intended. But the Japanese changed his plans.

As he was walking Gloria to her door, the air-raid sirens started to howl. Searchlights stabbed upwards and anti-aircraft guns sent shells high into the night sky. Bombs whistled down. Gloria grabbed his arm and led him down through a hatch into the basement of the house.

"Is there anyone else at home?" Tommy asked as the sound of explosions got louder.

"No, the other two girls are on duty."

The basement had an old sofa, which they sat on side by side. A bomb landed very close and Gloria grabbed Tommy in fright. The next thing he knew he was kissing her and then . . .

* * *

His recovery was almost too fast. They took the stitches out and he was declared fit to serve. He contacted Z Force and the Allied Intelligence Bureau and said the *Krait* and crew were ready to go.

Orders came by return, telling him: *Stay in Darwin and be prepared for a briefing.* He got the crew together and two days later they were visited by a pair of officers from Allied Intelligence, one army and the other navy.

"We want you to take an army survey team to Buru, support them while they are there and bring them back," Major Burrows told him.

"How many?" Tommy asked.

"Five, all engineers."

Tommy checked the chart and paced off the distance with his fingers. "Six hundred and fifty miles or thereabouts; that will take three days each way. Are there Japanese on the island?"

"Yes, as far as we know there is a radio relay station on Mount Kapalatmada that they use to relay messages. If you can destroy that, it will greatly inconvenience them."

"What force do they have?"

"A company-strength force in the north of the island to protect the transmitter. There is at least a regiment down on the south coast, where we

want the surveyors to map the defences. If you can get a few prisoners on the way, that would be good.”

They aren't asking much, are they? thought Tommy.

Buru

February 1944

The surveyors were all members of the Royal Australian Engineers. Along with their instruments they carried Lee-Enfield No. 4 rifles — apart from the officer, who carried a Thompson. They were all in spotless, well-ironed uniforms. Tommy rolled his eyes at the sight and approached the officer.

“Excuse me, lieutenant, but are they the only weapons you have?”

The lieutenant, who had not yet been formally introduced to Tommy, looked at the scruffy man facing him dressed like a Chinese fisherman and said, “What the hell has that to do with you?”

At that point, Major Burrows appeared. “Lieutenant Fitz-William, may I introduce Commander Keelson, the captain of the *Krait* and your escort?”

The lieutenant went pink as he realised that he had just been rude to a superior officer. “Oh, ah, dreadfully sorry.”

Tommy held up a hand, forestalling any extended apology. “You were not to know. Now, about your men’s guns . . . ?”

“They are standard issue.”

“If you fire one of those in the jungle in Buru, every Jap within five miles will come running. Not only that, they are long and will get tangled in the undergrowth.” Tommy turned to the major. “Can we get them issued with suppressed Stens or Austens?”

“Excellent idea, I’ll talk to the QM.” The major beamed.

Tommy then walked the lieutenant towards the *Krait*, where stores and equipment were being loaded.

“You can call me Skipper or Tommy. I am a member of the intelligence service. Those four men over there, and myself, will be your guides and escort — along with two more jungle specialists, who haven’t arrived yet.”

“I see your men carry fighting knives and machetes,” Fitz-William said.

“Yes, all our weapons are quiet, apart from the grenades. Killing the enemy without lots of bangs seems to unnerve them.”

Fitz-William looked at the crew — the four native men dressed in loincloths but with webbing belts to carry their knives, the white men dressed in Chinese quilted jackets. They all looked confident and professional. As soon as the lieutenant had left, Tommy went back to cleaning a Bren gun.

A jeep pulled up at the dock and two men got out of the back. They were Australian Z Force commandos, dressed in jungle greens and carrying their packs and guns. They walked over to the *Krait*.

“Commander Keelson?” one said.

Tommy stepped forward, wiping his hands on a rag, and saluted. “That’s me.”

“Sergeant Bull and Corporal Waverly.”

“Welcome aboard, get your kit stowed.”

“There’s a bunch of Stens in the jeep, sir. The major said they were for the engineers.”

Tommy looked for the lieutenant and saw him chivvying his men along to stow their equipment. “Lieutenant! Your Stens are in the jeep.”

Sergeant Bull saw the lieutenant and frowned; he did not look happy. “Is that who they’ve given us?”

Tommy noted the look. “You know him?”

The sergeant practically growled, “He is the clumsiest, most inept man I have ever had the misfortune to train.”

Fitz-William stepped up to the two of them with a beaming smile. “Sergeant Bull, I didn’t know you were coming with us!” He turned his smile on Tommy. “He trained us, you know.”

* * *

Fitz-William was clumsy; he tripped over ropes, and when the boat rolled he couldn’t make it from one end to the other without being in danger of going overboard. He was, however, passionate about his work. Tommy liked him in one way and despaired of him in another.

When a storm rolled in, he sat the lieutenant down in the wheelhouse and told him not to move. They didn’t wear life jackets, and he didn’t want to lose him to the sea.

Later, Sergeant Bull sat with Tommy to discuss the tactics for travelling through the rainforest.

“What’s your Christian name, sergeant?” Tommy asked before they started. The sergeant actually blushed.

“Most of me mates call me Bull ‘cos me name is Vivian.”

Tommy smiled, “I wouldn’t worry about that, John Wayne’s real name is Marion. You can call me Tommy.”

Bull grinned, then got to business. “Your native fellas are good scouts, so I suggest we send two of them out on point whenever we are moving.

Put the other two out as flankers and you me and the corps will provide close protection. The lieutenant should be encouraged to follow you or me."

Tommy agreed it was a good plan. "Let me get the lieutenant."

Fitz-William came in and sat with the two of them. Tommy spread a map of Buru Island on the table. "Where do you need to go to do your surveying?"

"Well, sir—"

Tommy held up his hand. "We will not be using ranks or sirs on this mission. I am Tommy, this is Bull, and you are?"

"William."

William Fitz-William — that's original, Tommy thought.

"OK, William, carry on."

"Yes, s— Sorry, Tommy. We need to get to high ground so we can take bearings and ranges. Sites that overlook the defences would be best. But to start with, Mount Kapalatmada. Aerial photographs have shown that the peak has been cleared by the Japanese to give their relay station a clear field of view. We should be able to see most of the island from there as it is more than eleven thousand feet high."

Tommy looked at Bull and raised his eyebrows. That was a hell of a mountain. "Do you have the photographs?"

"Oh! Yes, I do." William opened his ever-present map case and took a wad of photographic prints out.

Tommy took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then spread out the photos, which were aerial shots of the island. He found one of the relay stations and after looking at it for a moment fetched his chart magnifier, a magnifying glass set into a frame that was placed on a chart at its focal length. He examined the photo in detail.

"There is a road leading up to the top of the mountain. Question is, where does it go at the other end?"

They looked through the photographs and managed to piece three together that covered an area from the mountain towards the coast. Tommy followed the road through the forest until the edge of the last photo. He then went back to the map and tried to estimate where it would end.

"They obviously need to get up there — to service the station if it isn't manned or take supplies up if it is — and I'm pretty sure that their supplies are brought in by boat."

“And if they do take supplies to the station, then they will take them by truck,” Bull said.

Tommy grinned. “Exactly.”

* * *

Tommy navigated them to the north coast of Buru, to where he had seen a rubber plantation on the coast in a bay where the river Bara emptied. He guessed that was where the Japanese landing was, and their home base. He planned to land them in a river inlet two miles to the west, and then the shore party would make their way around the inland side of the plantation.

They approached at night, feeling their way in, with Tito in the bow guiding them. The boat crept into the river and the team slipped ashore.

“Take her out and watch for our signal at the pick-up point; we should be there in two weeks. If it all goes tits up and we need to get out earlier, I will send a message by radio,” Tommy told Mason, who was left in charge of the *Krait*.

* * *

They went inland a little. They found a coastal road that looked recently used and followed it, keeping to the trees of the plantation that lined the bay. Progress was good as the rubber trees were spaced out and the brush under them kept clear, to aid harvesting.

They came to what had once been the plantation owner’s house, which had been taken over by the Japanese as their dock and base. It was lit by electric lights, and they could hear the chug of a generator. Men sat around either eating or chatting. Bull did a head count. “A platoon of about fifty.”

There was also a vehicle park patrolled by a pair of sentries. In it were a four-wheel-drive car nicknamed the *Yonki* by the Allies, three Nissan 180 trucks and two six-by-six Isuzus.

Tommy led them south along the road that led into the interior. He was pretty sure this went to the relay station. The road swung west until it came to a river, where it split with the main road and continued east along the coast and second road off to the south.

They followed the road upriver for two miles until it started to meander up a hill.

“This is perfect, let’s block the road and set up an ambush,” Tommy said.

They soon had a tree down and lying across the road on the blind side of the corner. Then Tito and Maru went back down so that they could give advance warning as soon as they saw a truck coming. However, no truck came until the following day. Soon it was heard growling up the incline, obviously heavily laden.

They waited until it came around the corner, encountered the fallen tree and stopped. They continued to wait until men got out with axes and saws to clear the obstruction they had set up.

“NOW!” Tommy cried — and he opened fire, taking down two men with his first burst. Tito and Maru came out of the forest behind the truck and killed any soldiers in the back. It was all over in less than thirty seconds. Eight men were either dead or so badly wounded they couldn’t move. Bull went around the bodies and put a bullet through every one of their heads.

The bodies were dragged into the jungle and the roadblock moved aside. Tommy climbed up into the cab of their new vehicle, along with Bull and William; the rest of the men got in the back. Bull drove and they were soon climbing up towards the mountain.

The first eight miles were easy but then the truck started to struggle as it had a normal carburettor and no supercharger. Tommy noticed he was getting short of breath as the oxygen levels decreased. The road zigzagged up the hill, and soon they were down to second gear to make progress.

“We must be up at eight thousand feet by now,” William said, looking at his map.

“Bloomin’ air is getting thin,” Bull said.

Two miles further on they were down to first gear, but the truck made it and the relay station came into view as they rounded a corner.

Two men came out to greet them and were shot dead before they could react, then the team was out of the truck and rushing the buildings. Tommy followed Bull, who booted open a door and entered with gun blazing. Two more men died in the hail of fire. The sound of Stens popping came from the little house at the back . . . and then it was quiet.

All the Japanese were dead.

Escape and Evasion

“Get your men busy, we will not destroy the equipment until you are done,” Tommy said.

William had the good sense not to ask why, but ordered his men to get on with it. Meanwhile Tommy, Bull and Stan, the corporal, went about setting small charges that would have a devastating effect on the equipment. They placed half-pound charges of RDX plastic explosive known as Composite C2, which was made up of 80 per cent RDX and 20 per cent non-oily, non-explosive plasticiser inside the equipment cases. The charge detonators were linked by a wire to a hell box, a ten-cap blasting machine.

Tommy waited as the engineers faffed around with theodolites and maps, taking the bearings and heights of mountains and hills in the distance. By the time they had finished, it was getting late in the day.

“The Japs will be missing their truck soon,” Bull said.

“I know. Have you taken out the sump plug?” Tommy asked.

“Yes, we will start it just before we leave.”

The engine would run for a while and then seize up, making the truck useless.

“Time’s up, William,” Tommy told him.

“We’re just about done. The boys are packing.”

Tommy checked that no one but dead Japanese were in the buildings, then went to the hell box and inserted the handle.

“Fire in the hole!” he cried, and gave the handle a sharp twist.

Every piece of equipment, including the generator, was blown to bits. The antenna tower was taken down and the buildings caught fire.

Tommy gathered up the detonation kit and ran over to join the others. He was panting by the time he got there.

“I’ve always wanted to say that!” he said, and grinned at them.

* * *

They headed south-west down the mountain, through the forest with two of the local lads leading and trail-breaking. They moved down the slope as fast as they could manage given the altitude, but it got easier the further they went.

“Will we travel all night?” William asked.

"I'm afraid so, we need to put as much distance between us and the station as possible. The Japs will be looking for their missing truck come the morning and when they spot the smoke from the mountain peak, the game will be up."

The way was difficult — rocks and holes were unseen hazards in the dark. Fortunately, they were under the forest canopy and hidden from any search aircraft that might have been sent out. They had been travelling for six hours when Tommy had them rest and set up camp by a stream. Tommy estimated they were maybe six miles from the station.

"We rest for two hours, then move on."

He dozed after eating a ration pack and woke instinctively two hours later.

"Leave nothing behind," he told them.

Tommy steered a course as close to due south as he could, marching them for two hours and resting for an hour. By evening they reached another streambed and made camp.

"No fires, cold rations only." He sat next to William. "Do you know where we are?"

"Only by dead reckoning, same as you," William answered. He had rolled his trouser leg up and was looking at his shin.

Tommy bent forward to look at it. There was a deep scratch.

"Tito, come look at William's leg, will you?" he called.

Tito went to work on it while Tommy pulled out his map of the island.

"By my reckoning we are about here, a mile inland from the village of Siopot."

William took out his own, heavily annotated map of the area. "If we are here, and by the way I agree with you, then there should be a hill just over there." He pointed east. "It overlooks the coast in both directions."

* * *

The next morning, they heard a plane droning overhead. It was circling the area and obviously searching for something. *Probably us*, Tommy thought. They moved up the side of the hill but stopped short of the peak, as there was a lack of cover there.

The plane circled for another half-hour then flew off to the east.

"Let's go. Do your stuff as fast as you can and avoid reflections from your lenses," he told the engineers.

They made a perimeter around the crown of the hill and kept watch, hidden by the trees. The engineers put up a tarp on poles to hide themselves and to prevent reflections.

Tommy checked in on them after a couple of hours. "Seen much?"

"Actually, we have. There are coastal batteries set up there, there, there and there," William said, indicating points along the coast. "The coast road is well used and Jap trucks are moving up and down it all the time."

"We are finished, sir," the engineer's corporal said.

William was happy. "Good." He pointed at another hill to the east. "I want to be there tomorrow."

* * *

Tommy checked the site was as clean as possible before they moved on, and got the men heading down into the trees as quickly as practical. If they could get to the next hill by dark, they would be in a good position for the next day.

They went over several smaller hills before they came to the first of the hills that William had selected. But there was a problem; they had run out of trees for cover. The terrain had turned from forest to scrubland.

"We will stay here until dark and then move up the hill to that ridge of trees," Tommy stated.

It was a tense wait. The aeroplane came back, and Tommy got a glimpse of it. It was a Japanese spotter floatplane. He made sure the men stayed well hidden. On a hunch, he asked Tito, "Can one of your boys check our back trail?"

"Sure, boss, David can do it."

Just as it got dark, David returned. He looked worried. "The Japs have got local trackers and are about two hours behind us."

"Bugger, it won't be long before they try to trap us between two patrols and the rendezvous."

William asked, "What will you do?"

Tommy thought about it. He was unhampered by army training and so decided: "We will set up an ambush to eliminate the patrol behind us. The Japs know where we are, so we need to change location fast. We will go to the coast road and hijack a truck."

The terrain was ideal. They moved back to a place where a gully would force the pursuing soldiers together, and set things up. Tommy was at

the entrance to the gully, in a tree. The others spread out along the gully, ready to put the Japanese in a crossfire.

As he sat waiting, he suddenly remembered a scene from the film *Sergeant York* and took out his Browning. He screwed the silencer to the end of the barrel and rested it on a branch in front of him. It was a stable aiming position, and he took a shot at a tree across the way. *Nice*, he thought as the bullet hit the knot he was aiming at.

Then a twig snapped and Tommy became alert. A tracker appeared; he examined the ground and signalled that the track led to the gully. A Japanese officer carrying a pistol and wearing a sword emerged from the trees. He dropped into a half-crouch and looked around.

Tommy waited, hardly risking a breath.

Hearing and seeing nothing, the officer waved his arm. Fifteen men came out of the jungle. The tracker and two soldiers advanced, and when they had reached the entrance opposite Tommy, the rest came after them. Tommy waited — he wanted all of them in the gully, which was around fifty yards long, before he started anything.

The last men came up in single file, spaced about six feet apart. He took careful aim at the last one.

PHUT.

The man dropped to the ground. His comrade kept going, unaware.

PHUT.

The second man went down. Tommy focused on the next one in line.

PHUT.

He too dropped to the ground. Tommy switched to his Sten, just as screams and shots came from up the gully and there was an explosion. A man backed out of it, firing his rifle up towards the rocks where the lads were hiding. Tommy gave him a burst.

Everything went quiet.

Tommy dropped to the ground and advanced the ten yards to the gully's mouth. Suddenly he was confronted by an apparently manic Japanese officer wielding a samurai sword. The man's face was full of hate, and he charged at Tommy with sword raised.

Tommy put three bullets into his shoulder; the sword fell from now-useless fingers, landing six feet in front of Tommy. Yet the man staggered on. Tommy swung the metal butt of his Sten around and floored him.

Bull appeared; he looked around and saw the bodies. "All dead?"

Tommy kicked the officer. "Not this one."

Bull bent over the officer and examined his shoulder. "Made a right mess of that."

The rest of the team came out of the gully. Tito was wiping his knife on a scrap of Japanese uniform.

"Patch this one up — I don't want him bleeding to death — and search him thoroughly."

"What — *now*, boss?" William asked, surprising Tommy with the honorific.

"We make for the road. You will have to map any fortifications as we travel."

* * *

The officer was bandaged and given morphine. His arms were tied to his sides, as they couldn't tie his hands together. That done, they made their way south to the road.

The first truck that passed was full of soldiers. They let that go and waited for something else.

"David and Tito, go to the corners ahead and behind us and let us know when you see a suitable truck coming," Tommy said.

Eventually, a truck came loaded with crates. Tommy threw the officer out into the road in front of it and it stopped with a squeal of brakes. The driver and his mate were quickly dispatched and some of the crates thrown into the sea to make room for everyone.

"Go east, young man," Tommy said — misquoting another film.

As they drove, Bull asked, "You got three in the head. How?"

"Did you ever see the film *Sergeant York*?"

"The one with Gary Cooper?"

"Do you remember the scene where he picks off a column of Germans one by one, starting with the last man?"

"Yeah, he said something about shooting geese."

"Well, I remembered that — and picked them off one by one."

Bull laughed. "Last one first!"

One of the crates on their new truck contained a radio, so they parked up in the forest near the rendezvous and set it up. It had more range than their own little set. Oliver made contact with the *Krait*; she would come in to pick them up that night.

* * *

They waited. There was a small dock and Bull was at the end of it with a torch. The rest waited in the treeline on the other side of the road. A light blinked from the sea and Bull answered it. Then the *Krait* emerged from the dark. They started to move — but suddenly there were headlights coming down the road at speed.

Tommy grabbed the officer and dragged him across the road. Bull came up and relieved him of his burden. The truck stopped and men poured out of the back.

“GO, GO, GO!” Tommy yelled, and opened fire to cover the men.

The Bren gun on the *Krait* opened up, sending a stream of tracers at the Japanese. They were firing back with rifles, and then a machine gun mounted on the roof of their cab kicked into life. Tommy dived for cover as bullets tore up the road where he had been standing just a moment before.

Whoever was on the Bren targeted the cab, and the machine gun was silenced for a moment. Tommy didn’t hang around: he sprinted for the boat and dived onto it as bullets whined through the air past him.

The *Krait* backed away from the dock, her side lined with guns pouring rounds down on the enemy.

LS5

March 1944

Back in Darwin they handed the Japanese officer to intelligence and Tommy found himself in hospital again. He had not felt the bullet go through his calf as he dived into the *Krait*. Tito had treated it — and a few other wounds the men had collected — but he needed hospital treatment to sort it out when they got back. While he was there, a major from intelligence stopped by.

“You have new orders from London,” he said to Tommy, who was trying out a pair of crutches.

Tommy took the proffered envelope and opened it, scanning the contents. “Can we stop by my quarters on the way to the airfield? I need to pick up my stuff.”

He never got a chance to say goodbye to the men, as an aircraft was waiting to take him to Perth, where a Qantas PBY Catalina flying boat was waiting for him.

From Perth he flew to Colombo in Ceylon, which took thirty hours with a tailwind. From there he was taken by DC-3 back to the United Kingdom, landing in Croydon. A car picked him up from the airport and deposited him at the Army and Navy Club.

He was still using a stick to walk when Bill visited him.

“Shot again?”

“Almost healed.”

Bill smiled.

“How’s Rose?” Tommy asked.

“She’s fine. She’s in England on assignment.”

“I should look her up.”

Bill looked at Tommy, assessing him before he said, “She’s at Bletchley Park.”

Tommy looked blank. “Where? What goes on there?”

Bill looked around to see who could overhear. “It’s an old country house in Buckinghamshire. It’s the home of the Code and Cypher School. It’s where we break the German codes. Rose is in charge of the SIS codes, Air and Met section.”

Tommy beamed. “Really? Well done her. Was she promoted?”

“She was, she’s a lieutenant now. But we need to talk of your next assignment, which is very urgent.”

Tommy wasn’t surprised. They hadn’t gone to the trouble of flying him back for nothing. “Alright, what is it?”

“We have requisitioned you a new boat and put together most of your old crew. We want you to work with Combined Operations to get their people ashore and assist with mapping and plotting the defences on the beaches.”

Tommy knew he shouldn’t ask, but did so anyway. “What’s this for?”

Bill looked at him as if he should know better. “Once a fisherman, always a fisherman.”

Tommy laughed.

* * *

His boat was at Portland, and he approached the dock with interest. Bill followed him from the car.

“You have to be kidding me,” he said out loud.

There in front of him, docked next to a trio of MTBs, concealed from air observation by a canopy, was a German LS-boat.

“LS5 was shot up last year off Kos in the Aegean. The Germans thought she had been sunk, but we got to her before they did and took her to Malta.”

LS5 was forty feet long and eleven feet wide. Weighing in at around twelve tons, she was powered by two Daimler-Benz twelve-cylinder, 2,000-horsepower diesels. She had two internal, stern-mounted, 450-mm (which is to say, 17.7-inch) torpedo tubes, depth charges and a 20-mm machine gun in a closed turret.

“We will replace the tubes to take 21-inch Mk VIIIIs,” Bill told him.

“And the gun?” Tommy asked.

“That will stay. We have plenty of German 20-mm ammo.”

A group of men approached; Seth led them. It was his old crew. Gary Stone the radio man. Alf Boddington their engineer. Alec Jones, Harry Stepson, Earnest Wilson and Mike Brown, and one new face who introduced himself as Phil Walsh, assistant engineer.

“Nice to see you all,” Tommy said, after shaking hands with all of them.

* * *

The torpedo tubes were changed — extra fuel tanks were added in place of the depth charges to increase the range to five hundred miles and a Type 286 PU radar installed. They checked the boat out from stem to stern — the last thing they needed were any surprises. The deck was completely enclosed with the turret mounted on the roof. The gunner stood at the rear of the cabin on a raised platform with his torso in the turret. Her hull and upperworks had been well repaired where she had been damaged and everything else was good. They found a plaque that said she was commissioned on 15 October 1941.

They familiarised themselves with the *LS5* with night runs out into the Channel. They had to be fast, as the first mission was already set.

She was ready to go and a ten-man team of marines and navy surveyors arrived, commanded by a sergeant. Their orders said they were to be taken to a beach in Normandy and landed at night. They were loaded onto the boat. They had no kit bags and only carried their wet suits, fins and slates for making notes.

* * *

2 April 1944

At 21:00, the *LS5* growled into life, the big diesels sending their throb through the hull. Tommy took the helm and they eased out of the port. A special recognition signal had been given to the air force and naval units operating in the Channel, and they flashed it at Breakwater Fort as they exited. Then Tommy pushed the throttles forward and she surged ahead.

“Blimey, she can shift a bit, can’t she?” the marine sergeant said.

“The Germans know how to make good engines,” Tommy replied.

They were doing thirty knots and would be off the coast in four hours. Meanwhile, the landing team members made themselves comfortable. Mike Brown had the turret and acted as lookout, with Gary Stone on the radar.

Tommy steered by the Anschütz gyro compass installed in front of the wheel, between the other instruments. He also had a magnetic compass in a binnacle to one side. After years of steering by magnetic compasses — with all their vagaries — this was pure luxury.

“Ship, thirty degrees off the starboard bow, range four miles heading east-north-east,” Gary called out.

“Speed?” Tommy shouted back.

“Fourteen knots.”

Tommy visualised the triangle of conversion and eased the helm to starboard. "I will pass behind them, keep an ear out for recognition requests."

The radio beeped and Gary replied: "It is HMS *Tartar*, a Tribal-class destroyer. They have accepted our recognition signal."

The sergeant came over to stand by Tommy and looked out of the window. "She is passing dead ahead of us, about a mile away. We will pass half a mile or so behind her."

"No danger they will mistake us for Krauts?"

"I certainly hope not."

Ten minutes later, and well clear of the *Tartar*, Tommy eased them back to their original heading.

* * *

3 April 1944

At 01:00 Tommy eased back the throttles and their speed fell away rapidly. He could see the coast silhouetted against the night sky and could pick out the landmarks he had selected to aid his navigation. He slowed the engines to tick over, barely making headway against the current. The landing team men were all putting on their wetsuits.

"Tide is going in, you have three hours," Tommy told them. "Time is 01:05 set."

They synchronised their watches. The sergeant grinned, his teeth white against the camouflage make-up smeared over his face. "More than enough. Let's go."

They were a mile off the beach and the team left the *LS5* to swim ashore.

* * *

Sergeant Ian Jameson was an engineer and marine. He was a strong swimmer and with fins could easily swim for miles. The difference here was he was swimming directly for an enemy-held beach.

The team had been dropped off in a line, a mile offshore of what would become known as Sword Beach, and all were swimming in. As strong swimmers, they were expected to reach dry land in less than thirty minutes.

Ian's hands brushed sand — he put his knees down and knelt. He looked around and ahead of him could only see the landing craft obstructions that the Germans had built. He moved carefully. His hands

touched a smooth metal object. He traced the outline. *A naval mine.* He lay flat and parallel to the beach, finding more set along the gradient. He made notes on his slate.

That done, he moved up onto the beach and measured the spacing of the anti-landing craft obstructions. As he did, he probed for landmines with his knife. Something caught his eye as he moved. He approached the obstacle.

Nasty buggers have attached land mines to the obstructions.

Keeping an eye on the time, he sampled the sand for firmness using a special tool. Meticulous notes were kept on the slate, showing where he had tested and the result. He advanced up the beach on his belly, his dark wetsuit helping to keep him hidden. He saw the outline of bunkers and pillboxes.

Then time was up and he returned to the water's edge, which was closer now it was high tide. He slipped into the water and started the swim out.

* * *

Tommy kept the *LS5* pretty much stationary, by choosing two points that stood out against the sky and taking bearings.

The boys lined the side, which had a net slung over it for the swimmers to climb. They peered towards the shore, looking for any signs of them.

A splash gave the first one away, and Tommy swung the bow around so that the net faced the shore. The sergeant came aboard.

Tommy slowly made way along the line he had dropped them off from, and one by one they climbed the net. They were all cold and Harry served up cups of hot soup. With the last man aboard, Tommy turned the bow to face England and eased the throttle forward a notch. They exited the bay of the Seine at five knots, and once in the Channel he took them up to thirty.

* * *

The next night they did the same, only this time on a beach to the west of the last one. It was a different landing team, and they overstayed their time by an hour. Consequently, they didn't get back to Portland while it was still dark. The sun was coming up as they came within sight of Portland Bill. Several aircraft passed overhead and requested recognition signals, and an MGB came out to meet them.

Tommy didn't complain; he had guessed what all of this was in aid of and knew it was more important than the inconvenience they were

experiencing.

Tommy slept most of the day and woke at 15:00 for breakfast and a briefing on that night's activity. The team from the first night was back on duty and they would survey the next beach west. He asked Ian why they were doing it.

"We are making sure conditions haven't changed since the last survey, and updating our intel on the defences. Aerial photos are good, but the view from the beach cannot be replicated."

Tommy understood that and decided that they could, possibly, add to the picture. He talked to the briefing officer.

"Would it help if we could go close inshore during daylight and take photographs of the shoreline?"

"Actually, that would be very helpful. We haven't asked because we thought it would be too dangerous."

He was lying: they hadn't asked because they feared it would give the game away. But having a German boat and a crew who knew what they were doing was a new opportunity, and one that should not be ignored.

"Let me make a phone call." The officer left the briefing room and returned fifteen minutes later. "Would you come with me?"

Tommy stood and followed him to an office. The officer picked up the phone and told whoever was on the other end that Tommy was there. Then he handed him the phone.

"Commander Keelson," Tommy said.

"Commander, your suggestion is a good one. Am I right in assuming you are volunteering yourself and the boat to do this?"

The voice was unmistakably that of the prime minister, Winston Churchill.

"I am, sir."

"Let me be clear. You are not to be captured, whatever happens. Your boat and crew must perish rather than let that happen. Do you understand?"

Tommy raised his eyebrows at the officer, who was looking at him expectantly.

"I do, sir. We will bring back the information."

"Good man. I have your record in front of me, you are a credit to MI6. Carry on." And the phone went dead.

"Well, that was unexpected," Tommy said as he put the receiver down.

* * *

The mission that night was regulation. They returned, and rested during the morning. In the afternoon an intelligence officer turned up with a camera. It was large and he was small — a bespectacled man called Leonard, who looked as though he wouldn't say "boo" to a goose.

"This camera needs to be mounted as high as it can be," he said. "It is an F.24."

"If we mount that on the cabin roof it will stand out like a nun in a knocking shop," Alf said.

Tommy thought about it. "What if we mounted it in place of the 20 mm?"

"In the turret?"

The intelligence officer looked at the turret and exclaimed, "That would be ideal! I can operate it from inside."

Tommy did a double-take. "Hold on a minute, did you say *you* could operate it?"

Leonard looked excited. "I was expecting to just have you run along the coast five hundred yards offshore and set it off to take the pictures automatically, but now I can control it myself and get much better results."

"You do know this a *not to be captured alive* mission?" Tommy asked. His crew had been told that and batted it off as business as usual.

"I am well aware of the risks."

Tommy shrugged; this little fellow had more guts than most.

Alf got to work, and they soon dismounted the 20 mm. To mount the camera, he had to fabricate a couple of brackets, but that didn't take long using the onshore facilities in a workshop.

They were escorted out of Portland by a pair of motor torpedo boats and had to keep their speed to thirty knots accordingly. However, as soon as they were out of British waters Tommy gunned the engines to get across to Normandy as quickly as possible and in the daylight. They had enough fuel onboard to make the crossing at forty knots, which would minimise the risk of interception, and he used it. Once they got to the headland at Goury, they slowed to twenty knots to stay on the plane and turned east. Tommy had to estimate the range to the shore.

Leonard was in the turret, but Tommy couldn't hear anything over the noise of the engines. In any case, he was concentrating on piloting the boat.

A signal winked from an observation tower. Seth took an Aldis lamp and replied. It worked — the guns stayed quiet.

“Looks like that signal book they gave us was up to date,” Seth said as he closed the window.

Tommy replied, “Bloody good job, there are a lot of guns over there.”

“It’s a bit scary in daylight.” Seth grimaced.

Tommy agreed with a nod and eased them around Jardeheu towards Cherbourg, which they knew to be heavily fortified.

Alec, who was assisting Leonard, passed up a new cartridge of film in exchange for a used one, which he placed in an open case. They passed Cherbourg and rounded the point past Barfleur and Réville, where there was a strong redoubt and bunkers.

Now they were passing the beaches.

“Bloody hell, look at all those bunkers. We’ve been cuddling up to them for the last week.” The radio crackled and someone spoke in German. Tommy ignored it: none of the crew spoke German worth a damn. They continued the run and were passing Arromanches when the Germans gave up on the radio and flashed a signal. They replied with the daily recognition signal from the book. They passed Ouistreham and were approaching the Rouen estuary when Tommy saw an S-boat coming down the river at speed.

It turned towards them.

“Shit, they’ve sent a boat to intercept us. HOLD ON.”

Tommy spun the wheel and pushed the throttles to their stops. The *LS5* bucked as she hit a wave head-on. Leonard dropped out of the turret and landed in a heap on the deck.

“What the hell?” he yelled. Seth helped him to his feet and pointed out the stern window. Just then the gun on the S-boat’s forward deck opened up. “They’re shooting at us!”

“Hold on!” Tommy yelled again and zipped. “Get the depth charges ready, minimum depth.”

Seth and Mike went aft to remove the safety pins from the depth charge launchers.

“Ready!”

A line of bullet holes appeared in the after-deck. “They’re going for the engines!” Seth shouted.

Tommy eased back on the throttles, all the time watching the boat behind them. “Stand by.”

More holes and bullets hit the armoured stern panel of the bridge. *Any time you’re ready, boss*, thought Seth.

“NOW!” Seth sent the two depth charges over the side. Tommy cracked the throttles open to maximum. Supercharged diesel engines surged with power, and they hit forty-two knots.

The depth charge went off right under the S-boat, which seemed to be lifted on the water plumes. It came down in two halves. The gunner kept firing until the bow hit the water.

They headed west, directly into the sunset, heading for England and home. Tommy let out a sigh of relief. All they had to do now was get there. But a waterspout made him realise they were not out of the woods yet. They were still in range of the big guns ashore and the Germans were pissed off that they had sunk their boat.

Tommy zigged and zagged until they were out of range, then set course for Portland before handing the helm to Seth. He went aft to check the damage.

“Are we going to sink?” Leonard asked.

“No, they didn’t hit us below the waterline.”

“Did you kill all the crew on that boat?”

“I honestly don’t know. Getting hit by a pair of depth charges in a boat is like hitting a mine in a truck, so some of them will certainly have been killed. Their mates ashore will send out another boat to look for survivors.”

Leonard looked slightly sad.

“What’s the matter?” Tommy asked.

“I’ve never been involved with killing people before. Not directly.”

Prelude

17 April 1944

Tommy was summoned to London a week after the photographic mission. The *LS5* was being retired, at least for the time being. She would need a new identity if she was to carry on.

Tommy got off the train at Waterloo and decided to walk to Broadway. He crossed Westminster Bridge, returning the salute of a policeman in Parliament Square, and walked down Broad Sanctuary.

The office was as dreary as ever, and Bill sat behind his desk looking typically calm.

“Tommy, well done on sinking that S-boat.”

Tommy shrugged that off and started to remove his coat, while Bill picked up the phone and dialled a number. “He’s here . . . OK.”

Bill picked up his own coat and said, “Keep that on — we have an appointment.”

* * *

Tommy followed Bill out of the building and towards St James’s Park. They turned right along Birdcage Walk, then left into Horse Guards Road, past the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. They turned the corner into King Charles Street and approached a nondescript door set into the wall.

Bill knocked and it opened. A policeman checked their identity papers and let them in. They were led down into what must have been the cellars of the Treasury and Cabinet Office. People typed and dashed to and fro on important business. Maps of the theatres of combat were pinned to walls. They reached a room with the label *Cabinet Room* on the door. Bill knocked and it was opened by a woman of middle years.

“Captain Curry and Commander Keelson,” Bill said.

“Come in,” the familiar voice of Winston Churchill bellowed.

The woman smiled and rolled her eyes as she let them enter. As they did so, Tommy was astounded to find that not only was Churchill there but so were two admirals and half a dozen army officers from brigadier general to field marshal. All were sitting at the table.

“Captain Curry, thank you for bringing Keelson to us so promptly.” Churchill had a cigar burning and took a puff. He looked at Tommy. “We

have here in front of us copies of the photographs of the Normandy region that your crew and a member of the photographic team took. To get these showed initiative and great bravery. I cannot tell you why, but these photographs are very valuable."

There was a round of "*Hear, hear!*"

"On top of that, you sank a German S-boat, the account of which reflects coolness under fire. First Sea Lord, please do the honours."

Admiral Andrew Browne Cunningham, who thus far had stood silently holding a box in his hand, now walked around the table to where Tommy stood, and addressed him.

"Commander Keelson, I know your background and the extraordinary way in which you came into the naval reserve. However, you have shown yourself to be a credit to the service and yourself." He opened the box and took out a medal before placing the box on the table. "The prime minister has asked me to personally present you with the Distinguished Service Cross." He pinned the medal to Tommy's chest and held out his hand. "Well done, me boy."

Tommy was in a daze. He automatically reached out and took the great man's hand. A round of applause echoed around the table.

"Thank you, sir."

Churchill had more to say. "You have a new mission and it is one of great importance. We wish you to go to Norway and reinforce the impression that the Allies are going to land a force there. Our intelligence people are working hard on this deception, but it needs a little local activity to make it seem real. To do that you will need to be off the coast of Norway transmitting false coded reports and landing commando teams that will destroy selected targets. There is no doubt that this will be risky and warm work, but I am sure you will behave in as ungentlemanly a way as possible to make sure it is done."

The field marshal frowned; Tommy realised it was Montgomery when they locked eyes and Monty nodded to him.

Bill nudged him and Tommy realised they had been dismissed. He saluted the room and followed Bill out.

* * *

The boys gave him a real ribbing about the medal when he returned to Chatham and met them on the dock, especially as he wouldn't say much about it.

“Bet he nicked it,” Mike declared.

“Nah, I reckon he bought it in a pawn shop,” Harry offered.

“Alright, enough. We have work to do,” Tommy said.

“Doing what?” Seth asked. “They took our boat away.”

Just then there was a roar of engines, and a motor gunboat came up to the dock. Lines were thrown across to tie her on.

Tommy swept his arm out and grinned.

“Gentlemen, your new ride.”

She was HMS *MGB 317*, a Fairmile C MGB. One hundred and ten feet long, seventeen feet across the beam. Powered by three Hall-Scott V12, 35.7-litre, supercharged Defenders making 900 horsepower each, she drew less than six feet. She was armed to the teeth with:

- 2 x Molins QF 6-pounders with autoloader on a hydraulic mount
- 5 x Oerlikon 20-mm cannons (four in dual mounts)
- 1 x dual-mounted Vickers 50-calibre machine guns
- 4 x depth charges

Seth looked her over and then looked at the crew. “We are going to need more men.”

* * *

The *317* got her extra crew. Another twenty-two men joined her: gunners (marines), mechanics and radio men. She had a radar and a set of radio equipment that was a radio man’s dream — she could sound like anything from a submarine to a battleship.

As she would be acting predominantly at night, *MGB 317* was painted black and her exhausts were fitted with flame suppressors and selectable mufflers. She carried 3,400 gallons of fuel. She was not as fast as the *LS5*, but she more than made up for that in other ways.

Home base would be in Shetland — on the Island of Unst behind Balta Island in the Balta Sound. A Coastal Forces depot ship and former Loch-class destroyer, HMS *Derby Haven*, would be anchored in the sound to provide accommodation and supplies. They would be just 180 miles from Norway.

* * *

The new crew, with its large contingent of marines, settled in quickly on the way up to Shetland. The *Derby* was waiting for them, and they rested up for one day.

On 1 May, Tommy took them across the North Sea to attack an aluminium plant near Kopervik in the south of Norway — a hit-and-run where the marines would go ashore and blow up as much infrastructure as they could in forty-five minutes. The crossing took thirteen hours, and they hid in a fjord overnight before making the hundred-mile trip down the coast.

This is going to be the easiest one, we have surprise on our side, Tommy thought.

The black boat slipped down the coast at twelve knots — its most economical speed — and turned into a fjord that led up to the works. The mufflers were selected by flipping a switch in the cockpit — this activated solenoid-powered butterfly valves that redirected the exhaust. It was recommended that they only be used at low revs.

To mix things up, the radio shack transmitted a series of short, encoded messages as if they were on a destroyer. The length of the messages was designed to prevent the Germans getting an accurate direction-finding fix on them.

They crept up the fjord at five knots or so, and came to the aluminium plant. The entire contingent of seventeen marines and their lieutenant were ready to go. Each carried a pair of satchel charges with pencil fuses and was armed with a suppressed Sten gun.

Intelligence had told them the Germans had an infantry company at the works and surprise was of the essence. They came up to the dock and the marines leapt ashore.

Tommy had a Sten close by him in the cockpit as they waited. The boys manned the Vickers. A glow appeared a short way down the dock.

“Cigarette,” Seth said.

“Must be a guard. Harry — with me,” Tommy said.

They silently left the boat and crept towards the glow. They had to go slowly, as there were many obstacles lying around, discarded. The dock had obviously not seen much use.

The smell of smoke warned them they were getting close. Tommy had his Sten ready. The butt end of the cigarette arced out to sea and the guard

stepped forward. It was a German soldier. He was facing away from them looking up at the plant.

Tommy slipped his Sten around, so that it was slung at his back, and pulled out his fighting knife. He stepped up behind the guard and wrapped his left arm around his head from behind, pulling it to the left. His right hand flashed down, once, twice, three times into the side of his neck. Blood spouted and the guard died. Tommy pushed him into the water.

Lieutenant Tony Willard appeared from the dark, his gun at the ready. "Thought it must be you. Is he dead?"

"As a doornail."

"Lovely, let's get back to the boat — the boys will be here any minute."

The team returned; no one was wounded or missing. They slipped the mooring lines and pushed off. All the guns were manned.

Twelve minutes later, the first explosion rent the night air.

"That will be the transformer," Willard said as the sky was lit with electrical arcing. The rest of the charges went off over the next two minutes. Timing pencils — or No. 10 delay switches, as they were officially called — relied on cupric oxide eroding a wire that held back the striker that set off a percussion cap. They were accurate to plus or minus a couple of minutes in an hour. Each marine carried a box of four.

The explosions woke up the coastal defences and searchlights criss-crossed the fjord. Tommy kept the throttles low and their speed to five knots, to minimise wash.

A searchlight slid over them; they held their breath waiting for it to come back. One of the Oerlikons turned on its mount to target it.

"Hold your fire," Willard said.

Tommy moved them over to the eastern side of the fjord. He was wary of rocks as seventy-two tons of boat would destroy itself if they hit one.

The fjord widened out and they reached the Skudenes Head. This was home to Syreneset Fort and batteries at Skudenes Fyr and on the peninsula.

"Blimey, you can hear the alarms going off from here," Seth said.

Suddenly they were pinned by a searchlight. "Switch the exhausts, full ahead!" Tommy yelled.

"Open fire!" Willard shouted, and the guns opened up.

The noise of the engines increased to a deafening roar as the baffles were bypassed. The 317 lifted onto the plane. The searchlight went out and Tommy turned north as they entered the North Sea proper.

“Good shooting, Tomkins,” Willard shouted.

“Bollocks — it was pure luck,” an anonymous voice said.

* * *

They hid out for the day in an inlet on the island of Sørøya. They pulled camouflage nets over the boat to screen it from aircraft and the men settled down to a hearty breakfast and sleep.

In the mid-afternoon an open boat came into the inlet and stopped twenty yards away. The person steering it stood and waved at them.

Tommy took out his pistol and went to the stern.

“Hello,” the person shouted, in English with a Norwegian accent. The voice was decidedly feminine.

“Hello,” Tommy said. “Who are you?”

“Annita Westrum. I saw you from the cliffs up there.”

Tommy realised that the girl was quite young. He beckoned her to come closer, and she steered her boat alongside. Up close, he could see his impression was right — Annita was about seventeen years old, blonde, blue-eyed and pretty.

Comments filtered down to Tommy from the boat. “Belay that,” he said. He tied her bowline to a cleat and helped her aboard.

“You are British?” she asked him.

“We are,” Tommy said. “A raiding party.”

Annita smiled. “We have a better place for you to dock if you come back.”

“You do? Who are *we*?”

“My father and I. We live at Sandvagen, which is further up the west side of the island.”

“Are there any Germans on the island?”

“No. They came here but didn’t stay. We are only fishermen.”

“Can you take me there?”

“Of course, come.”

They got into the small boat and Annita started the little single-cylinder engine. She steered them out of the inlet and followed the coast around to a large inlet, which she followed to a dock in front of a cottage. A man stood on the dock waiting. He was holding a shotgun.

“It is alright, Daddy, he is English,” Annita called.

“Daddy” broke the gun and took out the cartridges and put them in his pocket. Tommy took his own hand off the butt of his pistol.

“Harold Westrum, pleased to meet you.”

Tommy shook his hand and replied, “Commander Keelson, Royal Navy.”

“Annita says you have a torpedo boat anchored in the Langvåg.”

“A motor gunboat, yes.”

“If you need somewhere to hide, bring it here next time. We are part of the Norwegian resistance. We are the end of the pipeline for downed airmen and escapees from German camps.”

“Thank you, we will.”

“In fact, I have an American pilot here now; can you take him?”

Tommy nodded. “Take me to him.”

Harold led him up the dock to the cottage, where Tommy caught a glimpse of a face at a window. They went in and Harold said, “This is Commander Keelson. He has a motorboat and can take you across to England. Commander, this is Lieutenant Kosmalski of the US Army Air Forces.”

The two shook hands after a swift salute.

“Where were you shot down?”

“We were providing cover for a raid on Lübeck, and we got jumped as we turned back over Denmark. A 190 got me and I bailed out. Landed in the North Sea and was picked up by a Norwegian ship. They got me into the pipeline, and I got here a week ago.”

Tommy turned to his host. “Right. Annita, can you take us both back to the boat?”

“Daddy will do it, I have baking to do.”

They went to the boat and Harold soon had them chugging along while Tommy kept an eye on the sky.

“Look out, an aircraft!”

Harold left the tiller and lifted up a fishing net. “Under here,” he urged.

Tommy and the pilot covered themselves in the net and the plane conducted a slow pass about five hundred feet up. Harold waved at it.

The pilot turned and came back for a second look. Harold waved again. Then: “He’s gone now. We get them flying over here once a day.”

* * *

That night, just after dark, they set off to travel the short distance to the seaplane base at Haugesund. The Germans were using it to fly patrols over the North Sea and to rescue downed pilots. As a seaplane had recently

machine-gunned an Allied pilot while he was in the water in sight of a rescue launch, it had become a priority target.

They slunk into the Visnesbukta fjord and stopped. The marines took to three rubber boats and rowed into the harbour where the seaplanes were moored. With faces blackened and dressed in black, they disappeared into the night.

* * *

Lieutenant Willard was in the lead boat with Sergeant Anderson. They rowed silently — being careful not to make a splash — for the furthest flying boat away from the 317. When they got there, they activated a one-hour timer pencil and placed it in a satchel charge. The plane, a Heinkel 115B, had floats, so Willard climbed on one and tossed the charge up onto the wing between the engine and fuselage.

The next plane they targeted was a BV-138. Willard was about to drop the charge into the hatch forward of the gun turret on the nose when a head popped up. The German's face was a picture of surprise when he saw the blackened face in front of him. Willard didn't hesitate — he drew his fighting knife and stabbed the man through the eye, pushing the knife in up to the hilt. The knife entered the man's brain, and he died instantly.

Willard had to scramble up onto the plane's hull to get his knife back — which also allowed him to place his charge.

* * *

The second rubber boat carried Corporal Higgins and Marine Stains, who made their way to the end of the dock, where the refuelling barge was tied up alongside the fuel pump. A charge laid in the barge between the fuel tank and the side next to the dock would serve to take out both. Their next target was an AR 196, which was probably the plane that overflew them earlier in the day. The charge was placed at the wing root.

* * *

The third boat was manned by Corporal Ieuan Evans and Lance Corporal Joe Stokes. Their target was a big, six-engine BV 238. The plane dwarfed them as they rowed up to the hatch in the side. Voices came from inside. They listened.

“Sounds like three people,” Evans said in a whisper.

He picked up his Sten as the rubber boat came up to the hatch under its own momentum. Stokes grabbed the sill to allow Evans to step aboard, Sten

at the ready.

His battle-tuned reactions had Evans firing as soon as he saw movement. A man died and another came out of a compartment further forward; he died too. Stokes came in behind him and the two worked their way through the fuselage. They found two more crewmen asleep in bunks and another working on a radio set. They shot them all. Once they were sure there was no one left alive, they set their charges: one down as far as they could get in the hull and the other up on the spar that connected the wings.

* * *

The last boat returned to the 317 and Tommy started them on the way home. They hadn't reached the North Sea when the charges went off. The sky lit up around the base as flames shot into the sky from burning fuel. Anti-aircraft guns opened up and tracers wove patterns up into the sky.

It was 219 miles to their home base. Tommy set a direct course with the throttles to the stops, and got them out of Norwegian waters as quickly as possible, only dropping back to cruising speed once they were well clear. A short message was sent warning the *Derby* that they were on their way home and that they had Lieutenant Kosmalski on board.

Stavanger

Shetland Islands

4 May 1944

They tied up next to the *Derby* and Tommy led the American pilot up the steps to the entry port. They both saluted the sentry and proceeded to the captain's office. Captain Harrison greeted them.

“Commander, good to see you. I trust you had a productive trip? Lieutenant, welcome back. We have informed your squadron that you are here. There will be a Beaufighter at RAF Sumburgh to take you home. A car will pick you up in the morning. Meanwhile, enjoy our facilities here. We can let you have a change of clothes while yours are laundered and repaired.”

Lieutenant Kosmalski smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Captain — I could do with a shower.”

Tommy patted him on the back and turned to the captain. “Any new orders?”

“Yes, they want you to visit Stavanger and create some mayhem, but you can have two days' rest before you go.”

“Wonderful,” Tommy said, happy that the boys would get at least a couple of nights' sleep in the comfort of the tender's cabins.

The captain stood to dismiss them.

“You have some post; it's in your pigeonhole. Would you two gentlemen do me the honour of dining with me tonight?”

“Absolutely, sir,” Tommy replied — for both of them.

* * *

Tommy showed Kosmalski to his cabin and pointed out where the showers were. A steward appeared and said, “Just leave your clothes outside your doors and I will see to getting them cleaned. I've put fresh clothes out for the lieutenant. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Nothing thanks, Billy; we'll catch a few hours' kip,” Tommy said.

“Very good, sir.”

* * *

Showered, and refreshed by four hours' solid sleep, Tommy gathered up Kosmalski and took him to the wardroom — which had its own steward

and kitchen — for lunch. They were met there by the tender's first lieutenant, Archie McSorley.

“Hello, Tommy. This must be our intrepid flyer.”

“Kosmalski. Pleased to meet you. Call me Pete.”

They sat down together and Tommy ordered a pink gin. Pete asked if there was any beer. He was given a pint of light ale. Archie had a cup of tea.

“Skipper told me you would be here for two days,” Archie said.

“Yes, then we will go over again for three days.”

Archie sipped his tea. Then, as another officer walked in, he said, “Frobisher! This is our intelligence officer, Simon Frobisher. This is Lieutenant Pete Kosmalski of the US Army Air Force.”

Frobisher greeted them all and helped himself to a cup of tea from the samovar. He commented: “We should have the aerial photographs of the targets soon. But the German radio traffic went crazy after you hit the seaplane base, which indicates you did quite some damage.”

Pete laughed. “There were explosions going off all over the place. The air defences opened up 'cos they thought it was an air raid.”

“Where are you from, Pete?” Simon asked.

“Chicago — my parents are second generation, which makes me American through and through.”

“What did you do before the war?” Archie said.

“I was at Princeton University, studying economics and politics. After the Japs hit Pearl Harbor, I volunteered for the Army Air Force in early forty-two and had qualified as a fighter pilot in P-47 Thunderbolts before the end of the year. They sent me over here to join the 56th Fighter Group and I've been here ever since. What did you do, Tommy?”

Tommy actually blushed. “I was a merchant seaman, a first mate.”

“When did you join up?”

Tommy extemporised. “I was in the RNR before the war started and got orders to join the intelligence division.”

Pete wisely let it go at that. There was a knock at the door and a rating stepped in holding an envelope. “You said you wanted these as soon as they arrived, sir.”

“Aah, the photos. The recon aircraft went out at dawn,” Simon said. He opened the envelope and flipped through them. “My, you have been a busy boy.”

He handed Tommy a photograph of the seaplane base. It showed a fire on the docks, burning fuel on the surface of the water and the wreckage of five aircraft.

“Hmm, not a bad night’s work.” Tommy handed it to Pete.

Simon passed Tommy another photo. “The marines did a good job on the aluminium plant as well.”

This one showed the wreckage left after the charges went up. The electrical substation was completely burnt out and key installations were badly damaged.

“Taken this morning?”

“Yes.”

He only let them see those two photos, slipping the rest back into the envelope.

Tommy recovered his letter from the pigeonhole after lunch and settled down in a canvas chair on deck to read them. Two were from his mother, one from Rose and another from Sandra Hayward.

His mother talked about day-to-day stuff. Hull had been bombed and several people killed. Their house had been missed, and she was fine. Rose’s letter was vague about her job at Bletchley Park and told him that she had met an army officer, who she had fallen for. He was also in intelligence and was a former professor at Cambridge.

Sandra’s letter was far more interesting. She had been on a tour of the Far East theatre of war and been entertaining the ground troops, sailors and airmen. She told a couple of funny stories that made him smile. She told him how much she missed him and that she was looking forward to seeing him again when she got back to England.

Tommy went to his cabin, got paper and a pen from the steward and wrote replies to all of them — spending by far the majority of his time on Sandra.

* * *

The time to leave was upon them and at four hours before dark, fully fuelled and armed, the engines roared into life. The tender’s mechanics had given them a full service while they were tied up and they purred like tigers.

Tommy’s orders had been succinct and said, in essence, *Sail into Stavanger Harbour, shoot up anything that looks like fuel storage and fly a German flag.* There was a short brief on the defences and some aerial

photographs which Simon explained and highlighted where the biggest threats were. He was to take care to minimise damage to civilian property.

As a secondary target they had been given a German communications bunker at Narvik. To hit that they needed to refuel and carry extra fuel tanks, as it was close to being a 1,500-mile round trip from Shetland. So, they planned for the *Derby* to meet them at 63° N 3° 30' E and escort them to 67° N 7° E, where she would refuel them before hitting Narvik. Then they would rendezvous again on the way back, at 68° N 6° E, and the *Derby* would escort them back to Shetland.

* * *

The aerial photographs showed oil storage tanks on a headland on the northern side of the fjord. One also showed a tanker offloading, and as it was only a day old, there was a good chance that tanker was still there. Tommy's plan was to sneak in and blast out. The port was heavily defended, with artillery pieces in strong points, and he expected to get a warm send-off once they announced their presence.

They reached the Norwegian coast at just after midnight and slowed to enter the fjord from the north — the German flag flying from the transom. To the south was a huge coastal defence bunker with a big gun, which they didn't want to get anywhere near. Tommy flicked the switch to baffle the engines. Five miles to go and he hoped like hell they would have better luck than the last time they had been there.

The next hour was nail-biting. At this time of year, they only had three hours of true darkness with an hour-long twilight at either end of that. They needed to be in, out and gone before then.

Seth steered and Tommy watched the shore ahead with binoculars. He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

“Tanker a point off the port bow, about half a mile ahead. I can see her profile against the stars.”

Seth swung the wheel over to bring them closer to it, and the guns swung around in anticipation.

“We will pass it and swing around to come at it from the opposite direction,” Tommy told them. “That will give us a clear line of fire to the tanks. We will drop a depth charge under the tanker.”

“Steady lads, wait for the order,” Tony Willard said.

They spun the boat around by applying full rudder and reversing the starboard engine. Tommy was in dread of someone hearing them or seeing

the wash, but all remained quiet.

Now for the riskiest part of the raid. The fuel tanks came into view. Tommy fired a parachute flare, and as it ignited the guns opened up. Tracers streamed across the water to the tanks as the Oerlikons chattered into life and the twin 6-pounders thumped.

There was a God Almighty bang as one of the tanks exploded. "Bugger, that must have been petrol," Tommy said.

"Why aren't they firing at us?" Seth asked. Almost immediately, a heavy machine gun sent a burst of tracer just over their heads.

"Big mouth," Tommy said as he ducked. "They won't fire the big guns until we are away from the tanker. Get the depth charge ready."

Tommy flipped the switch to bypass the baffles and pushed the throttles forward. That caught the machine gunner by surprise and the tracers fell behind them. They came alongside the tanker.

"Depth charge!"

The charge rolled over the side, and he gave the engines the beans — full emergency throttle. They surged forward and the guns swung around towards the western shore.

The detonation of the depth charge broke the tanker in two; petrol spewed out of it and was ignited by a burst of tracer from the Vickers machine guns. That was followed by an enormous explosion, as the vapour in her ruptured tanks ignited.

Flashes showed that the artillery was starting up, and they were suddenly surrounded by water plumes. Tommy had the helm and weaved. They were doing thirty knots and a shell landed dead ahead. They hit the plume, and the boat reared. Seth stumbled and fell. "Aargh!" he yelled and stayed crumpled on the cockpit floor.

"Harry, check Seth," Tommy shouted.

They were almost there; the gun barrels were glowing. Then they were out, and roaring across the open sea. Tommy kept the speed until they were a good ten miles offshore then throttled back to their cruising speed of twelve knots.

"Ernie, take the helm, steer us north."

Seth was propped up in a corner of the bridge with Harry kneeling in front of him. "He's broke his arm."

Tommy looked at Seth's grey face. "Come on, let's get him below."

In the main cabin, several casualties were being treated by the marines' medic. Lance Corporal Patterson was all business. "Sit him over there, I'll get to him in a minute."

The marine he was already treating lay on the dining table, having a bullet removed from his shoulder. He glared at nothing in particular as Patterson dug around in the hole.

"Got it! It's a 7.92 mm, probably from an MG 42."

The marine grinned. "That will be the fucker I zippered. He hit me as I sent a burst into his nest."

The wound was cleaned and packed. "That can be stitched up on the depot ship," Patterson said as he tucked the dressing in place to hold it. "Who's next?"

He looked around, evaluating the wounded. He looked at Seth. "You then, that lot are all minor. What we got here? Ooh, nice compound fracture of the forearm. Well, we need to set that back in line and splint it, so the doc on the *Derby* can have a nice easy job of it."

All the time he was talking, he was cutting Seth's clothes away. His jacket, jumper, shirt — the lot was cut off his body and put aside. Patterson pulled his medical bag over and began to clean the wound where the bone was sticking out. He took a vial of morphine and injected it into Seth's bicep. It took effect almost immediately and Seth relaxed.

"I need two bits of wood about the length of his forearm and about a half-inch thick."

"Two by a half-inch OK?" Tommy said.

"Perfect."

Tommy went forward into the sleeping cabin and lifted a mattress. The bed slats were the perfect size. He removed one, then went to the tool chest and found a saw. He cut the slat in half and took the pieces to the medic.

"Great, you're just in time. I want you to hold him around the body just under his arm. I'm going to pull the bones into line and you" — he looked at Harry — "are going to slap those splints on either side of his arm here and here and hold them while" — he looked around — "the sergeant here wraps a bandage around the arm from elbow to wrist."

The sergeant didn't bat an eyelid, just came over to join them and grabbed a large bandage.

"Ready? Here we go."

Patterson pulled, and the bone slid back into the flesh. He kept pulling with one hand and feeling with the other as he manipulated the arm. "Now," he said — at which Harry clamped the splints on and the sergeant wound the bandage to keep everything in place.

Seth had passed out.

Narvik

They rendezvoused with the *Derby* by using the huff-duff set to get a bearing when they were five miles out. Tommy pulled up on her lee side and they tied on. A fuel line was passed down and the armourers descended to service the guns.

The seriously wounded were transferred aboard and Tommy went to talk with Captain Harrison.

“It was successful, but we had casualties, including my own number one,” Tommy told him.

“And your boat?” Harrison asked.

“Acquired some new ventilation holes but is still fully operational — or will be, when the armourers have replaced all the gun barrels.”

Harrison looked concerned. “It was a hot fight?”

Tommy grinned. “The Germans opened up on us as soon as we were clear of the fuel depot; the marines shot back at the gun flashes. The guns were firing flat out for fifteen minutes or more and the barrels were glowing.”

“Well, you will get more marines to replace those that are in the sick bay. What about your number one?”

“Broken arm, which will put him out of action for weeks.”

“I will loan you my second if you like,” Harrison said.

“Thank you. I will need a first for the next mission.”

“About that — the RAF coastal boys will run a bombing raid over Narvik, timed to arrive as you enter the fjord.”

“That will help.”

Tommy’s orders were to go with the raiding party and acquire any papers, code books or Enigma machines.

Harrison wrote an order for his second and had it formalised, but Tommy went and found the lieutenant before then.

“Lieutenant Youngs, you will be accompanying us when we sail. You are my new first.”

Youngs looked surprised, then delighted.

“Your captain is cutting your orders, but you may just as well come down to the boat now. Do you have dark clothes?”

“I do have a dark jumper I can wear over my shirt.”

“You will need your duffle coat, sea boots and scarf or a towel to keep the spray from running down your neck.”

Tommy was dressed in civilian clothes with a fisherman’s Aran jumper, denim trousers and sea boots. When on the bridge, he wore a fisherman’s hooded jacket. The shoulder holster for his Browning was prominent when he didn’t wear the jacket. Youngs looked at it.

“Do I need a sidearm?”

“Yes; draw one if you don’t have one. Oh, hang on — they will only have Webley revolvers in the armoury. Those hand cannon are all right, but they only give you six shots and take ages to reload. I have a couple of spare Brownings aboard. You can use one of them. Have you had any training with an automatic?”

“No, in fact I’ve only shot a Webley twice on the range.”

Tommy shook his head in disbelief. The navy neglected small arms training after boot camp. “I will give you some pointers.” Tommy turned to leave, then stopped. “What is your first name?”

“Roger.”

“I’m Tommy. We use first names on the *317*.”

* * *

The *317* was refuelled, rearmed and patched at sea and before setting off for Narvik. The *Derby* would follow them, then pootle around the North Sea waiting for them to return from the mission. Both ships had the same economic cruising speed of twelve knots, so it was a comfortable companionship.

Tommy showed Roger how to strip and clean the Browning, load the magazine and fire the gun. He gave him a belt holster and had him shoot at bottles he threw over the side.

They refuelled for the second time 300 miles from their target. They timed their arrival to be just after midnight. The intelligence they had from the Norwegian resistance warned them that the bunker was heavily defended with entrances covered by machine-gun ports and a turret-mounted gun on the top. They could expect a platoon-sized force stationed there.

The entrance to the fjord was guarded by a series of fortifications with large naval guns and anti-aircraft guns that could depress to shoot at ships. They would have to sneak past, but that was standard operating procedure now.

The mouth of the fjord was wide and they slipped in with the exhausts muffled. This was perilous and all eyes scanned the dark for tell-tale flashes or searchlights. The sound of aircraft came from overhead.

“That sounds like Beaufighters,” Roger said.

Searchlights suddenly speared up to the clouds and began sweeping back and forth, looking for the aircraft. AA guns sent streams of tracers up as a matter of course — the noise was tremendous as it echoed off the walls of the fjord.

The bombers were early.

Tommy opened the throttles to hit the maximum revs allowed with the baffles in place. If the Germans had all their attention on the sky a bit of wake would not be noticed. They entered the channel that led to Narvik and passed below Tjeldøy Fort. They were in the thirty-mile-long Ofotfjord now.

Bombs exploded ahead of them and Tommy, knowing time was of the essence, pushed the throttles forward, taking the risk of breaking the baffles. They were doing fifteen knots. They shot past Tjelneset Kystbatteri and saw explosions to the north as the Beaufighters bombed the airfield.

They slowed and turned into the Beisfjorden to approach the Fagerneset and their goal. Nerves jangled as the marines prepared. Tommy gave the boat to Roger while he blackened his own face and hands and checked his Sten gun.

As per their intelligence, there was a dock where minerals were loaded onto cargo ships bound for Germany. They slipped alongside and the shore team hit the beach in a rush.

Eight commandos led, four moving and four covering. The rest, and Tommy, followed on behind. It was just 300 yards to the bunker.

A sentry died without a sound — stabbed through the neck, his arteries and veins severed. The commandos moved silently. Two went up on top of the bunker to deal with the turret. A steel bung was screwed into the machine-gun barrel that protruded from it. Anybody who tried to fire it would get a nasty surprise.

Two more commandos padded around to the back of the bunker, where a machine-gun port covered a steel door. They quietly fixed plastic explosives to the door and another in the port.

Tommy waited with the others. If they were rumbled now, the mission would fail. The four marines returned, and they waited too. The explosives

went off, and they moved. Speed was of the essence; it was vital to keep the Germans off balance. Grenades were sent ahead, then they stormed through the iron door. Another machine-gun port was dealt with. They stormed into the central chamber below the turret to find a German sitting in shock, with one hand blown off and his face burnt. Someone shot him.

Tommy came to a door that he figured was for the radio room. It was locked. He applied explosives to the lock and to the cable trunking that came through the wall above the door.

He snapped the fuses and took cover. The door went in and the trunking was shattered, cutting the wires. Tommy went through the door with his Sten spitting fire.

Two German radio operators, stunned by the blast from the door, fell to the floor in a hail of bullets. Tommy pulled his pistol and shot both through the head for good measure.

Two marines had followed him in and were soon busy gathering papers, books and anything else that looked interesting. Tommy found the Enigma machine and put it in its case. Then he began setting charges on the rest of the equipment.

Shooting from outside the room showed the Germans were fighting back. It was time to leave. He grabbed the Enigma machine and slipped out through the doorway, sending a burst of fire down the tunnel.

They made a fighting retreat. One group fired as a rear guard while the others fell back. Then the second group provided cover while the first group retreated.

They got back to the dock and the twin Vickers 50-calibre machine guns on the bridge of the 317 fired over their heads to cover their boarding. Once they were back on board, Tommy took the helm. He switched off the baffles and shoved the throttles wide open.

Speed was now their best defence. They shot out of the Fagernesstraumen at thirty knots — but before they had gone five miles, the twilight of pre-dawn came upon them.

The guns were manned. They turned into the Ofotfjord and the defensive guns started to rain fire down upon them. Tommy weaved and the gunners responded, but they took hits. In twenty minutes they had made it to the narrow stretch near the airfield.

Anti-aircraft guns poured more fire down and Tommy thought they wouldn't make it. Then there was a roar, and a Beaufighter passed overhead

with machine guns chattering as it shot up the defences. It was followed by another and another . . .

“God bless the RAF!” Roger yelled. They distracted the AA guns and the 317 was able to make the twenty-minute passage unmolested . . . Until they got to the Tjeldøy Fort, which sent shell after shell at them. Their starboard engine was hit and fire broke out. The engineers fought it with hand-held fire extinguishers but their speed dropped to twenty knots. The fort kept firing until they were passing Rotver Lighthouse.

“At this speed we will need three hours to get out of these damn fjords,” Tommy told Willard. “Keep your boys on alert.”

Alf Boddington came onto the bridge. “Starboard engine has had its fuel lines shot up. We should be able to get it going in twenty minutes or so.”

“Good, try and make it ten. We’re still in trouble as it’s getting light.”

* * *

“AIRCRAFT!” yelled a lookout, and pointed into the sky. The Oerlikons and the Vickers swung upwards. Tommy took a look through his binoculars.

“ME 109!” he shouted.

The fighter circled to get behind them for a strafing run. Tommy waited, watching. It fired, sending a stream of splashes heading for their stern.

“Hard to port.” The guns opened up and tracked the aircraft as it passed. Five Oerlikons and two Vickers sent an awful lot of shells into the air and the gunners were feeling vengeful. The 109 was hit several times and the pilot turned away, smoke or oil wisping from his engine.

They resumed course and the starboard engine roared back into life. She was smoking a bit, but didn’t sound bad. Alf appeared. “She can run at eighty per cent. Any more load than that and she will blow.”

“Good enough.”

“Another aircraft!” Roger shouted.

Tommy identified it and shouted, “JU 88.”

“Zigzag!”

The guns fired.

“Bomb attack!”

The JU 88 winged over and dived at them. Tommy tried to anticipate where the bombs would go. He watched as the bomber came down and

three bombs separated from the fuselage.

“Full to starboard.”

The bombs fell off their port side. But the pilot wasn’t finished: he must have been feeling lucky as he had not been hit at all on the first run.

* * *

Marine Eric Yates was calm — icy calm. He watched the twin-engine plane with the black crosses turn. He was the gunner on a pair of Oerlikons on a hydraulic mount. He looked through the concentric rings of his spiderweb sight and realised that it was flying directly towards him. He lined it up and gave it two rings for the range. He let a burst go. The tracers passed under the fuselage.

He adjusted and let go a longer burst. He watched the tracers hit the glass nose of the aircraft. He kept firing, and started hitting the cockpit. The aircraft passed overhead and kept going . . . straight into the cliff that edged the fjord.

A hand rested on his shoulder — he looked up and saw it was the lieutenant. “Nice shooting.”

Parachute Training

May 1944

The 317 was in pretty poor shape after the attack on Narvik. Her engines needed work, her hull was damaged and her guns had been almost worn out. As for the crew — they were shattered. Tommy had picked up another wound in the last strafing attack — a piece of shrapnel had hit him in the side. The same bullet had cut Roger's arm as it had shattered against the metal rail surrounding the open bridge. They had several wounded marines, and the rest needed a break.

They were ordered to return to the mainland at Inverness. With the boat in dock having engines changed and the hull repaired, Tommy decided to visit his mother.

The train down took nine hours and involved five changes. He left at 06:00 and didn't get to his mother's house until 15:45. When he arrived, he found the house next door was gone, demolished by a bomb. Baulks of timber were supporting the walls of his mother's house while the rubble was cleared and brick buttresses were erected. His mother wasn't there.

Mrs Jones, their neighbour from three doors down, told Tommy that his mother was staying at his father's cousin's house in Grimsby. Tommy slung his bag over his shoulder and set out.

Hull had been hit by a single He 111 three nights before. It had dropped a string of eight 250-kg bombs, one of which hit the house next door and exploded in the basement. The basement directed the blast upwards, and number 11 was consequently redistributed over most of Hull, leaving the houses on either side mostly untouched. Not quite a miracle, but close to it.

To get from Hull to Grimsby, Tommy found a taxi that would get him to the ferry crossing the Humber from Hull to New Holland. The old steamer had been operating for years and carried cars. The taxi driver didn't want to go over the river, so Tommy had to find another ride on the south side. Luckily, a post van was going his way and gave him a lift.

The cousin lived in Weelsby Street and Tommy walked the length of it before finding the house. He knocked on the door.

A grumpy-looking man answered. "Who are you?" he asked in a thick Yorkshire accent.

"I'm Tommy. Simone is my mum."

“Aye, she said you were in the navy. You better come in.”

His mother was in the parlour. With her was Wilma, his father’s cousin. She jumped to her feet as soon as he entered, hugging him and kissing his cheeks.

“Are you alright?” Tommy asked his mother.

“I’m fine, I was in bed when the bomb landed, near threw me on the floor!”

“You were lucky. You should have been in the shelter,” Tommy scolded her gently.

“I slept through the air-raid warning. I had stayed up late reading your letters.” She stepped back, holding him at arm’s length. “How many times have you been wounded?”

“Three, including a graze I got on the last trip.”

She looked at him, sure that he was understating the extent of the wound. “I want to see it.”

“Mum!” he complained.

“Now.”

He took off his coat and pulled his shirt and vest out of his trousers. The wound was covered by a pad of gauze that was taped into place. She pulled the pad off and looked at the row of stitches.

“*Graze* my arse,” she said, surprising everyone with her coarse language. Wilma gasped. At this point, the grumpy man introduced himself, more civil now he realised Tommy was wounded.

“I’m Victor, by the way; most call me Vic.”

Tommy shook his hand.

“Where did thee get that?” Vic asked, pointing at his wound.

“North Sea,” Tommy replied.

“You can stay here on t’sofa if you want.”

Tommy wasn’t about to do that. “Does that pub down the road have rooms?”

“It does, I’ll take you down there.”

Vic walked with Tommy to the pub and introduced him to the landlord, William. He gave him a room for a tanner a day, including breakfast.

* * *

A week passed and May was running out. The weather was horrible, with storm after storm rolling in from the Atlantic. Tommy visited a local doctor and had his stitches removed, then went back to Vic’s house to see

his mum. When he arrived, there was a policeman sitting in the parlour, drinking tea and chatting with the ladies.

“You must be Thomas Keelson,” he said, and stood.

Tommy looked at him quizzically. “That’s me.”

“This came from the station in Hull.” He handed over a telegram.

Tommy opened it. “So much for an extended rest. I have to report to London.”

* * *

He said his goodbyes and paid for his room before catching a London-bound train that would get him to King’s Cross via Doncaster. In London he went straight to Broadway.

“What is so urgent?” he asked Bill.

“I thought you would want to see the invasion of Europe kick off,” Bill said with a grin.

“What?”

“Operation Overlord will progress on the fifth of June.”

“Is that what they have called it?” Tommy asked.

“Yes; and you have been part of a grand deception to convince the Nazis that we will attack Norway and Calais,” Bill said.

“So, where will we *really* attack?”

“That is so secret that even I do not know,” Bill admitted ruefully.

“Hmm. I can guess, but—”

Bill held up his hand. “All this means we have a job for you.”

Tommy shrugged. “Not unexpected.”

“Come; we have to go to the War Office.”

* * *

The War Office was bustling. The mapping section was busy updating maps and almost every folder was marked *Top Secret*. Tommy was taken into the usual conference room.

“Prior to a second landing in the south of France,” Vice Admiral Hewitt explained to him, “we will need to take the Hyères Islands. To do that we will land the 1st Special Service Force on Port Cros and Levant simultaneously. Their mission — to capture and destroy the coastal defence batteries. At the same time, we will launch a diversionary attack at Cap Nègre.

“Once the landings start, an airborne force of British and American paratroopers will land near Le Muy in the Argens Valley. This is codenamed Operation Rugby. We want you to go with them to act as an interpreter, and then when the operation is complete, to take a select group of Special Air Service commandos by boat to Athens to prepare the ground for a landing there and to coordinate with ELAS.”

ELAS was the Ellinikós Laïkós Apeleftherotikós Stratós or Greek People's Liberation Army.

Tommy blinked several times as he took all that in. “I have only parachuted during training,” he said.

“That's not a problem; you will attend the parachute training facility at Ringway. You need to be fully up to speed by the tenth of August.”

* * *

Tommy was taken to Ringway, which was near Manchester, and enrolled in the parachute training course. He would get the same training as a parachute regiment soldier but without the commando training.

He was put through the basic training mill.

Jumping from platforms onto the ground to learn how to land: “Keep your feet together, bend your knees and roll!”

How to control his chute in its descent: “Pull on the riser and you can affect the direction of travel a little.”

The timings and procedures: “1001, 1002, 1003, check!”

How to deploy an emergency chute if it all went tits up.

How to deploy his kit bag so it hung below his feet.

Then they took him up in a balloon and he jumped out of the gondola.

Finally, he learned to jump out of an aeroplane along with a bunch of other men, to land and form up.

At the end of the fortnight, he became an oddity in the British armed forces: a naval commander with parachute wings.

Operation Rugby

August 1944

Tommy was flown to Sicily, where he joined the 2nd Parachute Brigade under the command of Major General George "Hoppy" Hopkinson.

"So, you are our man from MI6," Hoppy said when they were introduced.

"Yes, sir. I am to help you liaise with the locals."

"Excellent. We can't tell the good ones from the bad ones."

Tommy chuckled at that. "I will go out and find the local resistance; they will aid us and allow me to winkle out any collaborators."

"Do you need any help?"

"If I can have two men who are good with knives . . ."

"Sergeant," he said to the regimental sergeant major (RSM), who stood nearby, "have two men assigned to the commander."

"Sah."

"The RSM will look after you."

And so Tommy was dismissed. He saluted and left. He was dressed in combat trousers and shirt, with a sleeveless leather coat over the top, cinched with a belt band. He wore a navy beret. His Browning was on his belt, balanced by a fighting knife. He also had a second knife in a sheath strapped to his right calf, and carried his Mk II(S) Sten with six spare magazines in a bandolier.

The RSM took him to a row of tents where the men were billeted. They walked down the row, past men preparing their kit for deployment, and stopped at a tent where a pair of corporals sat. One was sharpening his knife, the other cleaning a Thompson.

"Higgins and Williams, this is Commander Keelson from MI6. He is coming with us to France. You are to accompany him and make sure he comes back." He turned to Tommy. "These two have been behind enemy lines more than anyone." Then he too saluted and left.

Tommy watched him go. "Happy bloke."

Higgins gave his knife a last swipe on the sharpening stone. "He's pissed off that he's in the second wave."

"Well, we will be going in with the pathfinders. Once on the ground, we will leave our kit in the drop zone and go find the Maquis. My name's

Tommy.”

“Phil,” the knife man said.

“Eric,” the other replied. “We don’t call you *sir*?”

“Nope, no time for all that.”

Eric nodded to his Thompson gun. “Do we need suppressors?”

“If I was you, I would swap those out for Stens and spend a bit of time working them in. The Thompson suppressor is a bogged Sten one and won’t fit an unmodified gun.”

“Right. They have some in the armoury that are used. We’ll get a pair of them. Save time and all.”

That was a good solution. Tommy then surprised them. “Is there room for one more in there?” he said, nodding at the tent.

“Yes, but aren’t you staying in officer country?” Eric replied.

“I could, but then I won’t get to know you — and we will depend on each other once we land.”

“Right . . . Well then, welcome; you can have the cot at the end.”

* * *

Tommy was right: living with the men allowed him to get to know their sense of humour, their way of working and their strengths. He practised knife fighting with both of them and discovered they were both adept. Phil was also a crack shot and had a Lee-Enfield No. 4 with telescopic sight.

“Do you want to carry that as well as a Sten?” Tommy asked.

“I’ve been carrying both for a while now. I’d hate to have the chance of offing some Kraut officer and miss it.”

Tommy learned that Phil’s mother and father had been killed in the Blitz, and that he hated Germans. Eric, on the other hand, was coolly professional and a born killer. He would kill on command, without remorse, but take no pleasure in it other than pride in a job well done. For their part, the two men learned to respect Tommy’s skills, especially with the Browning.

* * *

15 August 1944

All too soon it was time to go, and they loaded into Dakotas with the rest of the pathfinders. At 03:34 they jumped and landed on drop zone O, which was north of Le Muy. The pathfinders immediately set up Eureka beacons and landing lights.

Tommy's first destination was a chateau just to the south-east of the drop zone. "Drop your gear and follow me," he ordered Phil and Eric. They left their kit bags behind with their mates. Carrying just a radio, weapons and ammunition, they slipped away into the mist.

They found the chateau and approached it with caution; the windows were dark. A dog barked inside the building and kicked up a real ruckus. Tommy shrugged, went to the door and knocked.

"Brass balls, that one," Phil commented.

A flickering light shone through the window and the door cracked open. Tommy gave the recognition signal.

"Prêtre."

The reply came: "Diable."

The door opened and they were beckoned to enter. The man was in his night gown and had bare feet. His eyes widened at the sight of the two commandos. Tommy spoke to him in French. "The liberation has begun; can we contact the Maquis and organise them?"

"We got the message from the BBC — *The chef is hungry* — that told us the landings were starting," the Frenchman said.

"Well, tonight paratroopers are landing here and in the morning the landings on the beaches of the Var will take place."

"The German forces left here are mainly conscripts and old men. They took all the regulars and sent them to Normandy. They are commanded by the Gestapo and SS."

"Does the resistance have a plan?"

"Of course, but we have lost a lot of men since the landings in Normandy. The SS and Gestapo have been cracking down and massacring people. We will try to prevent the Germans from retreating west and cut their supply routes."

"Excellent. Now, I want to disrupt the command structure. Where is the enemy's main communications and command base?"

"At their headquarters in Le Muy. It is heavily guarded by the SS."

Tommy nodded. "Tell me everything you can."

"The communications centre is in the middle of the town, in a four-storey building. It has a large set of antennae on the roof. The town is full of soldiers, and the building is guarded by the SS company stationed there. The majority of the soldiers here are Polish conscripts, and the SS keep

them in line. If they disobey an order they can be shot and their families in Poland killed.”

Tommy shook his head and translated for his men.

“Easy then, innit?” Phil said.

“What is?” Tommy replied, a little baffled.

“We kill all the SS and then the Poles will give up.”

Tommy chuckled. “That’s not a bad idea. Only we’d have to get through a town full of soldiers to do it.”

* * *

Back at the drop zone, Tommy discovered that the brigade HQ had been set up, and went directly to it. Brigadier Pritchard was at a map table when they arrived. Tommy reported what he had already found out.

“That is good intelligence. However, our force has been dropped all over the damn place, the Scots have been scattered all over the countryside as far away as Cannes.”

The 5th (Scottish) Parachute Battalion was in the main force of Dakotas that were supposed to arrive around 04:45. Only seventy-three of the one hundred and twenty-six aircraft dropped their troops in the right place.

“The 4th are at fifty per cent and the 6th at sixty per cent. We have managed to secure the high ground to the north of Le Muy and the village of Les Serres. The Germans are counter-attacking. The bridge is also secured, and we have prisoners.”

Tommy looked at the map and had an idea.

“Can I make a suggestion?”

Prichard looked at him. “Go ahead.”

With all these troops scattered all over the place, the Germans may well think they are facing a much larger force than they actually are. We know their morale is low, so if you give every element the order to act independently while making their way here, I think you will spread uncertainty and confusion among the German command. I will set out to compound that. Do you have a German speaker among your men?”

“My intelligence officer, Captain Dombrandt, is fluent.”

“Good. Now all I need is a German radio set.”

* * *

Tommy and his lads set out for La Motte. The Germans there were holding out but were unable or unwilling to launch a counter-attack. They

crept forward from the perimeter set up by the paratroopers under the cover of the morning mist.

Phil was on point when he held up his hand. Tommy and Eric stopped while Phil crawled ahead. A muffled grunt was heard, then Phil reappeared. They advanced past the body of a German sentry.

They soon heard the sound of voices and made their way towards them, moving from cover to cover. There was the crackle of a radio set. Tommy signed for Phil to go right and Eric to go left. He went straight ahead and found himself looking through the open door of a house, the interior of which was lit by electric light. Half a dozen men, mostly officers, stood looking at a map. The radio chirped and a radio man answered it. It must have been important, as they all looked at him.

Tommy stepped in through the door. "Good morning, gentlemen."

The Germans spun around and several reached for their guns. "Don't," Phil said as he appeared in the window with his Sten trained on them. The rear door burst open, and Eric appeared.

The radio man grabbed the microphone and was about to transmit. Tommy shot him, deliberately aiming low to avoid damaging the set. The man fell from his chair and Tommy put a final bullet through his head. This demonstration was not lost on the officers.

"Put your guns on the table," Tommy said, and one translated while gingerly taking out his pistol with his fingertips.

"Now, hands on your heads."

They lined the men up on the floor and had them kneel.

"You speak English?" Tommy asked the one who had translated his orders.

"I do."

"The village is surrounded; your men are trapped. Tell them to surrender."

The officer looked defiant. "I will not."

Tommy sighed. "Have it your way." He shot another officer in the leg, and the man lay groaning in pain. "Next one goes through his head."

The officer straightened and nodded. "You will be reported for this."

Tommy grinned. "Go ahead."

The officer turned to the other men. "Wir ergeben uns. Lasst die Männer sich auf dem Platz aufstellen."

The NCOs looked at the commandos fearfully.

“I told them we are surrendering and that they have to assemble the men in the square.”

Tommy nodded and stepped away from the door, allowing the men to leave.

“If they try anything, you will be the first to die.”

* * *

It was light when Tommy and the lads returned to HQ. Sixty-five prisoners accompanied them.

“You’ve been busy,” Pritchard said as the men traipsed past.

Tommy moved to the side and let them pass. “You, bring that in here.” Two Polish soldiers who were carrying the radio set took it into the command tent.

Tommy looked at the intelligence officer. “They will set it up for you.” He handed him a sheaf of papers and a book. “I think you will have some fun with this.”

Operation Manna

September 1944

Tommy was back in Sicily, being briefed by the head of intelligence for southern Europe.

“We are negotiating with the Germans for them to hand over Greece to us without a fight and without destroying the infrastructure, in return for us letting their troops go free.”

Tommy looked at him as if he was insane. “You are *what*? Why? They will just end up facing our boys in France.”

The officer, codenamed Martin, expected that response. “No, they won’t, actually. The Germans will send them to face the Russians.” He held up his hand to forestall the next outburst. “Look, once this war is over, *we* will be facing the Russians. The Soviets will not want to stop at beating the Germans. Stalin wants to reinstate the Russian Empire, including the Balkans. If we hold Greece, it is a major advantage for us.”

Tommy had never looked beyond surviving the war and hadn’t given a single thought to what would come after. He had, however, suspicions about his next mission.

“There is a *but*, isn’t there?”

Martin smiled. “Yes. Patras. The airfield and port are both strategic elements of Operation Manna, which will happen in October. We need to take them. You are to take a group of SBS to Patras from Araxos, and take the airfield and port with the help of the partisans.”

Tommy had heard bad things about the partisans in Greece. “Which partisans? The communist EAM or the right-wing EDES?”

“You will be working with EDES. The communists want Russia to rule Greece after the war.”

“Are the partisans still fighting each other?”

“Yes. One thing to remember about the Greeks is that when they say they are fighting ‘the war’ they mean *their* war, with *their* agendas.”

Tommy sighed; he had expected as much. “How do we get there?”

“By boat; there is a modified fishing boat waiting at Araxos for you to use.”

“Modified?”

“Yes, we have fitted a bigger engine and mounted a couple of QF 6-pounders.”

* * *

Tommy was flown to Araxos, where a large force of British and Greek troops had taken the airfield. As he debarked from the aircraft, he was met by a sergeant. The man was dressed in a non-regulation uniform and had a beard.

“You Edwin?”

“Yup, who are you?”

“Sergeant Collins.”

Tommy fell into step with him. “Got a first name, Collins?”

“Arnie.”

“I’m Tommy.”

Arny gave him a side-eye look.

“Not Edwin?”

Tommy grinned. “That’s my codename.”

“Oh, you’re one of *those*.” Tommy looked at him quizzically, noting that Arnie looked a little sour. “A spook — SIS, MI6, whatever.”

“MI6,” Tommy admitted.

“Seen much action?”

“Since 1941, wounded three times.”

Arnie didn’t say anything to that, but Tommy could feel there was less tension in him.

He was introduced to the five-man team. They were all armed to the teeth. Two had Brens, one had a Browning M1919 .30, the rest had Tommy guns, and one carried a Lee-Enfield with telescopic sight as well. Tommy had his Sten and, like all of them, a Browning Hi-Power sidearm and knives.

“Where is the boat?”

Arnie looked at the northern horizon. “On a beach three miles north of here.”

“Well, let’s get on with it,” Tommy said, and picked up his pack.

The men were ready, and they all piled into a jeep and drove off. “Didn’t expect you to have transport,” Tommy shouted as they sped along a dirt road.

“We don’t — this is the commander’s. We borrowed it.”

* * *

The boat was a typical Greek fishing boat: sharp at both ends with a small house covering the engine. Two Vickers K machine guns were mounted on the roof.

“I thought we were getting QF 6-pounders.”

“Waste of space, them. These have a high rate of fire and we can take them with us.”

The single-cylinder petrol engine had been replaced with a six-cylinder diesel from a German truck. Tommy looked at it. *Why?* he thought. It was an ugly adaptation. However, it started first time, and he got the boys aboard. He soon had it speeding along the coast and he had to admit the motor purred and hardly had to work at all to push them along at around ten knots.

Tommy had to admit this small group of men had the firepower of a platoon . . . and he began to think of ways to utilise it.

* * *

Patras came up over the horizon and Tommy slowed the boat. It was nearing dusk, and they had to watch for a signal from the shore. Arnie flashed his torch — three dashes and a dot. They waited. Nothing. So Arnie flashed again. This time they were answered with three dots and a dash.

Tommy ran the boat up onto the beach, where it was held by a group of four locals. He killed the engine, and all of the men disembarked. The Vickers Ks came with them, carried by a pair of locals.

They were led around the east side of the town to the ruin of a Roman aqueduct. There, a small army of partisan fighters had assembled, and Tommy was introduced to the leader. Thanos Vasiliou was formidable. At six feet four inches and, Tommy estimated, some eighteen stones of solid muscle, he was a giant among the partisans. He carried a rifle like it was a pistol. One of the party that met them on the beach spoke English and acted as his translator.

Tommy knew immediately how to get on Thanos Vasiliou’s good side. “A man like you needs a better gun than that,” he said, and beckoned to one of the partisans carrying a Vickers K. “This is more like it.”

Thanos grinned as he took up the gun, and slapped Tommy on the back, almost knocking him over. Wilco, one of the commandos, chuckled as he

caught him. “If that’s what he’s like when he’s happy, I’d hate to see him when he’s mad.”

Tommy explained what they had to do. “The Germans have not yet agreed to leave Greece peacefully, and we need to make sure that the port in Patras is left intact. We need to take it. Our intelligence tells us that the regular German army will probably just retreat, but any elements of the SS or parachute divisions will fight. We need to clear them away from the harbour and secure it.”

Thanos grinned. “We hate the SS and the paratroopers. We are happy to kill them.”

Tommy was convinced of that, but not so sure that they would care whether the uniform worn by their victims was grey, black or camouflage. He pulled out an aerial photograph of Patras. “Where are the SS and parachute bases?”

Thanos placed a finger on the map. “The SS is here in the town hall; the parachutists are at the old castle.”

Tommy turned to Arnie. “How do you want to play this?”

Arnie didn’t hesitate. “What we should do is hit them both at the same time. How many men have you got?”

“We have one hundred and eighty men.”

“How are they armed?”

“We have rifles and captured German machine guns. We also have four mortars that we took from an Italian ammo dump before the Germans blew it up.”

Arnie nodded; he was familiar with the 81-mm Italian mortar. “Do you have much ammunition?”

Thanos grinned again. “We stole one hundred rounds.”

“Right, we set the mortars up here on the high ground to the west of the castle and drop bombs into the middle of it. The paratroopers will try and rush them through the olive groves once they figure out where they are. We will place machine guns along this road to provide enfilading fire, and put two thirds of your men in this olive grove to ambush them. I will leave you, Will and Nipper with the Browning and a Bren. You can have both Vickers Ks as well as we won’t need them in the town. The other third of your men will come with me, Tommy, Zak and Dusty. We will take on the SS.”

Thanos agreed with the strategy and said he would stay with the majority of his men. Tommy thought he just wanted a chance to play with

his new toy.

* * *

Four squads would block off the roads leading to the town hall to prevent reinforcements getting to it and to stop any SS from escaping. Once they were in position, the SBS — with Tommy and six partisans — would storm the building at 05:30 precisely, when the first mortar should be fired.

They set off, slipping through the streets like shadows. They reached the block before the town hall when they stumbled on a German patrol.

Arnie, who was on point, held up a fist and took a knee. Tommy stopped the column of partisans and waited. Arnie and Zak disappeared.

Phut.

Phut.

Phut.

Three suppressed shots from a Browning drifted on the wind to him. The tinkle of the shell cases hitting the cobbles was louder.

Arnie reappeared and beckoned them on. Tommy placed the first group at the road junction. Dusty took a second group around the block to seal off the road to the front of the town hall.

Three dead bodies lay in the moon shadow of a nearby building. Zak waited nearby and led a third group to their position. The last group was positioned to the front of the town hall, out of sight of the guards behind a low stone wall.

The team reassembled. It was 05:25. Tommy looked at his watch and steadied his breathing. There was a *whump* from the direction of the castle. "They're early, let's go," Arnie said.

Tommy moved and fired at the same time, taking down the two sentries that stood by the doors. Arnie moved up to one side of the doors with Zak on the other; he took a Mills grenade and pulled the pin. Zak opened the door, and it was tossed inside.

The blast was very loud, and before the dust had settled Tommy was first through the door, shooting at anything that moved. The SBS boys followed him in and spread out. Shouts came from further back in the building and upstairs.

Tommy took cover behind a desk as a stream of bullets came from a room behind the foyer. He pulled a grenade out of his pocket and threw it. It bounced once and went through the door.

BLAM!

He followed up by charging the door, with Dusty on his heels. The grenade had made a mess of the room and the two men in it. He shot both men to be sure, then looked around. It was a radio room and music was still coming out of a speaker that had, miraculously, been left unharmed in the blast. Tommy realised that the dead body in front of the desk must have shielded it and the radio.

Meanwhile Arnie, Zak and the partisans were working their way up the stairs. It was turning into a vicious firefight that demanded fire and manoeuvre and grenades to make headway.

Tommy and Dusty checked the other rooms on the ground floor and found a second stairway up to the first floor. They advanced quietly and came to a landing with a door. Tommy peered through the keyhole, then signalled to Dusty to get a grenade ready.

Tommy gently turned the knob and cracked the door. He held up three fingers and used them to count down. 3, 2, 1 . . . He yanked open the door and Dusty tossed in the grenade. Tommy slammed the door shut and lay flat on the floor.

BLAM.

Then they were up and through the door, guns spitting fire. A bullet passed through the sleeve of Tommy's coat, tugging at his arm. Dusty killed the perpetrator with a burst from his Tommy gun. Then it was quiet and the only shooting was from outside the room. Arnie appeared in the doorway.

"How did you get here?"

"Back stairs," Dusty said.

"Do they go up to the next floor?"

"Yes," said Tommy, and went back through the door to the landing. Bullets thudded into the floor around him, and he fired a long burst up the stairs. His mag was empty, and he reached for another as Dusty came up beside him and fired up the stairs himself.

A body slid down, its head *bump-bumping* on each tread. Tommy stepped over it and started climbing. He fired short bursts as he went to keep anybody from the landing. He stopped halfway up, and Dusty took the lead as he again replaced his magazine.

Then they were at the landing and this time a grenade went off on the other side of the door before they had a chance to throw one. They entered the room.

It was all over.

Tommy started the task of searching the bodies and house for intelligence. It was gruesome, but it had to be done.

* * *

On the hill overlooking the castle, one of the partisans who was manning a mortar knelt beside it with the bomb poised in the tube, waiting to drop it on command. He had been waiting three minutes when his tired fingers let the seven-kilogram bomb slip.

BOOP.

The bomb shot out of the tube and triggered the other mortar operators to fire theirs — two minutes early.

Luckily, everyone was in position. The mortars landed in the middle of the castle walls and exploded, sending shrapnel zinging around the open space. Men appeared on the roof of the keep, silhouetted by the dawn sun, as more bombs arrived.

Nipper took aim with his sniper's rifle and dropped one. The rest took cover.

"That's got their attention."

Down at the castle the paratroopers quickly got organised as professional soldiers do. They evacuated the keep through a postern door and formed up to storm the hill.

"Here they come; steady, lads," Will said, cocking the Browning.

He was wasting his breath. The partisans didn't speak English and didn't have any discipline. They opened up as soon as they saw the first soldier.

It was too early, and allowed the paratroopers to take cover. The operation turned from an ambush to a firefight.

* * *

Tommy and the town hall team flushed out the men in the building, killing all but one. Tommy wanted a prisoner to go with the pile of papers and books he had captured.

The man was a lieutenant and had been shot through the thigh. Tommy had him brought downstairs and tied to a wooden chair. There was sporadic firing from around the building. More worrying was the fact there was obviously a major firefight going on up on the hill.

"I'm going to take ten men and hit those paratroopers from behind," Arnie said. "Then I'll come back here."

Tommy nodded; he was focused on his prisoner. Dusty spoke some German and translated: "How many more SS are in the town?"

The man stayed stubbornly silent.

Tommy leaned forward and placed his thumb on the bullet wound. He pressed; the lieutenant groaned.

"It will only get worse. How many SS?"

Still silence. Tommy took out his fighting knife. He pushed the blade into the hole and wiggled it around. Blood flowed. The lieutenant screamed.

"How many people have you done this to? You know how it goes: I want answers and I will make your life hell until you give them to me."

He punched him in the gut, winding him, then went back to the wound before the German could get his breath. "How many?"

The man gasped in a lungful of air and whispered something.

"Speak up!"

"Fuck you!"

"Oh, you speak English — and almost without an accent." Tommy was tired of this. "Get me a cloth and a bucket of water."

When Dusty returned, he didn't have to be told what to do. He held the cloth tightly over the lieutenant's mouth and nose and tipped his head back.

As Tommy poured water over the cloth, the lieutenant choked and breathed it in. Tommy continued pouring for a full thirty seconds. Then he stopped and signalled for Dusty to remove the cloth.

"How many?" he asked when the lieutenant stopped coughing.

He shook his head in answer.

Tommy repeated the treatment for a full minute.

"How many?"

"Another platoon," the lieutenant gasped.

"Where are they?"

"In a villa on Anonimi Odos."

Tommy fetched a partisan and asked, "Anonimi Odos?" He showed him a map of the town. The partisan pointed to a road half a kilometre north of the castle.

"SHIT! The boys on the hill will be flanked!"

* * *

Up on the hill, Arnie was coming up on the rear of the German paratroopers, who were using a dry-stone wall for cover. He was about to open fire when someone started to fire over on the left flank.

“Bugger, that sounds like Schmeisers.”

There was nothing he could do but continue. He opened fire and they poured as much lead as they could down on the paratroopers.

Will and Nipper were suddenly aware of fire coming in on their right flank, and switched their fire around. That reduced the fire on the paratroopers, and they started to advance.

Things were getting hot: they were being attacked on two fronts. Then there was the roar of engines. “Fuck! They must have called in reinforcements!” Nipper yelled.

Then there was the tearing sound of MG 34s and the deeper note of the ZB-26.

“What the hell?” Will said as the fire from the flank suddenly decreased.

There was the sound of a man calling, “Hände hoch!” with a decidedly Northern English accent. All the firing stopped and it became unnaturally quiet.

An engine revved and a German half-track came into view on the road, a double column of SS ahead of it with their hands on their heads. Standing in the back, manning a machine gun, was a man in a blue navy beret and sleeveless leather coat. He waved.

Leave

October 1944

Tommy was exhausted. He had been under extreme stress for a long time with only the odd week off here and there. The bosses at MI6 knew they couldn't push him any further, and stood him down for three months.

Before that, though, he had to collect a bar to go with his DSC for gallantry and bravery in the face of the enemy. Patras was in Allied hands with the port intact, and Sergeant Collins was also awarded a DSC. They met at the gates to Buckingham Palace. Arnie wore his green beret with its Royal Marines cap badge.

The two met King George VI and his eighteen-year-old daughter Princess Elizabeth, who was in the uniform of an ATS junior commander. They chatted briefly to them about the action. Tommy thought Elizabeth to be both beautiful and charming.

With that out of the way, he packed his uniform and gun away and wore comfortable civilian clothes. He hated wearing a suit and instead normally settled for loose-fitting trousers, a shirt and a jumper or blazer. He carried a stiletto switchblade for protection.

* * *

When Tommy got to the Army and Navy Club, he found a letter from Sandra waiting for him. Posted from Perth in August, it told him that she was returning to England. She mentioned an address in London, so he decided to visit.

Rathbone Place was in the district known as Fitzrovia, celebrated for its Bohemian residents — including Virginia Woolf, who had lived there before she died in 1942, and George Bernard Shaw, who was still in residence. Tommy found the house and knocked on the door. A man answered.

“Hello! Who are you?” he said, cocking his head at Tommy and looking him up and down.

“Tommy Keelson to see Miss Hayward.”

“Sandra! There’s a hunky guy here to see you,” he called out, and opened the door for Tommy to enter. “I’m Reginald, by the way.”

Tommy stepped inside and Sandra appeared from a door off the entrance hall.

“Tommy!” she squealed, and launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and planting her lips on his.

“Some girls have all the luck,” Reginald said, and walked off looking decidedly forlorn.

“Who’s he?” Tommy asked when Sandra came up for breath.

“Reggie? He’s an actor and dancer. He’s quite harmless. He lodges here.”

She led him into her sitting room, where a large sheaf of papers, held together by a treasury tag, lay on an occasional table. “I was learning the script for a new musical I’m going to be in, at His Majesty’s Theatre. It’s called *Follow the Girls* and opens on the twelfth. Arthur Askey is in it.”

Tommy knew of Arthur Askey as he had heard him on the radio in *Bandwagon* and seen him in films like *The Ghost Train*. “That’ll be a comedy, then,” he commented.

“A musical comedy,” Sandra said. “You must come and see it.”

“I will, and now you’re here I’ll stay in London for a while before going up to Hull to see Mum.”

* * *

Tommy found that he was quite well off. His back pay, which he had not used when he was on duty, had accumulated over the last four years into quite a tidy sum. Sandra got him a backstage pass and a complimentary ticket to sit in the front row, and he arrived at the opening night of her new show dressed in a tuxedo and patent-leather shoes. The show was advertised in huge letters on the front of the theatre and Sandra’s name was in lights.

The tuxedo, shirt and bow tie had been tailor-made in Savile Row and fitted his athletic frame perfectly, accentuating his broad shoulders and slim hips. He looked quite the part as he entered through the stage door carrying a large bouquet of red roses.

He was shown to Sandra’s dressing room. “Darling!” she cried and took the flowers. “I’m sorry I can’t kiss you. I just put on my lipstick.”

“That’s OK,” he said, and kissed the nape of her neck instead. “Are you ready?”

“I am. We have rehearsed it to death. Arthur will ad lib some parts, but the rest will be the same every night.”

Just then the door opened, and Reggie stuck his head through. He looked Tommy up and down and pursed his lips. “Ooh, look at you!” He turned to Sandra. “Break a leg, darling.” He winked at Tommy. “I’ll see you later.”

“Not if I see you first,” Tommy muttered.

Sandra laughed. “He’s only teasing. He has a boyfriend.”

Tommy looked a little confused. “I thought that was illegal.”

“It is, but it’s ignored in the theatre world.”

Tommy shook his head; in his world, homosexuality had only existed in theory until now.

“What did he mean, *break a leg*?”

“That’s what we say for good luck.”

Tommy shook his head again, and looked at his watch. “I’d better get to my seat.”

The show was bright and lively with catchy songs. Sandra played a burlesque striptease queen who becomes the star attraction at a servicemen’s club in Long Island. She did not strip — that was illegal — but the hint was there. The show was a sell-out.

After the show they went to the opening night party, where the cast and the good and the great gathered in the theatre bar for drinks.

Tommy met Arthur Askey, who was only five feet two. Tommy, who was five feet eleven in his socks, towered over him. Sandra brought them both a glass of champagne.

“What do you do?” Arthur asked.

“I’m in the navy,” Tommy replied.

“He’s a commander,” Sandra said, knowing that Tommy wouldn’t, “and he’s been decorated for bravery.”

“Jolly good,” Arthur said, and moved on.

Tommy was a little non-plussed, but Sandra reassured him. “Don’t worry; he was looking for a joke at your expense but it’s a little hard, what with you getting those medals!”

* * *

Home called to him, and he got the train to Hull in December. His mother had moved back into her own house, which was still missing a neighbour and relied on buttresses to make it the end of the terrace.

His arrival for Christmas was the talk of the street as he was the only twice-decorated commander in it, and his mum kept asking him to wear his

uniform. Tommy resisted and kept his feet firmly on the ground. Local kids would ask where he had been, and he made up stories of serving on a ship because he couldn't tell them about his actual operations.

He bought a goose for Christmas Day, and his mother invited her friends who were widowed, or just alone, to join them. Tommy managed, through old contacts in the black market, to get the makings of a proper Christmas dinner. He had bought his mother's Christmas present in Greece before he left. It was a fine, handmade set of silk throw-overs for her sitting-room chairs. She loved them, as the design was unique and no one else she knew had anything like them.

* * *

While his mother cooked lunch, aided and abetted by his auntie Ethel, Tommy went to the pub. Many of the local men who were either too old to be conscripted or exempted for one reason or another were there. The talk was about the flying-bomb raid on Manchester.

"The radio said that the Germans sent fifty buzz bombs which landed on Oldham. There's forty-two dead and over a hundred injured," said Bill Rogers, the local grocer.

"Aye, my cousin Trudy lives over there. I talked to her on t'phone. She said it were terrible," added Alfie Edwards, a tug pilot.

The Battle of the Bulge was also a point of discussion.

"Have they stopped the German advance yet?" Tommy asked.

"Last I heard was the Panzers had reached Celles," said Vic, the pub's landlord. "They also managed to get some supplies to those poor buggers in Bastone."

* * *

Christmas lunch was customarily eaten at 14:00 and followed by the king's speech. This year the king spoke of hope in his message, saying that the lamps the Germans had put out all over Europe were being rekindled and beginning to shine through the fog of war. He added, "At this Christmastime we think proudly and gratefully of our fighting men wherever they may be. May God bless and protect them and bring them victory." He sent his good wishes to the sick and wounded in hospital and the medical staff caring for them, and to prisoners of war and the relatives at home waiting for them to return. He also spoke of the hard work and sacrifice of people throughout the Empire who had helped to bring victory

nearer, and the goal of creating, after the war, “a world of free men, untouched by tyranny”.

Tommy listened, hoping the war would end soon, along with his part in it.

Operation Roast

March 1945

Tommy returned to London early in the new year and stayed at Sandra's house. The constant flow of actors and artists was entertaining, and he met Noël Coward, who he knew had served in the intelligence service in the early years of the war. He also met David Lean, the director of Coward's early film *In Which We Serve*. The two of them were currently adapting Coward's play *Blithe Spirit* into a film.

Tommy liked Coward; his urbane wit and cutting observations were always amusing and frighteningly accurate. Coward had recently learned that had the Germans invaded Britain then he, Virginia Woolf, Paul Robeson and Bertrand Russell among others would have been put up against a wall and shot. He showed Tommy a telegram from Rebecca West, who was also on the list. It said, *My dear — the people we should have been seen dead with.*

But one day, a messenger arrived and told him he had to report to Broadway immediately. Tommy climbed on the back of his motorcycle and was given a lift to the office.

Bill greeted him with, "All rested? Good. I have a job for you."

"Hello, Bill. Nice to see you too," Tommy said as he dropped into Bill's comfy chair.

Bill gave him a sideways look, which made Tommy grin. "You are going back to Italy."

Tommy was surprised — he thought it would be something else. "Not Greece, then?"

"No, the only fighting there is between the EDES and EAM/ELAS, they hate each other with a vengeance. You will be going to Ravenna to disrupt the port. At Pescara you will collect the SBS team you were with in Greece. You'll use the same boat as well."

Tommy looked up in surprise. "The same boat?"

"Yes, the one you used last time you were in Italy."

"Oh, that one."

"Operation Roast will be an offensive by the commandos on Comacchio Lagoon. Their aim is to push the Germans off the spit and to

capture the bridges to fool the Germans into thinking we are going to attack from the sea.”

Tommy looked at the map that was pinned to the wall. “I’m guessing that we will be really attacking through the Argenta Gap.”

Bill nodded. “Yes, and we will push the Jerries back and trap them in Bologna.”

“OK, what do you want me and the boys to do?”

“Reinforce that illusion. Take out German infrastructure in the port, mess with their minds and cause confusion. Then get out safely.”

Tommy grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

* * *

He was given a ride to Sicily in a Dakota. His boat, the *Re del Mare*, was tied up beside a dock. A familiar face was sitting on the deck, cleaning a Bren gun.

“Hello, Seth. How long have you been here?”

“Me and the boys got in yesterday.”

Tommy didn’t mention that Bill had forgotten to tell him they were coming along. “Where are they?”

“Alf’s checking the engine, Gary’s in the radio shack and the rest are in town getting supplies.”

A truck pulled up and a corporal got out of the cab. “Commander Keelson?”

Tommy raised a hand. “That’s me.”

The corporal looked him up and down; Tommy was dressed in civvies. “I heard you were one of that lot. I have some stores for you.”

The stores turned out to be a Vickers K, several crates of explosives, a bazooka and ammo, two 3-inch mortars and ammo, grenades and a device Tommy had never seen before.

“What’s this?”

“Booby trap. You place it somewhere the Jerries walk down and set the trip wire at about a foot above the ground. The charge is wrapped in ball bearings.”

Tommy checked it over, the trip wire was in a sprung casing that could be pulled out to whatever length you wanted it. The charge had straps attached for securing it to a post or similar anchor point. There was a safety pin fitted, like a grenade.

“Nice.”

“Bloody barbaric if you ask me,” the corporal said, and grimaced.

* * *

When the boys returned, they loaded the boat with food, water and the stores. Tommy had thought about what to do with some of them.

“I want the mortars set up on deck and the bazooka set up on the cabin roof with the Vickers. We will turn this boat into a gunboat.”

The explosives were packed into shoulder bags for easy transportation.

“OK, let’s go,” Tommy ordered, when everything was organised.

They pushed off from the dock and set off for Pescara.

* * *

1 April 1945

It took three days to get to Pescara and pick up Arnie and the boys. Tommy showed them their toys as they chugged up the coast to Ravenna.

“We should land here at midnight,” Arnie said, indicating a beach by the town of Punta, “and make our way to the port, which is two miles away. In the meantime, the *Re* will proceed up the coast and enter the canal to the port. Once there, you can start lobbing mortar bombs at the main docks.”

Tommy took over. “Open fire at 00:30. Concentrate on this area here.” He pointed to an area on the map that was to the west of the canal. “Use the bazooka on any ships you see flying a German flag. We will be creating mayhem on the east bank in the industrial area, where there is a German garrison. You will pick us up at 02:00 here.” He pointed to a dock.

They synchronised watches and went about their individual preparations.

* * *

It was a moonless night; the sky was clear and the stars shone brightly. The *Re del Mare* pulled up on the beach and Tommy and the boys, all dressed in commando uniforms, jumped ashore. All of them carried heavy packs of explosives and booby traps. They made their way directly inland to a bridge that would get them to the port. It was guarded at either end by pairs of German soldiers.

Knives ended the lives of the pair on the near side and a quick burst of suppressed Sten fire ended the pair at the other end. Now they followed a road north-east up towards the port.

At precisely 00:30 the first mortar bomb landed, followed by more. It sounded like an air raid without the aeroplane engines. The commandos had reached the first factory and warehouses. Doors were kicked in and explosives set. They immediately moved on.

They stopped when Zak, the point man, held up a fist. He signalled: four men, machine-gun nest. Tommy and Arnie moved up. There was the machine-gun nest, with four men who were all peering at the area of the docks that was under fire.

Tommy moved forward on silent feet. He got within ten yards and emptied his magazine on them. Zak moved past him and advanced up the dock road to the next warehouse.

It was full of German supplies. They set up booby traps on the entrance after they set charges inside. They moved on once more.

A siren was wailing. The alert had been given. "Took their time," Arnie commented.

Tommy's teeth shone white through the camouflage paint. "They must have been asleep."

A Tommy gun barked from up ahead. Zak came back to them. "German patrol, was eight but now only six."

They spread out in pairs and moved. Bullets buzzed through the air and ricocheted off buildings. The Germans were professionals and they too fired and manoeuvred. Zak shot another as he moved, Tommy got his partner. A grenade ended it and they moved on to the next target as an explosion behind them saw the end of their first target.

* * *

The commander of the German garrison was getting reports from all over Ravenna. He roused his men and sent out patrols in strength. As far as he could tell, a ship was bombarding the port and the warehouses and factories in the industrial area.

"Is it an invasion?" headquarters asked him. "There is activity further up the coast as well."

Another explosion ripped through the air and a window shattered.

"It must be. That was our ammunition store."

"I will send you a battalion of armoured infantry. Hold on — they will be there in an hour and a half."

* * *

Tommy backed down an alley; there was another German patrol ahead of him and he fired as he retreated. He stopped to attach a booby trap to a gate post and stretch the wire across the alley to a drainpipe on the other side.

A burst of fire came down the alley and he dived for cover. He was too slow — three bullets hit his legs and feet. He rolled flat and groaned as the pain hit him. He had lost contact with the others, who had moved on.

“Fuck!” He scrawled for his dressing pack and bound his calf where a bullet had gone through. He had been hit in the heel of his left foot and another bullet had creased the top of his right.

The booby trap went off and there were screams. He crawled behind a crate then sat up — with the Sten and grenades at the ready.

A figure appeared at the end of the alley and he gave him a burst, then tossed a grenade into the entrance. He was holding his own.

Then the lights went out.

* * *

Arnie and the boys finished up what they were doing and then realised that Tommy was nowhere to be seen. They backtracked and found the alley, which was covered in a scattering of bodies that, judging from their wounds and the scorch mark on the gatepost, had been killed by a booby trap.

A trail of spent shell casings from a Sten and a smear of blood led them to the crate, where they found more blood and Tommy’s Sten. Of Tommy there was no sign, just a smear of blood with bloody footprints beside it leading away.

“Jackboots,” Nipper exclaimed.

“They’ve got him, and he’s wounded,” Arnie said. “I don’t rate his chances.”

Captivity

3 April 1945

Tommy woke up in a bed. He had the mother and father of all headaches and felt sick. He looked around, squinting against the bright sunlight that shone through a window. An orderly approached. "You are awake, good." He had a German accent.

Tommy focused and saw that anybody who was standing was in uniform. "Am I a prisoner?"

"Yes, you were captured last night. Someone hit you on the head with a rifle butt."

A doctor came over and examined him by looking in his eyes and having him follow a pencil with them. He said something in German. "He said you will live," said the orderly.

"Where am I? I know I'm in hospital, but where?"

"Bologna. Now you are awake, you will be transported north. The British and Americans are closing in."

Tommy figured he was lucky; commandos were usually shot on sight. But the orderly had not finished. "What is your name?"

"I am Commander Thomas Keelson, Royal Navy. Service number 277891."

"You are not a commando?"

"No."

The orderly bundled off and Tommy lay back on his pillow. He felt around the back of his head, where there was a substantial lump. A Wehrmacht officer came onto the ward and strode over to Tommy's bed.

"Commander Keelson?"

"Yes."

"I am Oberst Hans Zimmer, it was my men that captured you. You and your men caused a lot of damage last night."

"I was just along for the ride."

The oberst nodded then put his head to one side. "It was a diversion, ja?" Tommy didn't answer. "I must congratulate you. The British attacked the Argenta Gap this morning and the Americans are advancing on their front. The attack on Comacchio has virtually destroyed the garrison south of Port Garibaldi. I escaped with what was left of my men — and you."

“Well, you could have left me behind.” Tommy grinned.

The oberst took out a silver cigarette case and offered it to Tommy, who took one and accepted a light from a gold lighter.

“I had to have something for my trouble, and we did not want the SS to get you. They are feeling vengeful.”

Tommy nodded in thanks. “What happens now?”

“You will be transported to a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. I will stay here and try to defend the line as the Führer orders.”

* * *

Tommy was carried on a stretcher to a train and put in a cattle wagon along with a load of Italian civilian prisoners and four Americans. The train left Bologna and headed towards the Austrian border in the north-east of Italy.

“Who are you?” one of the Americans asked.

“Commander Keelson, Royal Navy. And you are?”

“PFC Tony Mordello, 34th Infantry Division. These are Corporal Will Major, PFC Alex Marquess and PFC Micky Montessa.”

“Pleased to meet you, gentlemen,” Tommy said.

“We were captured when we were on patrol ahead of the line. What happened to you?”

“Oh, I was on a little jaunt in Ravenna when I got shot in the legs and foot. After that I got hit on the head.”

“We heard that Ravenna and the area north of there was invaded.”

Tommy just smiled. He didn’t know these men and didn’t trust that they weren’t Germans in disguise.

* * *

4 April 1945

The train sped unmolested through northern Italy and into Austria at Villach, then on to Wolfsberg and Stalag XVIII-C, where Tommy was placed in the camp hospital. The guards were all Austrian or older Germans and Tommy got to know one or two.

“What news of the war, Hans?” he asked from the chair beside his bed.

“It goes not well for the Germans. The Allies are advancing on all fronts and the Soviets are making big moves as well.”

“Do you think it’s all over?” Tommy asked.

Hans, who was an Austrian, sighed. "I think it will be over soon. The Gestapo are running away and hiding and only the SS still believe in Hitler."

"Hitler is Austrian, isn't he?"

Hans grimaced. "Please do not remind me."

* * *

14 April 1945

Tommy's wounds healed and the days passed slowly. He had visitors — other officers would come and see him, including a couple of navy officers who had been interned for four years. Lieutenant Smethers and Lieutenant Commander Witherington had been captured when their ship was sunk in late 1940.

"Is there an escape committee?" Tommy asked.

"Yes, but it's inactive right now as the Allies are closing in. We'll make a bid to take over the camp if Germany surrenders. You see, we have a radio and know what progress we're making."

"Any news on Italy?"

"We've taken Argenta, and the Americans are advancing along their entire front . . ."

* * *

20 April 1945

Tommy was up and about and out of hospital, although he still needed a stick to walk. The camp was vast and contained prisoners of many nationalities. The news was good! The Allies had reached Munich in the south of Germany and the River Elbe in the north. Yugoslavia had been liberated and Bologna had fallen. The partisans in Italy had joined the fight and it was only a matter of time before that country fell.

The guards were increasingly morose, and many made sure they were nice to the prisoners, knowing that retribution would not be far away.

On the downside, food was short and they were all on slim rations. But the guards, who were on short rations as well, let the prisoners do as they wanted. Tommy spent his time getting fit again, walking through the camp.

The only part that was not welcoming was the Russian compound. The Russians were Soviets, communists, and were under the thumbs of their

commissars. Tommy disliked these political officers, who seemed to have more power than their military counterparts.

Tommy was walking one afternoon, his stick in hand but not really needed, when he was confronted by one such Russian.

“What are you doing here?” the sharp-faced politico snapped at him.

Tommy looked at him calmly. “What has that to do with you?”

“This is the Russian compound.”

“Actually, this is the *Polish* compound, the Russian compound is over there.”

The man sneered. “The Poles are now part of the Soviet Union.”

“That’s odd, I understood they were going to be a satellite, autonomously governed.”

“They are communists like us, and allies of Russia. You are not welcome here.”

That told Tommy volumes about the attitude of the Soviets to their western allies. *Allies one day, enemies the next.*

* * *

1 May 1945

The news was getting better every day. The Germans in Italy had surrendered; Mussolini and his mistress had been shot by partisans, having been caught trying to cross into Switzerland, and their bodies hung upside down from a girder in the Piazzale Loreto in Milan after being brutalised by the mob. The radio was full of speculation that Germany would surrender soon.

The guards had all but given up. The gates were open, but the camp was beginning to divide into west and east.

Then came the radio broadcast that Hitler and his wife Eva Braun had committed suicide. The celebration was immense. Moonshine that had been hoarded was distributed and a rare old time was had by all.

The camp inmates waited for the official surrender with a sweepstake on the official date and time.

* * *

8 May 1945

The news they had all been waiting for came streaming out of the radio. Winston Churchill announced:

German armed forces surrendered unconditionally on May 7. Hostilities in Europe ended officially at one minute past midnight, May 9, 1945, British Double Summer Time.

Yesterday morning at 2.41 a.m. at General Eisenhower's Headquarters, General Jodl, the representative of the German High Command, and of Grand Admiral Doenitz, the designated head of the German State, signed the act of unconditional surrender of all German land, sea, and air forces in Europe to the Allied Expeditionary Force, and simultaneously to the Soviet High Command.

General Bedell Smith, Chief of Staff of the Allied Expeditionary Force, and General François Sevez signed the document on behalf of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, and General Susloparov signed on behalf of the Russian High Command.

Today this agreement will be ratified and confirmed at Berlin, where Air Chief Marshal Tedder, Deputy Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, and General de Lattre de Tassigny will sign on behalf of General Eisenhower. General Zhukov will sign on behalf of the Soviet High Command. The German representatives will be Field Marshal Keitel, Chief of the High Command, and the Commanders-in-Chief of the German army, navy and air forces.

Hostilities will end officially at one minute after midnight tonight (Tuesday, May 8), but in the interests of saving lives the "Cease Fire" began yesterday, to be sounded all along the front, and our dear Channel Islands are also to be freed today.

The Germans are still in places resisting the Russian troops, but should they continue to do so after midnight they will, of course, deprive themselves of the protection of the laws of war, and will be attacked from all quarters by the Allied troops. It is not surprising that on such

long fronts and in the existing disorder of the enemy the orders of the German High Command should not in every case be obeyed immediately. This does not, in our opinion, with the best military advice at our disposal, constitute any reason for withholding from the nation the facts communicated to us by General Eisenhower of the unconditional surrender already signed at Rheims, nor should it prevent us from celebrating today and tomorrow (Wednesday) as Victory in Europe days.

Today, perhaps, we shall think mostly of ourselves. Tomorrow we shall pay a particular tribute to our Russian comrades, whose prowess in the field has been one of the grand contributions to the general victory.

The German war is therefore at an end. After years of intense preparation, Germany hurled herself on Poland at the beginning of September 1939; and, in pursuance of our guarantee to Poland and in agreement with the French Republic, Great Britain, the British Empire and Commonwealth of Nations declared war upon this foul aggression. After gallant France had been struck down, we, from this Island and from our united Empire, maintained the struggle single-handed for a whole year until we were joined by the military might of Soviet Russia, and later by the overwhelming power and resources of the United States of America.

Finally, almost the whole world was combined against the evil-doers, who are now prostrate before us. Our gratitude to our splendid Allies goes forth from all our hearts in this Island and throughout the British Empire.

We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing; but let us not forget for a moment the toil and efforts that lie ahead. Japan, with all her treachery and greed, remains unsubdued. The injury she has inflicted on Great Britain, the United States and other countries, and her detestable cruelties, call for justice and retribution. We must now devote all our strength and resources to the

*completion of our task, both at home and abroad.
Advance, Britannia! Long live the cause of freedom!
God save the king!*

The war was over. The guards handed over the camp to the inmates. Men went out in the countryside to find food. They returned with scant supplies.

* * *

10 May 1945

The sound of trucks and tanks heralded the approach of the British 8th Army. The column entered the camp, and they were officially liberated.

Tommy identified himself to the commanding officer and he was immediately transported to Milan — and from there, to London.

Berlin

London
18 May 1945

Tommy returned to a city he hardly recognised. It was decorated with bunting and still celebrating. He visited Sandra, who examined his new scars and then checked that everything else was in fine working order. Once that was out of the way, he reported to Broadway.

The office was busy. People rushed along the corridors and typewriters clattered. Tommy made his way to Bill's office. He was met by Bill and Ian Fleming.

“Nice to be back,” Tommy said.

“We thought we had lost you. The commandos reported you got separated and they only found your Sten.”

Tommy told them what had happened. To give him his due, Bill was not overly critical. “You were supposed to stay with the team. However, that is water under the bridge. We have a different problem.”

Here we go, Tommy thought. “Let me guess, the Russians,” he said.

Fleming looked at him. “That is very astute. What makes you think that?”

“The behaviour of the Soviet soldiers in the camp. Their commissars were preaching to them that after the war the Soviet Union would be the largest power in the world.”

“Well, they will come to the table and agree how Germany will be divided up. We want you to learn Russian.”

Tommy looked at them. “Hold on one fucking minute. The war has ended. I've done my time.”

Bill leaned back in his chair. “The war against Germany has finished but if I am not very much mistaken, the war against Russia is about to begin. You are too good an agent to let go, so I will do this. You continue to work for us as a senior agent, and you will receive a salary of £1,000 per annum, index linked, and a guaranteed pension at age fifty of seventy-five per cent of your final salary.”

That was the equivalent of a senior civil servant's pay — and a hell of a lot more than he could make as a merchant seaman.

“Danger money?”

“You will get a bonus for time spent in hostile territory, at my discretion.”

“Alright, where am I based?”

“You can stay here in London with your girlfriend if you want. You will be attending one-to-one lessons in Russian here.”

* * *

Tommy put his uniform in mothballs at the back of the wardrobe and settled down to attending Russian lessons every day from 09:00 to 12:00 and 14:00 to 17:00. He was taught to speak and read Russian. His bilingual upbringing had given him a natural talent for languages, and he learned quickly.

After the language lessons he received further training in espionage. Surveillance, entering a building without leaving any physical evidence, photography with miniaturised cameras, wire-tapping — the usual spy stuff. By September he was ready. He was briefed.

“Your cover is that you are a French businessman keen to do trade in Berlin. You are to set up an office in the French sector and appear to trade. Your name is Michel Marchand, and you are a wine merchant.”

Tommy was given a complete background story, which he had to memorise, and equipped with a new weapon — a Walther P-38 9 mm. It was purely for self-protection, as he would not be expected to get into trouble himself.

* * *

14 August 1945

He flew into Berlin’s Tempelhof airport, which was under American control, and took a taxi to the French zone. His office and apartment were to the north of the city centre in one of the few areas where buildings were still standing. It was a perfectly normal apartment . . . except for the unofficial second telephone line that was connected to a scrambler phone.

Clearance work in the city centre, where 90 per cent of the buildings had been destroyed, was ongoing. More than a million Berliners were homeless. Damaged buildings were being demolished to make way for new ones. The eastern sector was even worse off as the Soviets were looting anything they could take back to Russia, including the rail infrastructure and factory equipment.

Tommy wondered about the choice of wine merchant for his cover, as builder would have been more useful.

* * *

Tommy's brief was to set up a network of informants to monitor what the Soviets were up to, so he went into the Soviet sector, carrying samples which he "gifted" to the border guards. He looked for people in positions where they would have access to useful information.

The first, Sigrid, was a secretary in the Russian secret police headquarters. He bribed her with food and clothes for her children, since she was widowed. She led him to other people who were prepared to sell Soviet secrets for money or goods. He was picking up German as he lived there and soon had a working knowledge of the language.

One thing was for sure: there was no loyalty in any part of the city. The NKVD was active, enforcing communist doctrine and carrying out purges as ordered by Stalin. Tommy had to be careful and was stopped and searched randomly in the Soviet sector. Consequently, he never carried a gun on any of his "trading trips", since to be found with one would lead to arrest and probably torture.

He met Sigrid in a café. "They are searching for scientists and engineers," she told him. "When they are found they are arrested and sent to something they call a *sharanshka*. That's a type of prison which is quite comfortable and more like a secure research centre."

"Are there any particular skills they are looking for?" Tommy asked.

"Aerospace, physics, rocket scientists, weapons specialists . . . that sort of thing," Sigrid replied.

Tommy was keeping a constant watch for anyone paying a little too much attention to them, so he quickly spotted the man in a leather coat drinking coffee — or rather, what the east Germans *called* coffee.

"Thank you." He put money for their drinks on the table. "Your package is hidden at drop-off B."

Tommy left her and walked away down the street, noting that the man got up and followed him once he was thirty yards away. Tommy didn't know if the man suspected him or was just following him out of curiosity. He took a roundabout route to the French checkpoint and crossed into safe territory.

* * *

The next time Tommy crossed he was in a small van, carrying cases of wine. He picked up a tail almost immediately. He let him follow him and established it was a single operative in a battered Volkswagen. Tommy led him to a shop he supplied with wine and offloaded. While he was there, he picked up several messages.

He returned directly to the French quarter and decoded the messages. Once he had read them, he got on the scrambler phone to HQ.

“Informants tell me that the Russians are looking for Heinrich Schultheiss, a German physicist who lives in the American sector. Once they find him, they plan to kidnap him.”

There was silence for a minute, then Bill came on the line.

“He is a nuclear physicist. The Americans want him to work for them, but he is reluctant as they dropped the bomb on Japan. They would rather have him dead than work for the Russians.”

Tommy asked, “And us?”

“We would like him to work for us.”

“And if he won’t?”

“We let the Yanks do what they have to do. I want you to meet him. I will clear it with the Americans and let you know where they are hiding him.”

Two days later, the scrambler phone rang.

“Go to the American sector, then find the junction of Lauenburger Strasse and Kniephofstrasse. He is in the house with a blue door. Offer him a professorship at Cambridge or Oxford — his choice.”

* * *

Tommy left his house, walked to the local train station and got a ticket to Priesterweg. He checked his back trail regularly and took a number of false trails. As far as he could tell, he was not followed. He walked the last leg on quiet roads with hardly any traffic or pedestrians. He stopped outside another house and waited. He could see no one. Satisfied, he went to the blue door and knocked.

It was opened by a bespectacled man, who was as scholarly as they come.

“Hello, I’m Thomas Keelson,” Tommy said.

“Come in,” Schultheiss replied and led him to the living room.

“Professor—” Tommy said after Schultheiss’s wife had brought him tea.

“Doctor,” Schultheiss corrected him.

“Doctor, I understand that you are reluctant to accept the offer from the Americans.”

The doctor looked upset. “I will not work on weapons — look what they have done to my country.”

Tommy chose his course carefully. “I am authorised by my government to offer you a professorship in whatever field you want at either Cambridge or Oxford. This comes with a house and salary.”

“Any field?”

Tommy nodded.

“I wish to join Liverpool University and George Ansell’s team.” Tommy must have looked confused, because he added, “They are studying nuclear medicine.”

* * *

A week later all was agreed, and Tommy returned to the house to escort the doctor and his wife to the airport. He had called in a support team from the SAS who would provide security, and carried his own gun as well. They were loading the doctor’s luggage into a Humber car borrowed from the army, when a car came speeding up the street and squealed to a stop outside the house.

Tommy’s gun was in his hand before he had consciously thought about it and he put himself between the doctor and whoever was in the car.

Three men got out, all dressed in drab colours and carrying guns. Tommy pushed the doctor behind the Humber and fired at the first man running towards him. He missed and fired again. The man kept coming, firing as he ran, and Tommy fired again. The man went down. The second and third men fired at him, and he heard the bullets fizz past. One tugged at his coat.

The SAS arrived. A machine gun spat, and the two men fell no more than ten feet away from Tommy. The driver of the car accelerated away but swerved into a wall after it was hit innumerable times by machine-gun fire.

Tommy stood, took a step and staggered. “Bugger, not again,” he groaned.

“Are you alright, sir?” the lead SAS soldier asked.

“I’ve been hit,” Tommy said as he leaned against the car.

“Medic!” the soldier shouted.

* * *

Tommy was treated at the scene. The bullet had passed through his side without hitting anything critical. A field dressing staunched the bleeding, and he insisted on getting the couple to the airport himself.

Tommy was not convinced that he had been shot by one of the assailants, as the hole looked more like a .45 calibre than a 9 mm, which the Germans had been using. But the SAS strongly denied shooting him. In any case, he boarded the plane with the couple and handed them over to MI5 when they got to Croydon. Then he took himself to hospital, where he was found by Bill.

“You told me—” Tommy started to say as soon as he saw him.

“I know. Look, you have done a bloody good job. Everyone is happy except the Russians.”

“Even the Yanks?”

“Even them.”

Tommy looked around to make sure no one else was listening. “Did we identify them?”

“No. They were using Walther P-38s which are available anywhere in Germany. No ID and no identifying marks.”

“So probably NKVD,” Tommy said.

Bill looked concerned. “In which case, your cover is blown and we will have to replace you.”

Tommy wasn’t done yet. “Do you have photographs of the men?”

Bill opened his briefcase and took out an envelope, which he handed to Tommy. “This one was the one at the café. I was watching him, and he didn’t take any photos.”

“You can’t be sure of that; they could have had someone in a house or car.”

“Then I will grow a beard and go back under a different name.”

Bill wasn’t sure. “Why?”

“Because I need to get Sigrid out.”

* * *

Tommy returned to Berlin as soon as his wound had healed enough to allow it. He was bearded and went under the name of Joseph Clarkson. His papers said he was a cement salesman. He stayed in a guesthouse in the outskirts of Berlin, in the British sector.

He visited several building companies in Berlin before trying to find Sigrid through his other contacts. He found out she had been questioned by the NKVD about her association with him and then transferred to another office.

He knew where that office was and set up a watch on it. He spotted Sigrid leaving and followed her to her home. She was being watched and her tail followed her from the office.

One day, soon after she got home, she went to a neighbour to collect her two children. The tail settled down for an hour watching her house and then left. Tommy moved in; he had a window of opportunity and took it.

He knocked at her door and when she answered he pushed his way in. "Sigrid, it's me."

"Michael? What are you doing here?"

Tommy placed his hands on her arms and looked her in the eyes. "I've come to take you to the American side."

She was confused. "What? Why?"

"Because you have been found out. The NKVD are using you to find me. Once they give up on that, you will be eliminated."

Her hand went to her mouth. "My children!"

"Exactly — grab their things and bring them with you. We leave now."

She rushed to do as he said and soon had the children and a bag ready to go. Tommy had been watching the street and noticed a car that looked suspicious.

He left by a rear window that dropped into an alley and took a circular route back to the street. He approached the car casually, as if he was someone on his way home. He could see there were two men in it.

He took his Walther from his pocket and screwed on a silencer. Carrying it had been worth the risk. He had his overcoat over his arm to conceal the gun as he approached and when he got level with the passenger door, he stopped. The man in the passenger seat looked at him, then wound down the window. Tommy shot him in the head and then shot the driver in the side, twice. He shot him in the head as well, to make sure.

Sigrid was waiting inside the door when he returned to the house.

He stopped in his tracks as he looked down the barrel of a gun. It didn't shake or waver as she said, "Put your gun down on the table."

He did as he was told; her face had the cold look of a professional. "We thought you might come back for me." She waved the pistol, indicating he

was to enter the kitchen. "Sit there."

"So, the two men outside were back-up and not following you."

Sigrid lit a cigarette.

Tommy looked at her, his head tilted to one side. "You were going to feed me false information."

"Along with some snippets of real information so you would believe it. We learned a lesson from the British management of spies during the war."

"But you didn't count on me trying to rescue you."

It was a rhetorical question, and she ignored it. Tommy nodded; his hand went to his jacket pocket. The pistol came up. "Don't."

He raised his hands. "I was getting a cigarette."

"Then do so slowly and just use your fingers."

He slowly reached into the pocket and took out a silver cigarette holder. He reached in again and took out a gold Ronson lighter. He opened the case and took out a cigarette, then snapped it shut. He lit the cigarette with his lighter. Then he settled back in the chair and blew out a cloud of smoke. He held the case in his right hand and moved to put it away.

Sigrid blinked and as she did, his hand whipped forward and spun the case straight at her face. It distracted her just long enough for Tommy to follow up the throw with a lunge, catching her in the midriff with his shoulder and throwing her back into the kitchen cupboards.

She responded by hitting him on the back with the gun, but he was in close now and able to use his strength. He headbutted her in the face and grabbed the barrel of the gun, twisting it up. She let go — there was a crack when the gun went off as her finger broke inside the trigger guard.

Tommy swung the gun by the barrel and smashed it into the side of her head, then dropped it. She went down but was still conscious. He pulled her up into a sitting position, then he got behind her and wrapped his left arm around her neck and his right around so his hand was over her temple. Then he wrenched his right arm back and there was another crack as her neck broke.

Tommy looked down at her body. The head was now at an impossible angle, so he straightened it. He searched the house and found her NKVD identity card. Her name was Sigrid Pavlovic and, according to the card, she had the rank of lieutenant.

The children had been sent back upstairs, and he went up to see them. The girl was sleeping but the boy was awake.

“Is she your mother?”

The boy shook his head. It was all Tommy needed to know.

* * *

Tommy reported to Broadway. “They knew about me from the time I got there,” he told Bill.

“Then they must have someone on the inside.”

Tommy nodded. “Yes, and they used the information to find Dr Schultheiss. It was only because we acted so quickly that they didn’t get him.”

“Well, this is for the powers that be to investigate. You can have some time off before your next assignment.”

Epilogue

Tommy's next mission was in the Middle East. The British controlled Palestine and Walter, Lord Rothschild, the British foreign secretary in 1917, had told the British Jewish community that:

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

This had, understandably, led to an expectation that they would be gifted a state. However, the British had also promised the Arabs a united Arab country if they defeated the Ottomans during the First World War. Britain did not deliver on either promise.

During the war the British restricted the entry into Palestine of Jews fleeing from the holocaust and Nazi persecution. This resulted in the Jews unifying against the British and using terrorism to drive the British out.

Tommy was put in charge of the Middle East station and was responsible for intelligence gathering and counter-terrorism.

* * *

In his private life, his relationship with Sandra continued and he proposed to her before he left for the Middle East. They were married in London, at All Saints Church in Margaret Street. She continued her acting and singing career, joining Tommy in Jerusalem between shows.

They bought a house in the Cotswolds when she became pregnant with their first child. They named the girl Simone Rose.

* * *

In 1947 the UN adopted a partition plan for a two-state solution to the Middle East problem which was accepted by the Jews but rejected by the Arabs. Britain refused to implement it. However, Britain's time in Palestine

was almost up and on the eve of their withdrawal, the State of Palestine was born — which led to the Arab–Israeli War.

Tommy left the station and returned to England, thoroughly discontent with the way Britain had handled the whole thing.

His next job was to find the moles in the service leaking secrets to the Soviets. But that is a different story.

THE END



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Author's Notes

'Nduja — a spicy, spreadable sausage made from meat offcuts minced together with dried Calabrian chilli peppers. It can be fiery and is eaten on bread for breakfast. Believe me when I say it wakes you up! You can find it outside Calabrian grocery stores hanging from a metal rack with a plastic catch pan underneath to protect the pavement from the juices that drip from the sausage.

Private Edwin Roy Marsh Stockley, mentioned in the chapter called *Headquarters*, was my great uncle and died on 8 September 1943 in Italy. He was part of an advance landing by the Dorsetshire Regiment south of Salerno, and was killed by friendly fire when an officer (known by the boys as a Rupert) called in an airstrike by the American air force but mistakenly gave them his own headquarters' coordinates, rather than the enemy's. Edwin was hit by a bomb as he waited outside on his trusty motorcycle for dispatches. He is buried in the Salerno war cemetery.

Weapons

QF 3-pounder Hotchkiss

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QF_3-pounder_Hotchkiss

Maxim gun

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxim_gun

Sten gun

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sten>

Bren gun

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bren_light_machine_gun

Austen gun

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austen_submachine_gun

Browning Hi-Power

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Browning_Hi-Power

Fairbairn–Sykes fighting knife

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairbairn–Sykes_fighting_knife

British Money in 1939

Farthing = a quarter of a penny

Halfpenny or ha'penny = half a penny

Penny = one-twelfth of a shilling (or one two-hundred-and-fortieth of a pound)

Threepence or thruppence = three pennies

Sixpence or tanner = six pennies

Shilling or bob = twelve pennies or one twentieth of a pound

Florin = two shillings

Half-crown = two shillings and sixpence

Half-sovereign = ten shillings

One-pound note = twenty shillings

Imperial Weight

One ounce (oz) = 28.34 g

One pound (lb) = 16 oz = 0.45 kg

One stone = 14 lb

One hundredweight = 8 stone or 112 lbs = 50.8 kg

Large sack = 16 stone

Imperial Volume

One fluid ounce = 28.4 ml

One pint = 24 fluid ounces = 0.56 l

One gallon = 8 pints = 4.54 l

Fahrenheit to Celsius

30 °F = 0 °C

Thus: Celsius = (Fahrenheit - 32)/1.8

British/Navy Slang and Terminology

Aye = yes

Aye-aye = understood and will do

(The) Andrew = the Royal Navy

Belay = stop

Cdr = commander

Chuffed = proud

CinC = commander-in-chief

Civvies = civilian clothes

CPO = chief petty officer

Fleet = fleet chief petty officer

Guns = gunnery officer

Kip = sleep

Knocking shop = brothel
Lt = lieutenant
Mid = midshipman
MTB = motor torpedo boat
Mufti = civilian clothes
NACB = Navy and Army Canteen Board
NCO = non-commissioned officer
Nmi = nautical mile (= 1.15 miles = 1.852 km)
Oik = uncouth person
Pink gin = gin with a dash of Angostura bitters
PO = petty officer
RNR = Royal Naval Reserve
RNVR = Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
SNO = senior naval officer
Sprog = new recruit (or child)
Sub = sub-lieutenant (or submarine!)
Uckers = a variation of Ludo, played in the mess
U/S = unserviceable
Wardroom = officers' mess
Wet = a drink

Military Honours

Victoria Cross = the highest award for valour for operational personnel
George Cross = the highest award for non-operational personnel
DSO = Distinguished Service Order
OBE = Order of the British Empire
DSC = Distinguished Service Cross
DCM = Distinguished Service Medal
This list is not exhaustive but covers the main awards. If you want to know more, go to
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/medals-campaigns-descriptions-and-eligibility>

German Naval Officer Ranks

Grossadmiral (GAdm) = admiral of the fleet
Admiral (Adm) = admiral
Vizeadmiral (VAdm) = vice admiral
Konteradmiral (KAdm) = rear admiral

Kommodore (Kdm) = commodore

Kapitän (Kpt) = captain

Korvettenkapitän (KKpt) = commander

Fregattenkapitän (FrgKpt) = commander

Kapitänleutnant (KptLtn) = lieutenant commander

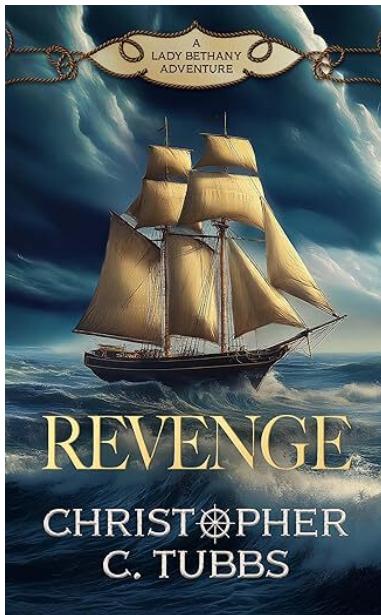
Oberleutnant zur See (Obltn.z.S) = lieutenant

Leutnant zur See (Ltn.z.S) = lieutenant (junior grade)

Fähnrich zur See (Fhr.z.S) = midshipman

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Book 2: WARLEY

Book 3: FARNBOROUGH

Book 4: DECOY

The Lume & Joffe Books Story

Lume Books was founded by Matthew Lynn, one of the true pioneers of independent publishing. In 2023 Lume Books was acquired by Joffe Books and now its story continues as part of the Joffe Books family of companies.

Joffe Books began in 2014 when Jasper agreed to publish his mum's much-rejected romance novel and it became a bestseller.

Since then we've grown into the largest independent publisher in the UK. We're extremely proud to publish some of the very best writers in the world, including Joy Ellis, Faith Martin, Caro Ramsay, Helen Forrester, Simon Brett and Robert Goddard. Everyone at Joffe Books loves reading and we never forget that it all begins with the magic of an author telling a story.

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We won Trade Publisher of the Year at the Independent Publishing Awards in 2023 and Best Publisher Award in 2024 at the People's Book Prize. We have been shortlisted for Independent Publisher of the Year at the British Book Awards for the last five years, and were shortlisted for the Diversity and Inclusivity Award at the 2022 Independent Publishing Awards. In 2023 we were shortlisted for Publisher of the Year at the RNA Industry Awards, and in 2024 we were shortlisted at the CWA Daggers for the Best Crime and Mystery Publisher.

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