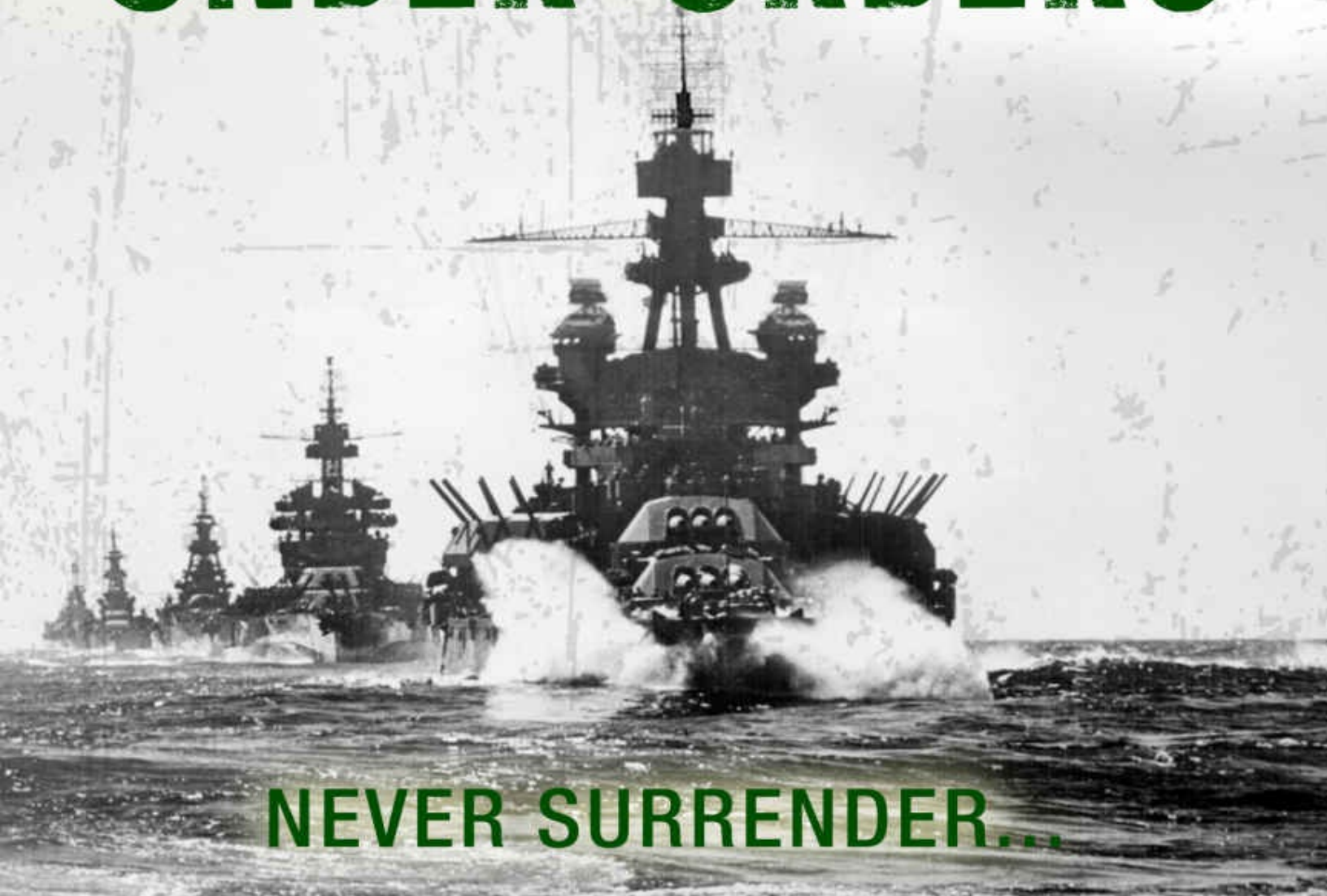


A DONALD CAMERON NAVAL THRILLER

PHILIP MCCUTCCHAN UNDER ORDERS



NEVER SURRENDER...

Under Orders

Philip McCutchan

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Table of Contents

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[Extract from *Dangerous Waters* by Philip McCutchan](#)

CHAPTER ONE

The racket was appalling, a terrible assault on the ears, worse by far than the close thunder of a battleship's broadside. It seemed as though Reichsmarschall Goering's screaming Luftwaffe meant to wipe Portsmouth and Southsea clean off the map, though clean seemed scarcely the word as houses crashed their occupants to pulp with falling brick and stone and burning woodwork. In the red glow that lit the night firemen could be seen, together with air-raid wardens and the men from the heavy rescue squads. As they worked, the bombs continued to fall. There was a shelter on the corner opposite the Queen's Hotel at the end of Osborne Road, at the edge of Southsea Common where in the piping days of peace the King's birthday parade of the Portsmouth Port Division and the military garrison had been held each year; only three years earlier the salute had been taken by the much-liked Admiral Sir William Fisher, lately Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, an imposing figure in cocked hat and epaulettes, wearing old-fashioned side-whiskers like John Bull. Fisher had caught a chill and died within a few days, and now lay in his sea-grave off the Nab Tower beneath the menacing beat of the German bombers...

Leaving the bar of the Queen's Hotel, Cameron, with his anti-gas respirator bumping his side as he ran, held Mary Anstey close to his body as some protection until he could get her down into the shelter. Somewhere on the common, earth and stones erupted and red and white flame came blindingly in the roar and crash of the explosion. Cameron threw the girl flat, covering her with his body. Half Southsea seemed to drop around him. As the din diminished he heard the screams from the burning houses and, looking round

as he got to his feet, he saw a flaming beam hurtle down from a roof to land fair and square on a fireman with a hose. Untended, the hose flailed like a wounded snake and water gushed uselessly. Cameron was close now to the shelter, and he pushed Mary Anstey unceremoniously down the steps. 'Look after yourself,' he said briefly. 'I'll be back.'

She turned, eyes scared and anxious in the red glow. 'Aren't you coming down, Donald?'

He shook his head, looking back towards the fires.

'Please take care.' She was in tears now, her face all crumpled.

He turned away: time was short and water was precious—and no one was tending that gushing hose. Cameron ran for it as more bombs came down and the anti-aircraft batteries close by on the common pumped shrapnel into the night sky. As he ran he felt blood for the first time, but it was not his own. As part of the scatter from one of the bombs, a piece of flesh had come down on his shoulder. He shook it free and ran on, grabbed the hose and struggled with it, astonished at its sheer power in unskilled hands. He lifted it with an effort, and played the stream of water back on the burning building. There was a woman up there, screaming for help. Two firemen were trying to reach her from a turntable ladder on an auxiliary fire service vehicle. A policeman in a steel helmet was rendering first aid to an old man lying in the gutter.

An AFS man came up to Cameron, tapped him on the shoulder. 'Right. Time for the professionals to take over!' He grinned from a blackened, dead-tired face, eyes looking like red holes. 'Thanks for the effort, mate, but you need to know the flippin' ropes. Way you did it, it's like a nipper tryin' to pee over a six-foot wall.'

He handled the hose with ease, and kept the stream steady where it was needed: as near as was safe to the firemen and the screaming woman.

Cameron looked round, all his senses battered by the combined racket of

the explosions and the ack-ack. Something sliced across his left shin; a stinging sensation was followed by a feeling of wetness, and when he glanced down his uniform trousers were seen to be torn. A sliver of metal, and not to be worried about now. The rescue squad needed all the help they could, get, any handy man with muscle and a fit back to go in and bring out anyone left alive. That night Cameron sweated blood and ruined his number one uniform, his shore-going one, by helping to prop up beams and masonry so that the living and the dead could be dragged clear. In some cases that was not possible: the bodies were too twisted, too integrated into the shattered buildings, and they had to be left until the coming of dawn gave light and freedom from the Jerries...

The All Clear brought an army officer from the shelter: a seedy major with a chairborne look, his breath smelling of Dutch courage. He saw Cameron.

‘You there,’ he said. ‘That RNVR sublieutenant.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Why aren’t you wearing your steel helmet, young man?’

Cameron was as weary as hell and he’d just seen a lot of death. He said, ‘Oh, get stuffed, will you?’

The major gasped. ‘I say, you can’t talk to me like that. I’m from the Provost staff...’ He broke off as a police sergeant approached. ‘Yes, what is it?’

‘This young officer’s been hard at it, sir. Worked like a black, he did.’ The police sergeant rocked on his heels, his face grim. ‘Refused to take shelter.’

‘Really? Oh. Good show, good show.’ The major ambled off, and the police sergeant gave Cameron a wink. This was a naval town, and the brown jobs were here on sufferance of the Senior Service. And they were apt to be a mentally constipated bunch at times. Cameron went down the steps into the shelter. A number of people had fallen asleep; Portsmouth was growing used

to the bombing, and sleep was important to the next day's work. Mary Anstey was amongst those who slept; she had been overcome by sheer tiredness. She had a demanding job in the Drafting Office in the Royal Naval Barracks, which held a constant level of some eight thousand ratings coming in from sea or from training and being drafted out again to the Fleet. Cameron woke her gently, then kissed her.

'Wakey wakey,' he said. 'Time to go now. Did you sleep through all that lot?'

She shook her head. 'Not all of it. Not till it began to tail off... then I just couldn't keep awake.' She paused, looking at his filthy, torn uniform. 'Has it been bad, Donald?'

'So-so,' he said, and left it at that. They caught an early corporation bus to the dockyard, and walked along Queen Street to the barracks.

The place was a shambles, with dust heavy in the morning air. One of the seamen's blocks had bought it, and the parade ground was pitted. The main gate was untouched, so was the guardroom. The sentry saluted Cameron and reported a lot of casualties; Cameron could see blood-stained stretchers for himself, and canvas-covered heaps. Mary went off through the gate to the Drafting Office, reporting exceptionally early for duty: she hadn't wanted to go back to the Wrennery. When Cameron crossed Queen Street to the wardroom block he went up to his cabin to strip off. He felt better in a hot bath, but fell asleep for a while in its comforting warmth. Back in his cabin, he put some Elastoplast on his grazed shin. Bringing out his number three uniform, he dressed and went down to the wardroom where he flipped through some magazines whilst waiting for breakfast. He yawned and chucked the reading matter aside and thought about his present job: assistant divisional officer of the CW Division, recently formed to deal with ratings recommended for commissions... such as he himself had been only a matter

of months before. After the hardships of life in the old *Carmarthen* on North Atlantic convoy duties, and the hazards of the Mediterranean aboard the *Wharfedale* off Crete, the present was cushy except when there was an air raid. Cushy but boring, and not part of the real war.

But it wasn't to last.

That very day, after breakfast, he was sent for to report to the Drafting Commander's office. He reported to a Lieutenant RNVR who brought a CW list from a drawer of his desk.

'Cameron,' he said. 'Here you are.'

He handed the clipped sheets of paper across.

Cameron read. As of 17 August he was appointed to HMS *Castle Bay*. The 17 August was in two days' time.

'No leave, I'm afraid,' the lieutenant said. 'She's lying in Rothesay, currently. I don't know for how long. You'd better get up there, old man.'

Cameron nodded. 'What is she?'

'Ocean boarding vessel. Bringing in prizes—that sort of thing. That's all I can tell you.'

It was pack and go, and goodbye that evening to Mary Anstey, now for an indefinite period to be just a memory and a photograph in a leather frame to adorn his new cabin aboard the *Castle Bay*. Using a first-class railway warrant, he left Portsmouth Harbour station on an early evening train for Waterloo, then caught the night train from Euston for Glasgow, whence he would proceed to Greenock and the ferry down the Clyde for Rothesay. Next day, as he came round Toward Point north of the Cumbraes aboard the ferry, he began to raise the ships at anchor in the bay, their cables straining to something of a blow coming out of Loch Striven. There was an aircraft-carrier and what appeared to be a merchant ship painted RN grey; as the ferry

came closer in and shaped up towards Victoria Pier, he saw a dumpy-looking depot ship with a number of submarines clustered at her sides. By this time it was obvious that the apparent merchantman was in fact HMS *Castle Bay*; a commandeered and converted three-island freighter of around six thousand tons with somewhat matronly lines that indicated a lack of speed. However, she appeared to be bristling with guns. Her bridge was surrounded with Swiss 20-mm Oerlikons plus pom-poms and machine-guns; on either side of the fore well-deck 4-inch guns were mounted, with two more aft, whilst amidships the deck had been cleared for the mounting of two 3-inch anti-aircraft guns. Cameron thought that if everything was fired at once, she would probably collapse and sink. But she looked trim and taut, with the Officer of the Watch and a full gangway staff at the head of her accommodation ladder, the White Ensign blowing out along the wind, and a signalman on the bridge exchanging signals by light with the submarine depot ship. It was a fresh forenoon, with the waters of the Clyde and Rothesay Bay dappled with small white horses under a bright, warm sun.

By chance, as the Greenock ferry came alongside the pier, a boat from the *Castle Bay* was inshore to collect wardroom stores. Cameron approached the coxswain, a leading-seaman.

‘Joining the ship,’ he said, returning the coxswain’s salute. ‘Can you spare some hands to bring my gear aboard?’

‘Soon as the stores party gets back, sir,’ the coxswain said. Cameron stepped into the sternsheets of the motor-cutter; within a few minutes the stores party was aback, his gear was brought aboard, and the cutter had cast off and was proceeding out towards the *Castle Bay*. Saluted aboard by another sub-lieutenant, Cameron made himself known.

‘Welcome to sudden death,’ the Officer of the Watch said, grinning.

‘Sudden death?’

‘Well, what do you think—if ever we meet the *Scharnhorst* or the *Gneisenau* or some such. By the way, the name’s Ricketts.’

They shook hands. Ricketts said, ‘Father’s expressed a wish that you should go straight up to his cabin to meet him—the First Lieutenant’s ashore, so he can’t do the introductions. Father, by the way, is a good chap—Commander RNR and late Chief Officer of the *Queen Mary*, no less. He drops on cackhanded seamanship like a load of manure.’ Ricketts grinned again: he had a round, chubby face and looked as though cheerfulness in adversity was his watchword. ‘Just thought I’d warn you!’

‘Thanks,’ Cameron said drily. At that moment there was a carrying shout from the Captain’s deck immediately below the bridge. Three stripes of interlaced gold braid surrounded the upraised cuff of a strongly-built officer.

‘Ricketts... special sea dutymen, and cable and side party. Close all watertight doors. Secure for sea... and warn the Chief Engineer I’ll be getting under way the moment Number One’s back aboard.’

‘Aye, aye, sir!’

‘That sub-lieutenant is that Cameron?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Cameron called back, saluting.

‘Come up, then, and make it fast.’

Cameron saluted again; the Captain withdrew. Under the guidance of a gangway messenger Cameron went up to the cuddy. When he arrived Commander Forbes was seated behind a desk in his day cabin, signing papers. Very blue eyes looked up, staring Cameron full in the face. Forbes’ own face was like old leather, the face of a seaman of many years’ standing. He got briefly to his feet and shook Cameron’s hand. Sitting again, he said, ‘I’m sorry, but I haven’t much time. We’ll get to know one another soon.’ He paused. ‘I understand you did some rather spectacular work in the *Carmarthen*, what with those grenades down the U-boat’s conning-tower.

Quick thinking, and I like quick thinking. Then there was Crete.’ The blue eyes seemed to bore into Cameron. ‘You’ve proved you’re of some use in a fraught situation. I believe your father’s a master mariner?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Forbes nodded. ‘Good background. I’ve no doubt he’s contributed to the quick thinking. I—’ He broke off as a tap came at his door and Ricketts entered. ‘Yes, Ricketts?’

‘The First Lieutenant’s coming off from the depot ship now, sir.’

‘Right, thank you.’ Forbes rose and reached for his brass hat, which he placed on his head with a firm gesture, pulling the gilded peak well down in front at a Beatty-ish angle. ‘Shift the watch to the bridge, please.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

Forbes marched out of the door and could be heard climbing the ladder to the bridge. Ricketts raised an eyebrow and asked, ‘Well? What d’you think of him?’

‘First impressions very good,’ Cameron said with a grin.

‘You’re right. Ship’s company would follow him anywhere.’ Ricketts hesitated. ‘I’d like to know where he’s leading us... I’ve a feeling there’s something big in the air.’

With his engine—the *Castle Bay* was a single-screw ship—moving at half ahead Forbes took the ship away from Rothesay, out past the expensive structure of the Glenburn Hydro Hotel, temporarily a little dimmed from its peacetime splendour, into the Clyde proper for the turn to starboard and the passage through the Cumbraes into the broad waters of the Firth. Inchmarnock Water and the Sound of Bute fell away to starboard as the ship came down past Arran and headed on for Pladda and Ailsa Craig, the former a flattish island, the latter an immense rock rising from the sea to provide a

lavatory for the seagulls, whose droppings gave it a permanently whitened aspect. Passing to the north of Ailsa Craig the *Castle Bay* came round the Mull of Kintyre into the North Channel, and Forbes gave orders to bring her up northwards towards the Mull of Oa in Islay. When she was on course he stepped to the tannoy and flicked the switch.

‘This is the Captain speaking,’ he said. ‘This ship is bound north to make a rendezvous off Hvalfjord in Iceland. I’m proceeding through the Minches to pick up two destroyers who are also detailed for the rendezvous and will act as our escorts to Hvalfjord. We’re under orders to join Rear-Admiral Vian and come under his directions. For now, that is all.’

The tannoy clicked off.

Cameron, on the bridge to observe but not yet employed, felt a thrill run through him. Rear-Admiral Philip Vian—Vian of the *Cossack*—was one of the heroes of the modern wartime Navy. Vian, then a captain, had taken his destroyer into Norway’s Jossingfjord and with Nelsonic panache had boarded the German supply tanker *Altmark* and had taken off the three hundred British prisoners-of-war seized from the merchant ships sunk by the pocket-battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*, by this time a burned-out hulk in the River Plate following her encounter with Commodore Henry Harwood’s cruisers.

If they were to link up with Vian, the future looked like being anything but routine.

CHAPTER TWO

From the bridge, Forbes pointed westerly. ‘Barra,’ he said. ‘Castlebay... town we’re named after presumably, though we’re blessed with a capital B.’ He paused. ‘D’you know the islands, Cameron?’

‘I’m afraid not, sir.’

Forbes grunted. ‘Some Scot! Try ‘em sometime—they’re worth it, or will be when this lot’s over. Know the song?’ Not waiting for an answer he started singing in a not untuneful bass:

*From Mull to the Pentland Skerries,
From Skye to Colonsay,
From Staffs to Iona
And the sands on Castlebay,
Each island has its magic
And holds men in its thrall,
But always in my dreams I’ll see
The lights on Loch Indall...*

Then he said, ‘Bugger the war,’ and lifted his binoculars to take a long look around from the port beam through right ahead to the starboard beam. The ship was in land-locked waters sure enough, with Barra to port and the island of Rhum to starboard as they made up towards the Minches, where, off Rubha Hunish at the northern tip of Skye, they would pick up their destroyer escort which had been refuelling from an Admiralty tanker in Kyle of Lochalsh, but land-locked or not, there could be no lack of vigilance. In land-locked waters, in Scapa, the battleship *Royal Oak* had succumbed to the torpedo-tubes of Kapitan-Leutnant Prien soon after the declaration of war,

and the lesson had been well learned, the more so since not long before that the aircraft-carrier *Courageous* had been sunk in a torpedo attack off the entrance to the Bristol Channel...

‘Port lookout,’ Forbes snapped suddenly.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Don’t daydream. The lives of everyone aboard depend on your eyes and those of the other lookouts. I don’t want any weak links, all right?’

HM Destroyers *Keppel* and *Cambridge*—the latter one of the fifty ex-USN vessels handed over under the Lease Lend agreement—had joined by now, taking station ahead at forty-five degrees on either bow as the *Castle Bay* steamed north to turn to port between the Butt of Lewis and Cape Wrath into the North Atlantic wastes. Cameron had been sent below to familiarize himself with the ship and then to get some sleep before taking the middle watch from midnight to 0400 hours as second Officer of the Watch under an RNR lieutenant named Beddows, who was also the Navigating Officer. As Cameron turned into his bunk after dinner in the wardroom there was considerable motion on the ship; she had met the Atlantic blow off the Butt of Lewis and was steaming at her full seventeen knots into a heavy swell confused by short, breaking seas that gave her an uncomfortable twisting motion as she rolled and pitched at the same time. Things shifted around Cameron’s cabin and he spent some while in securing movable items. Though he was dead tired from his wakeful night in Portsmouth and the wearisome business of trying to doze whilst sitting upright in an overcrowded night train from the south, he found it hard to get to sleep; but in the end sheer physical tiredness overcame his mental roavings and sleep resulted. It seemed no time before he was being called for his watch by a boatswain’s mate.

‘2345, sir.’

The voice sounded as though it had been saying this for some while. Cameron came to the surface. 'Right, thank you.' He stretched and swung a leg out of his bunk. He pulled on a shirt and trousers and a roll-necked sweater, completing his dressing with a duffel-coat and leather sea-boots with thick woollen stockings rolled down over their tops. He climbed to the bridge, swaying to the ship's motion, which was totally different from that of a destroyer and from the fishing vessels of his father's trawler fleet in which he had been to sea in pre-war holidays. There was a fair wind blowing now from the west, something like Force 6 or 7 by the look of the spindrift coming off the tops of the waves, and spray was flying over the decks as the blunt bows. dipped under, drenching the crew of Number One gun as they tried to find some sort of shelter behind the gun-shield. Their oilskins glistened in the light of a high moon, playing fitfully through cloud.

On the bridge Beddows had already taken over the watch from the First Lieutenant.

'A fairly dirty night, Sub,' he said, 'and it'll get worse. I take it you've not done a run to Iceland before?'

'Not Iceland. I've touched Norway aboard one of my father's trawlers.'

'You haven't missed much,' Beddows said. 'Talk about cold!'

'At this time of the year?'

Beddows shrugged. 'It can go into the fifties. Not what I'd call warm. I spent all my time east of Suez before the war!' He listened for a moment to the ping of the Asdic, coming from the cabinet in the fore part of the bridge. The sound was reassuring; a sweep round with his glasses as soon as his sight was night-accustomed was also reassuring so far as it went. It would be next to impossible to pick up a feather of spray from a periscope in the prevailing weather conditions; the Asdic had to be relied upon implicitly. Beddows paced the bridge, back and forth, keeping a sharp lookout, checking the

course by reference to the gyro repeater in its gimbals. He said, 'The Old Man's set a course between the Rosemary and George Bligh Banks. Back there is Rockall.' He pointed to the port quarter. 'ETA Hvalfjord is thirty-six hours from now.'

'What then?'

Again Beddows shrugged. 'No idea. Unless we're to join a convoy for Archangel, and somehow I doubt that. We're just not equipped for escort work... except maybe as a rescue ship, someone to act as arse-end Charlie and pick up survivors.' He paused, busy with his binoculars again, then added, 'There's something odd about our orders. I'm convinced of that. No doubt we'll be told all before long. I reckon—' He broke off as a shout came from the port-side bridge lookout. 'What was that?'

'*Keppel*, sir, turning hard to port!'

'See anything—a periscope?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Keep watching, Grigg.' Beddows moved fast for the Asdic cabinet; the ping was normal so far. He asked, 'No contact?'

'No, sir.'

'Stay at it. There could be a contact, red 180 to 360.' Beddows was taking no chances: he went for the action alarm and pressed it. The rattlers sounded through the ship and within a matter of seconds the ship's company was pouring from weather doors and hatches, doubling to their action stations at the guns, the depth-charge racks aft, the damage control positions, the engine-room and auxiliary steering. Forbes, who in fact had not taken off his clothing, was on the bridge within half a minute. Taking Beddows' report, he reacted instantly.

'Maintain course and speed, Pilot. I've a feeling the bugger's missed his chance and is dropping astern. In any case we're not here to attack U-boats.'

We leave it to the destroyers.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

'But pass to all guns, stand by to open fire if ordered.'

The message went by voice-pipe to the captains of the 4-inch guns and the men manning the close-range weapons. Just as it had been passed, the note of the Asdic changed alarmingly and a report was made of a contact unexpectedly bearing green 45. Once again the Captain's response was immediate. 'Starboard twenty!' he ordered. The *Castle Bay* heeled violently as the helm went over, and as it did so there was a shout from the starboard lookout.

'Torpedo trails, sir, bearing green one-oh, four of them!'

'Right.' Forbes' head bent to the voice-pipe connecting with the quartermaster at the wheel. 'Steady!'

'Steady, sir... course, oh-one-oh, sir.'

'Steer that.' Forbes straightened. The moonlight showed a white line of teeth as he gave a tight-lipped grin. 'No option now, Pilot! If those bloody fish miss us, I'm going in to attack. Stand by depth charges.'

'Stand by depth charges, sir.'

The message went aft to the quarterdeck. On the bridge, at the guns, at the depth charges, all eyes were on the torpedo trails, clearly seen in the moonlight in spite of the confused seas, four speeding slivers of instant death. As the bows of the *Castle Bay* lifted to the swell, and appeared to cant towards one pair of torpedoes, Forbes swore violently. His fingers gripped the bridge rail like vices, the knuckles standing white. To port, the *Cambridge*, evidently having also picked up the contact, was racing in after a tight turn to starboard that was about to bring her smack across the bows of the *Castle Bay*. It was in fact the *Cambridge* that got to the target area first, and dropped charges. As Forbes listened to the now very rapid *ping... ping...*

ping from his Asdics he saw the result of the first of the depth-charge explosions below the surface, a great upsurge of water like a giant's fist smashing through. At the same time reports came in from the port and starboard lookouts: the torpedoes were passing safely down either side of the *Castle Bay*. Two on each side: she had steamed slap through the middle of them.

'Thank God,' Forbes said. 'The bugger won't be firing off any more, that's for sure!' He brought up his glasses and looked away towards where the *Keppel* was now also dropping her depth charge patterns. He ordered the helm to port to bring his ship round, and then kept circling: it could be suicide to stop engines until the outcome of the action had been decided positively, and although the destroyers could very easily overtake him later if he put his ship back on course for Iceland and steamed away, the resulting nakedness could be equally dangerous if other U-boats were in the vicinity; and as he had hinted earlier, the *Castle Bay* was under orders not to take any risks currently.

A moment later Cameron reported, 'Submarine surfacing starboard, sir!'

Forbes swivelled and focussed his glasses. 'You're right, Sub. Damaged... I wonder if she's surrendering? Where's the *Cambridge*?'

'Turning away, sir, for another run in.'

As Cameron spoke, there was a flash of bright orange from the U-boat's fore plating, followed by the scream of a shell right overhead. All personnel ducked instinctively; Forbes, coming upright again, shook a fist towards the German and gave the order to open fire. Within seconds his 4-inch guns were in action, pumping shells across the water. Splashes, plumes of sea rising around the U-boat's hull, showed the near misses. As Forbes brought the *Castle Bay* closer in, the *Keppel* joined the surface action, blasting away with her 4.7s but having no more luck than the *Castle Bay* against the small target

provided by the half-submerged U-boat's silhouette. Then another blast of flame came from the German, once more straight across the bridge, catching two men in succession before they could duck down. The leading signalman fell in a heap with his head shot from his shoulders and blood spurting, until the heart's last action ceased, from the gaping neck; and the starboard-side Oerlikon spun madly in its mounting in the bridge wing as the body of the gunner, also decapitated, slumped sideways. Cameron, feeling himself a spare hand so far, ran for the gun and cast off the straps from the dead gunner, lowering him to the deck. Then he took the man's place and, as the *Castle Bay* continued to close the range, he sent a stream of bullets zipping towards the U-boat's conning-tower and the gun-mounting at its base. The fire from the German ceased abruptly and then the *Cambridge*, moving in now at high speed, took the U-boat a little abaft the conning-tower, ground hard into her and sheered her in half, the knifing bows cutting through the thin casing like butter. The two ends rose up and fell back into the destroyer's tumbling wake, spilling men who were flung in all directions from the gaping bowels, men who screamed out in fear as they clutched desperately at floating debris, men seen clearly as Forbes ordered his searchlight to be turned on to the scene. The *Cambridge* seemed to have suffered only superficial damage to her stem.

It was Beddows who spoke first. 'Survivors, sir?'

'No stopping, Pilot.' Forbes' voice was hard. As a merchant seaman by training with the traditions of the sea deeply embedded in him, he detested leaving men, enemy or not, to drown. But the exigencies of the service had to prevail and he was allowed no option. The *Castle Bay* had a vital mission to perform and was not to be hazarded until she had performed it.

Breakfast next morning was a silent and preoccupied meal: the ship had

sustained her first casualties since commissioning three months before, and though a victory had been achieved no one was celebrating it. The leading signalman had been a Fleet Reservist recalled on the outbreak of war, a man of forty-five with a wife and three children in Gillingham, handy for the Chatham Port Division to which he had belonged. The Oerlikon gunner had been little more than twenty, unmarried but with parents living in Sutton Goldfield. There would be letters to write, never a happy task, and during the forenoon the bodies would go overboard in their own hammocks, sewn around them as shroud and coffin combined. The *Castle Bay's* only warrant officer, Mr Hanrahan, Gunner RN, was lugubrious.

‘Bad omen,’ he said. ‘That lad—the Oerlikon gunner. Name o’ Luck. Able-Seaman Luck.’ He shook his head sadly. There was no more that needed saying. Cameron, with his own lower deck experience not far behind him, knew very well that the fo’c’sle messes would be thinking along similar lines. He had no appetite, and he left the wardroom. The gory scene on the bridge had been much too recent; until the decking had been swabbed down by a party under the Chief Boatswain’s Mate, there had been no keeping a foothold for any of them, and somehow the smell of blood had lingered long after the escorts had taken up their stations again and the small force was heading at speed for Iceland. The war was turning into a long, hard slog and there was no end in sight. The Germans, with their vast hunting packs of U-boats, were apparently winning the Battle of the Atlantic, and if the terrible sinkings of merchant ships continued, then Britain would inevitably be starved out. When ashore on leave, Cameron had noted a disinterest in the activities of the convoy escorts, indeed in the fate of the merchant ships themselves. There was too much selfishness around, even now. True, a wartime spirit had emerged and there was some positive sense of pulling together, but there were gaps. There were gaps amongst workers in the

factories and shipyards and arsenals; demarcation disputes had not by any means been entirely snuffed out. There were gaps elsewhere too: some people fiddled their food ration, others fiddled petrol, seeming uncaring that the stuff had been brought home to Britain by blood. The agonizing sufferings of the tanker crews who hadn't quite made it and who had died in the fire and suffocation that came to them when a torpedo struck and spilled their cargo to blaze around them, seemed to mean all too little to too many people. News about the Army and the RAF struck home rather more on the whole, with the exception of the few naval spectacles such as the boarding of the *Altmark*, the action against the *Admiral Graf Spee* by *Achilles*, *Ajax* and *Exeter* and the gallant, self-sacrificial defence of their convoys by the armed merchant cruisers *Jervis Bay* under Captain Fogarty Fegen and *Rawalpindi* under Captain Kennedy. Perhaps the British public wanted the resounding thunder of a major Fleet action, but Fleet actions were no longer what the Navy was all about. The reason for the Navy's existence today was the convoys.

At seven bells that forenoon, Cameron was sent for by the Captain along with all other officers not immediately required for duty.

‘Ah, Cameron. Sit you down.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ Cameron sat next to the Accountant Officer, a paymaster lieutenant RNVR who would be responsible for enciphering outgoing signals and breaking down incoming ones. Forbes stood, leaning back against a scuttle through which he glanced now and again while he talked, keeping an eye and a half on the restless seas and their possibly hidden menace.

‘Orders,’ he said briefly. ‘My orders from on high. Time you were told. Those orders are simple enough to spell out, perhaps more complex in the work-out. We’re not going out on ocean boarding duties.’ He paused, the

blue eyes scanning the faces of his officers. 'We're part of Operation Forestay. In my safe are the detailed, hour by hour orders, but all you need to know for now is the broad outline. It's this: as you're aware already, we're to rendezvous with Admiral Vian's Force F—the cruisers *Nigeria* and *Aurora* with two destroyers—off Hvalfjord. From there we sail with a convoy for Archangel on the White Sea. Ostensibly, that is. In fact, we don't go all the way. Before the convoy approaches the North Cape, we're to detach for the Norwegian coast. We lie off Vest Hammarfjord—that's inshore of Soroy Island, around eighty miles southwest of the North Cape.' Again he paused, pulling at the lobe of his left ear. 'Pilot, I'm sorry about this, but considerations of security meant I couldn't tell you earlier—if you'd gone ashore demanding up-to-date inshore charts of the area something could have been blown. However, Admiral Vian will provide the charts when we rendezvous. All right?'

Beddows nodded. 'All right, sir. I just hope they'll be corrected up to date, that's all.'

'They will be. Now, as to our objective. It's fairly straightforward. Word has reached the Special Operations Executive from underground sources in Norway—the Resistance, the anti-Quislings—that the Germans are up to something that could prove nasty on the shores of Vest Hammarfjord. It's all highly secret and nothing overt's been seen apparently, other than the fact that the site is attended periodically by small tankers, so the information does not include anything to suggest just what the Nazis are up to. However, the detailed orders for the operation, which I need hardly say is to destroy the German set-up, do contain a very full description of the site itself and its buildings, plus drawings—artist's impressions, you might say. Not that that'll be our concern. Our job's to be the landing of the troops who're going in to do the job... yes, Guns?'

Mr Hanrahan had been looking restive. Now he said sourly, 'Look, sir. Why can't the RAF sort this one out, eh? They'd be inside range from Iceland if not from farther off.'

Forbes nodded but said, 'It's not so simple, Guns. It's a question of accessibility—the lie of the land. Aircraft can't get an attack run between the mountains and the site is in any case covered in by a big rock overhang which in effect puts the whole thing in a cave—or almost. It's like a lid, extending for some way over the site. Anyway, we're landed with the job so we make a success of it. The site's to be destroyed for good and all, on the grounds that so much secrecy it's under very heavy guard and admittance is only via a mass of authorizations—must mean it's very bloody nasty indeed.' The Captain took another look out of the port, then asked, 'Well? Any questions?'

'Yes,' Beddows said. 'Why us? And just how do we go about it?'

'To take your second question first, Pilot, a demolition party will be embarked at Hvalfjord on arrival. They'll be soldiers—sappers, all of them explosives experts. They'll be accompanied by 20 and 21 Commandos—five hundred men, fully equipped for the job. Our orders are to lie off the entry to the fjord after dark and put them all ashore in a flotilla of inflatable dinghies. The naval part of the operation, that is, the conduct of the flotilla, will be left to us. I propose sending you, Number One, in charge with two sub-lieutenants, Ricketts and Cameron, to assist, plus a party of seamen with a petty officer and leading hands. Soldiers don't make good sailors and they'll need shepherding.' The Captain paused. 'Now—Cameron.'

'Yes, sir?' Cameron knew what was coming, had had more than an inkling since the Captain's first mention of Vest Hammarfjord.

Forbes said, 'I'm told you went to sea in your father's fishing trawlers out of Aberdeen on a number of occasions—right?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘And that once your trawler was forced by the prevailing weather conditions to run for the Norwegian coast—to be precise, that you took shelter behind the lee of the land, off Svalbard Point at the head of the inward channel for Vest Hammarfjord?’

‘That’s right, sir.’

‘And I understand you actually went up that channel yourself?’

‘Yes, sir. I had time on my hands, and—’

‘Quite. How much do you remember of it?’

‘All of it, sir. It wasn’t so long ago—just before the war.’

‘You could do it on your own, without a trawler skipper in charge?’

‘I believe so, sir.’

Forbes gave a satisfied nod. ‘Good! This confirms what I was told. For your information, the word was passed to the Admiralty from RNC Greenwich, where I understand you did a navigation and pilotage course recently.’

‘Yes, sir, after I left the *Wharfedale* during her refit in Malta.’

Forbes looked at him keenly. ‘D’you think your pilotage will stand the test of taking a whole flotilla of dinghies safely through?’

Cameron said, ‘I think so, sir. I’ll do my best.’

‘I’m sure you will. Remember, the whole thing will depend on you until the troops are ashore. At a guess, you’ll be just about the only naval officer who’s ever entered Vest Hammarfjord!’ Forbes blew out a long breath. ‘I only hope the secrecy’s held, that’s all. I’ve a nasty feeling it may not have done. That U-boat attack... I’ve a suspicion the buggers were after us in particular, under orders from the German Admiralty to get us—they made no attempt to fire on the destroyers, anyway.’

Mr Hanrahan gave a sigh and said, ‘Like the First Lieutenant asked, sir, why us, for Christ’s sake? Why not a cruiser?’

‘Because we’re not a valuable ship, Guns. If things go wrong... well, we’re

expendable.'

They were expendable: as the *Castle Bay* butted behind the more nimble destroyers into worsening weather beneath lowering grey skies, the Gunner enlarged on the theme of expendability which had been morbidly pointed up by the ceremony that had taken place after the officers were dismissed from the cuddy. The bodies of the two men killed in action were slid from a plank covered with the folds of the White Ensign. The Captain read the simple, poignant service of committal to the deep and as they went into the water with two splashes and vanished beneath the surface, there was a brief moment's reverent silence, a total suspension of all activity. Then Forbes nodded to the First Lieutenant and turned away to go back to the bridge; and the boatswain's pipes, shrilling out their orders along the desolation of wind and sea, sent the hands back to their stations or part-of-ship duties.

'Poor sods,' Hanrahan said. 'Expendable—like us! That's the way we'll all end up before this lot's over. The skipper's right: we're expendable, like it or not.' He waved a hand around. 'Every officer aboard is a reservist, 'cept me, and I was dragged back off pension. Like the ship herself—I'm old! I reckoned I'd seen the last of the Andrew when I swallowed the hook back in thirty-seven.'

'Don't you like being back, Guns?' Cameron asked with a grin.

'Do I hell! Know something?'

'What?'

'There's an old naval yarn about a boatswain who swallowed the hook at an advanced age and the first thing he did was to hire a youngster to wake him at 0400 every night and say, "The Captain wants you at once, sir," after which he would say to the lad, "Tell the Captain to get stuffed" and then roll over and go to sleep again. Well, that's me and all.'

The Gunner went off. Cameron climbed the ladder to the chartroom. There

was work to be done: a study of the charts for the approaches to Vest Hammarfjord and a close perusal of the Admiralty Sailing Directions, or 'Pilot', for the north Norwegian coast. Beddows was there, engaged on the same task. He was going through all the data with Cameron when they both heard a shout from one of the bridge lookouts, though they were unable to catch the words. They left the chartroom at the rush and as they did so the alarm rattlers sounded throughout the ship. From the bridge ladder Cameron saw that the visibility was closing in and through the mist and spray he saw the threatening loom of a great dark hull some two miles off the starboard bow. He had barely seen this when three brilliant flashes split the overcast and seconds later there was a noise like an express train and a great waterspout appeared on the starboard beam, a huge sea that dropped aboard like the world's final deluge.

CHAPTER THREE

The *Castle Bay*'s pop-gun armament was in action, spitting defiance across the seas however uselessly. Forbes had his binoculars trained on the enemy. As Beddows and Cameron reached the bridge Forbes said, 'It's one of the German heavy cruisers, don't know which yet. Yeoman!'

'Yessir!' The Yeoman of the Watch stood expectant with his signal pad and pencil ready.

Forbes said, 'I'm breaking wireless silence. Make to Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet, I am under surface attack by heavy cruiser. Get our position from the Navigating Officer, then tell the WIT office to send it immediately in plain language with a Most Urgent prefix.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' After taking the ship's position from Beddows, the signalman went off at the rush.

Forbes said, 'It's all we can do and it's not much. Scapa's too bloody far away for...' His voice was lost as a nicely ranged shell took the mainmast at its foot, just where it drove down through the deckhouse on the boat deck. There was a tremendous explosion and concussion; metal fragments flew across the decks; the funnel was peppered like a colander. Below on the embarkation deck the motor-cutter was smashed to matchwood. Bodies lay everywhere. Thick smoke spiralled up into the overcast and then the lick of flame was seen. Quickly on the spot, the First Lieutenant and the Chief Boatswain's Mate mustered and directed the fire parties as the hoses were run out; the Gunner's party stood by the depth charges, ready to jettison them if the fire looked like encroaching aft. From the bridge the Captain called the engine-room.

‘All right below, Chief?’

‘All well, sir,’ the Lieutenant-Commander (E) reported.

‘Good—keep at it, Chief. I want all you’ve got short of sheering the holding-down bolts. I’m turning away at full speed, for what good it’ll do.’ Forbes banged down the voice-pipe cover and passed orders to the quartermaster. ‘Hard a-port!’

‘Hard a-port, sir.’ There was a pause. ‘Wheel’s hard a-port, sir.’

‘Steady!’

‘Steady, sir. Course, two-seven-three, sir.’

‘Steer two-seven-oh.’

‘Two-seven-oh, sir.’ The voice was phlegmatic; you didn’t meet a German heavy cruiser every day of the week, and when you did you preferred to meet it in a battle-wagon, but you never knew your luck in the Andrew and you had to make the best of what fate sent you. Those were Chief Petty Officer Brewer’s views, anyway. On the bridge Forbes was less philosophic: he didn’t like running but on this occasion the Admiralty would expect him to, so would Admiral Vian waiting in Hvalfjord. Converted merchantmen didn’t fight heavy cruisers, at least not unless they were Amcs with a convoy to defend, when it was a different kettle of fish altogether.... As the *Castle Bay* headed west at full speed plus a shade more, the bombardment continued, but the next salvo fell short and off to starboard. The German gunners had been thrown for a short space by the alteration of course; Forbes started a zig-zag, though without the manoeuvrability of a cruiser or destroyer it couldn’t be all that effective. It was really a matter of time now. Then one of the lookouts in the after part of the bridge made a report.

‘*Cambridge* moving in, sir, crossing our stern to attack by the look of it, sir!’ The man sounded disbelieving of his own eyes.

Forbes swung round, bringing up his binoculars. He stared in something

like awe: it was an almost incredible sight. The old ex-USN four-stacker had turned towards the enemy, her 1,090 tons flinging through the spray-topped seas at her maximum thirty-five knots, her four 4-inch guns blazing as she went.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Forbes said. ‘She hasn’t a cat in hell’s chance. Talk about guts!’

He went on watching. The *Cambridge* had closed in and was running now right under the guns, beginning to come inside the angle of depression of the German’s heavy main armament. But the secondary armament was in action now, and as the old destroyer narrowed the gap, the close-range weapons on both sides opened. The men aboard the *Castle Bay* saw the flashes, saw both British and German seamen go down as the pom-pom and machine-gun rounds went across. Then the *Cambridge* appeared to alter a little to port, and raced head-on for the heavy cruiser’s bows.

‘By God, she’s going to ram!’ Beddows shouted. ‘She’s going to do it again!’

Forbes said nothing; just watched in fascination and in admiration for the men who were about to die. The *Cambridge* rushed on, her guns still blazing into the German’s side and causing small fires to break out in the superstructure. It was as though the *Cambridge*’s captain, having once rammed successfully, couldn’t resist another attempt, though there was something crazy about this one. The cruiser seemed to be making to turn away, but she was caught by the hurtling destroyer, smack in the port bow. Across the water there came the scream of tearing metal and a long gash appeared in the German’s side: by Forbes’ estimate it was all of a hundred feet in length.

Forbes wiped sweat from his face. Heroism had been performed in the interest of drawing fire off the *Castle Bay*... as he watched helplessly, the

Cambridge rolled over, a slow roll to port that grew faster until she had turned turtle. For a few moments she lay on the water hard alongside the cruiser's hull, borne along by the heavy vessel's movement, her screws still spinning and her rudder standing up like a sail; then she was gone.

Aft at the depth-charge throwers, Mr Hanrahan removed his steel helmet with reverence. 'Strewth!' he said to his Gunner's Mate. 'Never thought I'd see the like again, I didn't!'

'Again, sir?'

'That's right, again. I was in the *Renown* when the *Glowworm* did it—I didn't see it like, just heard about it afterwards. The old *Glowworm*, she'd parted company with us—one of our screen she was—to look for a man overboard. She met the *Hipper* and rammed just like now. Skipper was Lieutenant-Commander Roope. Got a posthumous VC. Deserved it an' all.' Hanrahan sucked his teeth for a moment. 'Wonder if we'll pick up survivors—if any! I reckon there won't—'

'Just a tick,' the Gunner's Mate broke in, and pointed away off the starboard bow. 'See what I think I see, do you, sir?'

'What?' The Gunner followed the petty officer's outstretched arm. His jaw sagged a little in sheer astonishment, then he gave a whoop of excitement. 'Well, stone me if it isn't KG 5! Cor, that'll show the bloody bastards that it's Winston not Adolf that rules the perishin' waves!'

He jumped up and down, foolishly for an elderly and somewhat stomach-ridden warrant officer, and waved his steel helmet towards the oncoming battleship whose turrets were already swinging to bear upon the German. As the *King George V* opened with her 14-inch main armament, the German was already turning away into the heavy overcast, apparently having no wish to meet the 35,000-ton flagship of the British Home Fleet. From the bridge, Commander Forbes watched the flagship break out its battle ensigns to join

the red St George's cross of Admiral Sir John Tovey, the Commander-in-Chief. The battleship swept on at close to thirty knots with the spray flinging back over her fo'c'sle, drenching the gun-turrets and sending spindrift up the superstructure almost to the Admiral's bridge. As the great guns sent their projectiles screaming through the overcast, the German cruiser was lost to sight from the *Castle Bay*, but within seconds of her disappearance there was a colossal explosion followed by a vast sheet of flame. Debris was hurled into the sky over a wide area, much of it coming down on the decks of the *Castle Bay* and in the water around.

For a moment there was a tense silence throughout the ship; then the cheering started, ringing out across the gap of water as the flagship turned, heeling under full helm. A signal was seen winking a message from her compass platform. Aboard the *Castle Bay*, the signalman read it off and reported to Forbes.

'From the Flag, sir: I just happened to be passing. Bon voyage and good luck.'

Once again, Forbes wiped sweat from his face. He said, 'Maybe God loves us after all!'

The signalman, pad at the ready, cocked an eye at him. 'Shall I make that, sir?' he asked.

Forbes laughed and nodded. 'Why not?' As the answering signal was flashed across to the flag, Forbes passed orders to bring the *Castle Bay* round to starboard; the *Keppel* was moving in towards the spot where the German had blown up, ready to pick up survivors from both her and the *Cambridge*; Forbes followed in, ordering the scrambling nets to be put over the side. He would not heave to nor lower a boat in case of lurking U-boats, but any men in the water could be collected, if they had the strength to grab the nets, like flies on sticky paper. It was a sickening scene that they entered as they closed

the area. Cameron, in charge of the port scrambling nets, looked down in horror as the *Castle Bay*, with her engine mercifully stopped now so that men would not be drawn into the screw to be ground to shreds like coffee in a mill, but with way still upon her, moved into human tragedy. Corpses floated among charred woodwork, smashed boats, the remains of hammocks—bodies lying back in their lifejackets with arms dangling like broken puppets, sightless eyes turned to the grey, unfriendly skies, or heads down in the water. There was oil fuel over all, thick, heavy, stinking, suffocating. From the living there came cries of agony; hands reached for the salvation of the nets. At a nod from Cameron, a leading seaman ordered hands down the nets, going himself to reach out and assist wounded men, or half-drowned men, to a handhold. Once on the nets, those who needed support were helped up and brought aboard by the seamen at the top, after which they collapsed in wet, oily heaps along the embarkation deck to await the attentions of the Surgeon Lieutenant and his medical team. British and German, all would get the same treatment if not the same sympathy. There was no sympathy for one of the German officers, one of the few who appeared to have no injuries. He swarmed up the netting, arrogantly rejecting any assistance. As he came over the rail, he snapped to attention and lifted his right arm in the Nazi salute.

‘Heil, Hitler!’ he said. ‘Long live the Führer!’

Mr Hanrahan, coming up from the quarterdeck, heard that. He spat on his hands and advanced. He seized the German, spun him round like a top, and landed his seaboot in his backside, hard. The German went forward like a bullet from a gun, tripped, and went flat on the deck. Mr Hanrahan walked away smiling: first time he’d ever booted an officer! It wasn’t done, of course, not even to a bloody Hun, but it had been well worth while risking a rocket from the skipper.

The fitter men among the German prisoners were interrogated by the

Captain on the bridge. Some would reveal nothing but the heavy cruiser's name: *Wuppertal*, one of an obsolescent class built just after Hitler had come to power.

The name given, they stared in defiant, supercilious silence at the British officers; maybe they had a little English, maybe they hadn't. From those more prepared to talk in private, in the hope that some co-operation might bring favours from the bestial British, Forbes gathered that the *Wuppertal's* destroyer escort had been withdrawn, probably to cover more valuable units of the German Fleet. It wasn't only the *Castle Bay* that was expendable. But all in all, it was another slice of luck.

There was a count of casualties, an assessment of structural damage: nine men dead—more sea burials and letters—and sixteen injured, some seriously, others superficially from flying splinters and burns. There was no serious damage to the ship other than a funnel that would now leak unpleasant fumes, the smashed motor-cutter and the burning out of a number of cabins in the deckhouse below the mast. The committals of the dead were conducted as before and at noon next day, promptly on her ETA, the *Castle Bay* came round Keflavik in Faxa Bay and anchored off Hvalfjord a little to the north of Reykjavik. *Nigeria* and *Aurora* were in the anchorage together with their destroyer escorts, and there were a number of merchant ships and more escorts—the old aircraft-carrier *Argus* out of Scapa Flow, the Fleet carrier *Victorious* wearing a vice-admiral's flag, six destroyers and the County class cruisers *Suffolk* and *Devonshire*, all awaiting the run to Archangel. As his ship got her cable, Forbes stared out across the anchorage to the grim face of Iceland beyond. From the time they had first raised Vestmannaeyjar and, behind it, the high ground around Myrdalsjokull, Forbes had felt oppressed by the grimness of sea and land and sky. The wind had dropped, but the greyness had remained; and even at this time of the year Iceland was living

up to its name. This was a land of ice-covered plateaux, of icy mountains, of crater basins and moraine lakes, of lava-strewn terrain in the centre. Almost an eighth of its surface was covered with glacier fields. It was a land of strange mixtures, of volcanoes, hot springs and geysers, with a proneness to earthquakes, a land of Viking hardness but one that was nevertheless said to be beautiful in parts...

Forbes turned away from his contemplations and spoke to the Officer of the Watch. 'Right. Fall out special sea dutymen. Engine to remain at immediate notice for steam until further orders. I'm expecting a summons from the Flag... and here, I think, it comes.' He waited; a lamp was flashing from Vian's flagship. The Yeoman of the Watch read it off and reported.

'From the Flag, sir: repair aboard immediately.'

Forbes nodded. 'Acknowledge.' He passed orders for his skimmer to be called away and brought alongside the accommodation-ladder, then started down to his cabin to shift into his best uniform. One did not wait upon flag officers, especially Rear-Admiral Vian, in seagoing rig and unshaven. At the foot of the bridge ladder Forbes encountered Cameron, who saluted. Returning the salute, Forbes said, 'I'm off to the Flag. When I come back, I'll want to see you.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

Forbes turned away, then hesitated. Smiling, he asked, 'How do you feel about the job in Norway, laddie?'

'All right, sir.'

'Good!' Forbes waved a hand around. 'It'll be rather like this, I imagine. Bloody awful country to fight in, but there we are. Know how I feel?'

'No, sir?'

Forbes gave a grimace and said, 'I feel what I am: five hundred miles nor'-west of the Shetlands! A far cry from Southampton and the idyllic days of

peace!’

He went into his cabin. Fifteen minutes later his coxswain was speeding him across the anchorage, and soon after that the shrilling of the boatswain’s calls came across the water as he was piped aboard the flagship.

Many more signals had been exchanged after the initial one from the Flag—mostly signals to and from the Naval Officer in Charge ashore. All *Cambridge* survivors were to be landed together with all the Germans from the *Wuppertal*. Boats would be sent off for them and for the *Castle Bay*’s more seriously wounded casualties; there would be a full supply of stretchers as required by the Medical Officer for the cot cases; these would all be hospitalized in makeshift accommodation until they could be sent to a British port, which would be as soon as transport was available. During the afternoon lighters would come out with stores and equipment—no mention was made of inflatable dinghies but it was not hard for the First Lieutenant to read them into the signals. *Castle Bay* would refuel to capacity from an Admiralty oiler arriving in convoy after dark. And when Forbes returned from the flagship he informed the First Lieutenant that the commando contingent would be brought off after the fuelling was finished.

‘They’ll come off in landing-craft,’ he said. ‘We’ll use both ladders in the interest of speed. The convoy leaves the anchorage at 0400.’ Echoing the Navigating Officer’s earlier words to Cameron, he added, ‘We take station as arse-end Charlie.’

‘Keeping up the deception to the finish, sir?’

‘That’s it, Number One, that’s it! Are you all ready to bed down the troops?’

The First Lieutenant nodded. ‘All ready, sir. Hard-lying won’t be the word, but they’ll be fitted in to the last man if it means having them as a deck

cargo!’

‘Poor buggers,’ Forbes said with feeling. ‘You’d better warn the Buffer,’ he added in reference to the Chief Boatswain’s Mate, ‘to have hoses and squeegees ready—they’ll be seasick to a man! The weather reports aren’t too good, I’m afraid.’ He turned away. ‘Send Cameron up, please, Number One.’

Fifty-odd inflatable dinghies were brought aboard from the lighters that afternoon and stowed below decks wherever they could be fitted in: the *Castle Bay*’s peacetime cargo holds were no longer available, converted now into messdecks and magazines, gunner’s stores and many other things necessary to a ship of war. After dark and the arrival of the Fleet oiler, Forbes took his ship alongside and the oil-fuel lines were connected up. When the operation was completed, he went back to his anchorage and the ship’s company stood by to receive the troops. Right on time the landing-craft came out, four of them, just visible in the darkness; there was no moon, but as always over water there was a faint loom of light, a not quite total dark. The troops embarked in a silence broken only by the rattle of arms and equipment and the occasional half-stifled oath as men missed their footing on the ladders. First aboard was the Lieutenant-Colonel commanding the operation. He looked around for a moment, eyebrows raised, then smiled as the First Lieutenant stepped forward.

‘Glad to have you aboard, sir,’ Number One said. ‘The Captain sends his apologies—he’s remaining on the bridge—’

‘Understandable.’

‘I’ll have you taken up.’ The First Lieutenant gestured to the gangway messenger, and the commando officer followed the seaman to the bridge. Hovering on the upper deck was Mr Hanrahan, ready to take over the explosives from the sappers and stow them in his magazines. He looked with suspicion at the soldiers: they would have their own ideas on explosives, no

doubt, and these might not accord with naval ideas, but he meant to be the boss whatever. He identified a major of the Royal Canadian Engineers and hustled forward.

‘Would you be the officer in charge of the explosives party?’ he asked.

‘Right, I am—’

‘I’m Mr Hanrahan, Gunner.’ He stressed the mister: he was something more than the equivalent of a regimental sergeant-major. ‘I’ll take over your materials at the derrick if you don’t mind, sir. Just till we reach our destination.’

‘Okay,’ the major said: the Canadian accent was strong. ‘I’m easy.’

‘Then just bring your troops along o’ me,’ Mr Hanrahan said with relief, and turned about. He clicked his tongue a little as heavy boots bashed hell out of the wooden decks, but that was more the Buffer’s concern than his, of course. The embarkation continued and soon the *Castle Bay* was crammed to capacity, looking more like an army camp than a warship. Khaki filled every possible space and blue was scarcely to be seen. On the bridge Forbes had a welcoming word with the commando Colonel and said there would be a conference during the next day as conditions permitted. In the meantime the Colonel was welcome to his cabin; he himself would remain on the bridge throughout the night and doss down when possible in the chartroom. He watched the Colonel going down the ladder: he was little more than middle twenties at a guess, and he could be going to his death.... In Forbes’ view the army had much the worst of the war; aboard a ship you had your comforts around you, at least. A warm bunk when you could get to it, regular hot meals except when action or the weather dictated otherwise, drinks in the wardroom at duty-free prices, one penny for a gin, twopence for whisky, sixpence for three-star brandy and cigarettes at sixpence for twenty. So to some extent with the RAF. Always a nice clean airfield mess to go back to...

when they were around at all, that was. The RAF wasn't too popular with either of the other two services... death stared all active servicemen in the face from time to time, but Forbes reckoned that the stare was directed at the soldiers more often than others, and this operation would be no exception. His mind went back to his visit to the flagship: Vian had appeared confident, but Forbes had detected an unease behind the sure speech and manner, as though the Admiral felt that the War Cabinet was taking an unjustifiable risk to wipe out what was in effect a pig in a poke. It was as though he'd feared a touch of the Churchills: Winston's impetuosity had got the better of his judgement and the War Cabinet had been bulldozed. When Forbes had mentioned his fear that the U-boat attack on the *Castle Bay* might have meant a security leak, Vian had remained silent for a moment, eyes searching Forbes' face closely, then, in his coldly clipped and rather autocratic voice, had said that such was always to be taken into account but that he, personally, believed the security to have been watertight throughout.

'If I'm wrong,' he'd said, 'it's going to be a nasty job. But I'm sure you know that, Commander.'

Forbes did; standing now on his bridge and looking down at the embarkation taking place without benefit of yard-arm groups or any other light, he could see in his mind's eye the solid wall of fire from the enemy that would meet any expected assault on Vest Hammarfjord.

He heard the approach of the First Lieutenant, and turned. 'Yes, Number One?'

'Embarkation complete, sir. All men bedded down for the night.'

Forbes gave a tired smile. 'Tucked 'em up, have you?'

'Metaphorically, sir, I suppose I have.'

Forbes rubbed at his eyes: now he could snatch a few hours' sleep—his watch showed midnight, a little after. He was about to speak when a voice

came from just forward of the bridge, down on the fore well-deck, a voice raised in song:

*‘Kiss me good-night, sergeant-major,
Tuck me in my little wooden bed...’*

Suddenly Forbes’ overstretched nerves reacted. He snapped, ‘Tell that bloody man to put a sock in it, Number One!’

The First Lieutenant leaned over the fore guardrail of the bridge, but already the song had ceased, whether of the singer’s own volition or that of an NCO wasn’t clear. Forbes felt a twinge of remorse. It hadn’t really mattered all that much and within the next few days the man could be cold and’ dead. He must keep his reactions in check: captains at sea needed cool heads.

He told the Officer of the Watch he was going to the chartroom.

At 0330 hours the *Castle Bay* went to stations for leaving harbour and the Lieutenant-Commander (E) reported the engines ready to turn over. Forbes, back on the bridge, ordered the cable to be shortened-in. Soon a shaded light from the Fleet flagship’s compass platform flicked out a brief signal: the final word from the Vice-Admiral in *Victorious* to weigh and proceed in execution of previous orders. On the heels of the executive signal the aircraft-carrier began to move out, sliding slowly through the darkness of the anchorage to make the turn for the open sea. Two destroyers, her own personal screen, moved busily ahead of her to take up their stations. Behind came the merchant ships of the convoy carrying much-needed arms and supplies to the Russian armies opposing Hitler’s march for Moscow; after them the *Suffolk* and the *Devonshire* to take station on the beam; after them again the cruisers of Rear-Admiral Vian’s force with their escorting destroyers, which would take station on the convoy’s quarter to port and starboard, acting as rearguard

on the *Castle Bay* as well as on the convoy proper.

Forbes said, 'Weigh anchor, Number One.'

The First Lieutenant passed the order to the fo'c'sle: the anchor was drawn home to the ship and left at the waterline in case of need in the inshore waters. Forbes stepped to the gyro repeater. 'Here we go,' he said. 'Number One, as soon as special sea dutymen are fallen out, the ship goes to second degree of readiness. If we go to action stations, I want all army personnel off the upper deck. Understood?'

'Understood, sir.'

Forbes gripped the binnacle hard, a prey once again to morbid thoughts and his nerves. He didn't like the projection of his mind... but that was nonsense, of course it was—they would go in and win, and may God direct Cameron's navigational skills aright when they were off Vest Hammarfjord! In a hard voice he called down the voice-pipe:

'Engine to slow ahead, wheel fifteen degrees to port.'

The screw thrashed the water; the head came round. They were away.

CHAPTER FOUR

As Forbes had forecast, the weather proved unkind. The convoy steered north into the Denmark Strait, executing a turn to starboard once the ships were past the northernmost tip of Iceland, thence heading north-easterly until such time as they would alter to the east to come between Spitzbergen and Bear Island. By the time the off-watch hands had been piped to breakfast, the *Castle Bay* was into the Arctic Circle with a strong northerly gale sweeping down from the polar ice, a wind that took the ships on the beam and made conditions highly uncomfortable. The convoy was a fast one and at its sixteen knots could expect to pass Bear Island within four days of departure from Hvalfjord; but before that the *Castle Bay* would have detached for Vest Hammarfjord with Vian's force also detaching to proceed in company for a while before again parting to cover them distantly to the south and west.

During the forenoon, the Captain spoke to the ship's company over the tannoy, putting all hands in the picture as to Operation Forestay, although by this time the embarked troops had largely done the job for him. In the petty officers' mess the Buffer, Chief Petty Officer Tanner, commented on the orders to Petty Officer Telegraphist Blackman.

'Wonder what this unidentified bloody dump is, Blackie?'

Blackman sniffed. 'Could be anything.'

'Well, that's helpful. You blokes usually have all the buzzes.'

Not this time, Buff. I reckon what the skipper said is right. No one knows.'

The Buffer scratched his head. 'Then isn't it a bit daft, to go in and blow it up, just like that?'

'Skipper knows what he's doing, so does whoever initiated the order in the

first place. Or we have to suppose he does, anyway.’ Petty Officer Telegraphist Blackman reached for his cap after a glance at his watch and got to his feet to go back to the WIT receiving room. ‘Tell you one thing, though: if I was one of the troops I’d sooner it was a rocky officer navigating me in than a wavy.’

Tanner grinned. ‘Ruddy pongoes won’t know the difference.’ He said this in a lowered voice, for the army sergeants had been accorded the honour of the Pos’ mess and one of them was not far off, looking about the same colour as his battledress and obviously wishing to die. Tanner pondered Blackman’s sentiments: the rockies, as the Royal Naval Reserve officers were known on account of the interlaced pattern of their gold stripes of rank, were the professional reserve, all of them Merchant Service officers and the majority of them master mariners, men who had spent many years at sea all over the world. The Wavy Navy—again the name suggested by the stripe pattern—were the Saturday afternoon sailors, the amateurs whose seafaring experience was mostly limited to what they’d gleaned in the time since joining, and that, in the Buffer’s view, was half a dog watch. But young Cameron, he was different; the buzz had gone round the lower deck, and the Lord knew where it had originated, that Mr Cameron had done unofficial time in trawlers pre-war and that his record in wartime so far had been a good one: among other things, he’d sunk a U-boat almost single-handed—that story had gone round the whole Navy and was well authenticated. Anyway, the skipper was RNR and he wouldn’t choose a dud; and the tannoy message from the skipper had in fact confirmed the trawler bit. Mr Cameron would not be entering Vest Hammarfjord for the first time and that was something.

CPO Tanner, his stand-easy finished, left the mess and went to the upper deck. As he had expected, it was a shambles of sea-sick pongoes, all looking like death warmed up. Tanner had a job to keep his feet from slipping under

him. In the enclosed alleyway the stench had been fearful, and by the time Tanner had made the upper deck he felt quite queasy himself. And some of them had no common sense; Tanner roared at a lance-corporal making for the guardrail:

‘Not the bloody wind’ard side, lad! For God’s sake, you must have come down with the last flamin’ shower!’

It was too late; vomit, carried by the wind, blew back in its owner’s face. Some people were born landlubbers.

The sea and sky were empty now of the enemy: no Focke-Wulfs, no U-boats, no destroyers, and the information reports broadcast in cypher by the Admiralty indicated nothing moving, or anyway known to be moving, in the vicinity. For the time being, the weather was the only enemy and seamen were accustomed to fighting that battle. Forbes, however, spent most of his time on the bridge; an attack could come at any moment and never mind the reports: the plotters at the Admiralty didn’t know everything, and every second counted when action started. Cameron passed his time in the chartroom with Beddows, committing to memory every possible detail of the approaches to Vest Hammarfjord and comparing them with his own recollections. Naturally, a chart would be taken with the shore party but the approach was to be made in darkness and the showing of a light could be fatal to the operation.

That afternoon the Captain called a 55 conference in the wardroom, which was cleared of all pantry staff and stewards. This conference was attended by the First Lieutenant and all the ship’s officers detailed for the landing, together with all the army officers. Forbes produced the secret orders for Operation Forestay; Colonel Bell had his own copy.

Forbes held up the orders in their file.

‘You’ll all have seen these by now. They leave nothing to chance, you’ll agree.’

There were murmurs of assent.

Forbes said, ‘That is, so far as they go—I think you’ll understand what I mean. Both the Admiralty and the War Office are damn good at producing highly detailed bumph with all manner of alternative plans to suit every state of the weather, for every minute of the work-out, with alternatives if someone trips over his feet or develops an appendicitis. Well, I don’t believe things always work out the way the planners say, right?’

‘Dead right,’ the Colonel said, grinning.

‘So for my part I keep an open mind. I don’t disregard the orders, nor shall I fly in the face of them unless they turn out to be damn silly. But I don’t intend to let them fence my mind in or make my reactions to events rigid to the point of insanity. In other words I shall still continue to envisage the other things that can go wrong, the things the planners *haven’t* envisaged. One of these is that Admiral Vian’s force could find itself withdrawn at short notice. That’s an Admiralty habit, I regret to have to say, but one they don’t care to acknowledge to the extent of allowing for it in the orders. If that should happen—if Vian’s ships should be urgently needed elsewhere—that leaves me in command. Now, I propose of course to accept that overall responsibility but in fact I shall confine myself to the conduct of my own ship and the actual landing and re-embarking of your force, Colonel. I’m no soldier; I’ll not presume to interfere with the purely military part of Operation Forestay. On the other hand, I’m insisting on one thing, and that is, my First Lieutenant is in command of all personnel while the force is waterborne both inward and outward. Understood, Colonel?’

Bell nodded. ‘Yes, that’s fair enough, Captain.’

‘Good. The rest is yours, and it’ll be up to you to decide when the pull-out

starts. My chaps'll be ready.' Forbes looked down at the file of orders. 'I'm to be in position for the disembarkation off Svalbard Point in the outer fjord at 2300 hours on the twenty-seventh. I shall be. The *Castle Bay* will detach from the convoy with Admiral Vian at 1500 hours tomorrow, after which our speed will be our own concern, or anyway Vian's, and we shall steam at our maximum—I don't anticipate that the weather will delay us unless the wind strengthens. The inflatable dinghies will be put over the side the moment I stop engines to lie off in the outer fjord, and you'll proceed inshore soonest possible, when all personnel have embarked. Any questions?'

There was a silence in the cigarette-smoke-filled ward-room. Forbes said, 'Well, I have one of my own. Has anyone any ideas on what it is you're going to blow up?' He paused expectantly. 'No? Well then, let us suppose it's a plain ammunition store, an arsenal—unlikely perhaps, so far north from the German bases, but let's just make the hypothesis. What then?'

Bell shrugged and said, 'We blow it up. Those are the orders.'

'How? Do you lay a fuse trail, and then take to the boats?'

Bell said quietly, 'We take what we find, Captain. If there's the opportunity to get clear afterwards, we'll make it. If there's not...' He left the rest unsaid. But, Forbes thought, he suddenly looked a hell of a lot older than his years. It was a pretty poor prospect, to be blown up by one's own charges.

When the conference was over, Cameron was given the seamen's messdeck in order to hold as many of the commandos and sappers as could be crammed in. He gave them a detailed, painstaking run-down of the intricacies of the entry channel to Vest Hammarfjord so that each man would know what to expect and would, Cameron hoped, have some chance of recognizing the various landmarks and trouble spots and of interpreting the orders as they were passed down the flotilla line. It was necessary to give two lectures, the second for the overflow; and he found that on each occasion the commandos

paid him the compliment of strict attention and were not slow to ask questions. They were well aware that their lives and the success of the operation would depend largely upon making an incident-free passage inwards.

The following afternoon, Rear-Admiral Vian, sharp at 1500 hours, made a preliminary signal for detaching from the convoy and as soon as this was acknowledged the executive was flashed by masthead light from his flagship. *Nigeria* and *Aurora*, with their destroyer escort, swung to port and starboard, away from the convoy as it steamed on for the passage north of Bear Island to drop down eventually on the port of Archangel. The cruisers re-formed in line ahead, with the *Castle Bay* wallowing in the centre and the destroyers on either bow. A signal came from the Admiral ordering maximum speed, and Forbes spoke briefly to the engine-room. The soldiers crowded the guardrails, watching the convoy's departure with the Vice-Admiral in *Victorious*, whose great dark bulk dwarfed all the other ships; watching the leaner outlines of Vian's cruisers as they steamed efficiently into their stations. There was not long to go now, and all at once there was a different feeling perceptible throughout the *Castle Bay*. The troops were all set to go and the sooner they were away the better; by this time they had largely got over their seasickness, though each corner of the deck, each little hidey-hole in the lee of boats or by the funnel-casing or below the Captain's quarters still held its dead-looking occupant, green in the face and shivering beneath its khaki greatcoat. Cameron looked at them with sympathy: he had suffered himself in the trawlers. He, however, had been made to work notwithstanding. The trawler skippers knew that his father, their owner, wouldn't forgive soft treatment just because he was the son. And now it seemed as though the army, having left its troops to wallow in sickness for long enough, had something of the

same idea.

A company sergeant-major came shouting along the deck.

‘Come along now, you wretched men, get fell in and show the sailors what you’re made of! Come along, come along, come along then! Sar’nt Hawker!’

‘Sar’nt-Major!’ Behind the CSM a drill-sergeant marched, incongruously smart in a well-pressed battledress and carrying beneath his arm, of all things to find aboard a ship at sea, a pace-stick. But rumour already had it that 20 and 21 Commandos had only recently been formed from an infantry battalion of the line.

‘Stir the buggers up, if you please, Sar’nt Hawker, stir ‘em well and truly up, like bloody pea soup.’ The voice was almost a scream; Cameron, glancing up at the bridge, saw the Captain with his fingers to his ears and a pained expression on his face. The Navy didn’t shout much other than in an emergency. But Sergeant Hawker, wooden-faced, stirred as bid. He poked with his pace-stick, marching along the decks with a rigid gait as though he was on parade at his regimental depot. His shouts rivalled those of his CSM; one day, he would be a CSM himself and now was the time to prove it. One by one, the seasick soldiers staggered to their feet and as the other NCOs went in amongst them, adding to the un-naval noises, they lurched into some sort of line with the rest until it was virtually a case of manning ship all the way round from for’ard to aft and back again. Then, majestically, the Regimental Sergeant-Major appeared, complete with Sam Browne belt and superfine cloth Service dress, cap pulled well down over his eyes, back straight as the Drill-Sergeant’s pace-stick. Behind him marched a person in a white singlet with red edging round the neck and sleeves.

‘Right! Now! There ‘as been too much sitting around on your backsides! I will not ‘ave it any longer! You will perform exercises under the PTA as laid down in ACIs. *You will ‘op up and down and get fit!*’

Forbes leaned over the bridge rail. Not aboard my ship they won't, Sar'nt-Major,' he called.

Mouth open, the RSM looked up. 'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'I'm sure you're accustomed to breaking step when, for instance, marching over a suspension bridge?'

'That may be so, sir. That may be so, and is so, I agree. But—'

'Five hundred men hopping up and down in what is not a very large ship would cause a vibration, Sar'nt-Major, and endanger the expansion plates. I'd be much obliged if you *didn't* hop up and down.'

'Very good, sir.' The RSM executed a tremendous salute. He looked stiffly forbearing but otherwise didn't bat an eyelid. He merely changed the orders. 'You will dismiss,' he roared, 'and you will dismiss *gently*, otherwise you will *sink the ruddy ship!*'

On the bridge, Forbes grinned to himself. Soldiers were a very strange lot. A few moments later they became a bloody nuisance. The CSM, following behind his RSM at a respectful distance, placed his boot squarely on a pool of recent vomit and went flat on his back, swearing luridly. The *Castle Bay* chose that moment to lurch heavily as a big sea swept beneath her bottom plating; the CSM slid fast for the side, out of control. He was not a large man; he went straight between two stanchions and below the chain of the guardrail, failed to make good his wild, despairing grasp, and plunged into the sea's turbulence before anyone could reach him to arrest his progress. He went deep; he vanished from sight.

Forbes had seen what had happened. He stopped engines and put the helm over to port in an attempt to provide a lee, and at the same time the Officer of the Watch called away the seaboat. From the deck, as a capless head appeared on the surface, a lifebuoy was thrown down by one of the *Castle Bay's* company. It fell wide of the mark, and the man in the water seemed to

be making no attempt to swim for it. He looked dazed and uncomprehending.

The seaboat might take too long; Cameron climbed over the rail. Seeing him, Forbes called down, 'Come back, Cameron. That's an order. Don't be a bloody fool!' It was a loud shout, and Cameron heard it, but jumped just the same. He was a strong swimmer; it didn't occur to him until afterwards that he was jeopardizing the whole of Operation Forestay. A man was in distress and that was all that mattered at that moment. Taking the water, he went deep as the CSM had. Surfacing, he dashed water from his eyes, saw the struggling man, and swam for him fast and powerfully. He reached him, saw the stark fear in the face, and grappled him, trying to get him to stop fighting the sea, to relax and leave it to his rescuer. Another surge of the sea lifted them both and flung them apart; the CSM swept down the side of the sea towards the ship's hull, Cameron swept down the slope the other way and by sheer chance made contact with the lifebuoy, floating on the end of its line. By this time the seaboat had been slipped from the falls and was pulling for'ard as fast as its crew could make it. Clutching the lifebuoy, Cameron headed for the half-drowned man, his breath rasping at his lungs and the blood pumping loudly in his ears. Then another sea came, bigger and more vicious than the last. The hull of the *Castle Bay* lifted and lurched heavily to port just as the soldier was once again swept Willy-nilly down the wave's side.

The end was hideous but inevitable.

The head impacted sharply against the steel hull, sent crashing into it with the full force of the sea behind it, and it shattered. There was a brief patch of blood and then the man had gone, down into the depths, visible just for a moment as an almost headless corpse in the instant of sinking. As Cameron clung fast to the lifebuoy, the seaboat came abreast to pick him up. Yanked aboard, he collapsed into the bottom of the boat, and the crew pulled at once for the falls to hook on. As the seaboat was hoisted, Mr Hanrahan was

waiting at the embarkation deck, shaking his head. Young Cameron was due to get a right bollocking from the skipper, but all said and done he'd acted in the best traditions of the service and that was something. Nevertheless, Mr Hanrahan's face grew longer at another death: they weren't having too much luck, not apart from the timely appearance earlier of the *King George V*. All in all, it didn't bode too good. Evidently Rear-Admiral Vian didn't think so either; already the impatient signals were coming in demanding explanations.

And then as if to make a pertinent point, a black speck was seen in the sky to the east, a speck that grew larger and was identified as a German dive bomber. As the alarm rattlers sounded, Mr Hanrahan moved at a stately double for his action station. The troops milled about, obeying the order to get below while the sailors ran like Mr Hanrahan for their stations. The dive bomber, a Stuka, made a preliminary high-level run over the ships. The anti-aircraft armament opened and put up a barrage of bursting shrapnel. Puff after puff till the sky looked like an attack of measles... down through it the dive bomber came, screaming out its high note of death, down through the bursts to attack Vian's flagship, aimed seemingly straight for the compass platform. The din was tremendous, with every ship in action.

The attack misfired: the Stuka dropped its bombs some way off the cruiser to starboard, and climbed for another attempt, streaking up and away from the barrels of the anti-aircraft batteries and the rapid s'Butter of the close-range weapons. Vian was zig-zagging now, with his engines moving at their full speed of more than thirty knots, laying his flagship this way and that as the Stuka went into the next dive. Again it missed: missed the cruisers—but hit fair and square on one of the destroyers. Cameron believed the vessel had taken a bomb slap down a funnel. She burst apart with a tremendous roar. A sheet of brilliant white flame shot up, turning to red and then orange. Bodies, fragments of metal and general debris hurtled into the sky. A great patch of

oil spread. Beneath it was nothing—nothing except what looked like a black vortex of disturbed water. It was as though the destroyer had been itself a bomb that had exploded. No one could have survived, but Vian's flagship was seen to be heading towards the oil patch.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Stuka left them. The ack-ack barrage was intense, and in any case the aircraft's bomb load had no doubt been expended. The flagship reported no survivors from the destroyer; the Admiral ordered the force to re-form and proceed. They all knew that they wouldn't be left alone now, that it was just a question of time before a strong German attack came in. Their one hope would be darkness, and there were some hours to go before nightfall.

The First Lieutenant climbed to the bridge. 'Fall out action stations, sir?' he asked.

'No. That bugger'll have used her radio, Number One, and I want to be ready. Keep the troops below, too—they'll get in the way of the guns' crews if they're let loose to mill around the upper deck.' Forbes was scanning the horizons while he spoke. After a pause he said, 'I think a word with Cameron would be in order. Send for him, please, Number One.'

When Cameron reported to the bridge, Forbes gestured him to the chartroom. The bollocking was to take place in private. Forbes said, 'Get one thing straight, Cameron. An order's an order no matter what the circumstances. The next time you disobey an order will be the last.'

'I'm sorry, sir.'

Forbes gave him a searching look; in the heat of the moment, in the overall sound of the wind and sea, it just might—just might—have been conceivable that Cameron hadn't heard the order or at any rate could have tried to make out a case that he hadn't. This he had not done, and that was good. The Captain's tone softened a little but he drove the point home nevertheless. 'The first consideration is Operation Forestay, Cameron. That must never be

jeopardized never. Your action could have jeopardized it. We would have gone ahead without you, of course—no one's indispensable. But it might have made quite a lot of difference.'

'Yes, sir.'

'That having been said, I'm proud to think that one of my officers put another man's safety before his own. Off you go, Cameron.'

This time, luck was really with them: there was no further attack that afternoon. The ship remained closed up at action stations until after dusk, then reduced to second degree of readiness. As Mr Hanrahan remarked to Cameron, their good fortune was someone else's ordeal. 'The sods have found a better target, that's what.'

'The main convoy?'

'That's right. It's a better prize than us, I reckon, though the Jerries won't find it so easy when the old *Victorious* flies off her aircraft.'

'Carriers are pretty good targets themselves,' Cameron said.

Hanrahan shook his head. 'Not really. Big, yes—hard to miss in a sense, sure enough. But their flight decks are armoured and bloody hard to penetrate, see. Which is where the Yanks'll find they've made a mistake if ever they join in this lot—they give their carriers wooden flight decks, dead easy to penetrate.'

'Why's that?'

Hanrahan sniffed. 'God may know, but I reckon even He's doubtful.' He yawned. 'Let's hope we get all night in, Sub. I'm getting too old for alarms and excursions. You're all right—you're young. This is a young man's war.'

When the Gunner had gone on his way Cameron stood looking out across the dark sea, at the restless heave of deep waters and the blurs in the night that were the hulls of the cruisers in company, none of them showing any

light whatsoever. Hanrahan was probably right about it being a young man's war; certainly you didn't find many men over the age of forty-five or so at sea with the RN except for captains and above. Bodies grew weary with age and minds grew unresilient, but you had to put up with that in the senior officers, which was quite a thought... there weren't many young admirals, and at forty-seven Vian himself must be almost the youngest, and that, from Cameron's standpoint, was scarcely the first flush of youth. The grinding strains of command... Cameron's soliloquizing was cut into by a sudden noise behind him and he turned. It was a door opening and crashing back against the bulkhead as a man lurched through to the open deck with something in his hand.

Cameron was close enough to see that the man was a soldier, one of the commandos, wearing a sergeant's chevrons. The bottle he was clutching could have been smuggled aboard in Hvalfjord or it could conceivably have been obtained on board, from the wardroom wine store: some stewards might not be averse to making a little cash on the side and stock shortages could be covered up by a little fiddling with the officers' wine bills.

The sergeant stood still for a moment, focussing his eyes on Cameron. There was no one else very near; Cameron had been standing on the starboard side of the after well-deck where, for considerations of free space for the guns' crews, the troops had not been allowed dossing billets; and at second degree of readiness only one full gun's crew was stationed aft and this crew was manning the port-side 4-inch.

The sergeant spoke in a slurred voice. 'Officer, eh?'

'Yes.'

'Lovely for some. Sir.'

Cameron said nothing; the situation was a difficult one. The sergeant's belligerent tone had indicated that he was not so very far off fighting drunk,

and a blow from him could end only one way: court martial and reduction to the ranks, a pretty nasty thing to have hanging over one when going into Operation Forestay. On the other hand, discipline was being shattered and if the sergeant was allowed to proceed on his drunken way all hell might be let loose. There was one way out: to summon the port after gun's crew and put the sergeant under restraint. But arrest would also lead to the defaulter's table if not all the way to a court martial, and a reduction to the ranks might be inevitable.

The sergeant spoke again. 'I said, lovely for some. Too bloody stuck-up to answer. *Too* lovely for some. Sir. And I say sod the bloody war. What does sir say, eh?'

The voice was hard, challenging, an older and more experienced man in a mood that was telling him that the juxtaposition of rank was all wrong. Cameron said, 'I suggest you throw that bottle overboard, Sergeant. But with the cap removed so that it sinks.'

'Sinks?'

'If it floats, it could give away our position. Scotch whisky, British ship, Sergeant.'

'Balls.'

Cameron took a deep breath. Maybe it was balls. Other nationalities could buy whisky in British ports when there was any, and so far as that went the bottle could have floated from anywhere. He said, 'All right, it's balls. But do as I say and nothing more will be said afterwards. Be sensible. Why throw away your rank, Sergeant?'

A moment later Cameron saw the upraised arm and the bottle in the hand. The sergeant blundered forward. Cameron dodged the wild swipe and got a firm grip on the wrist. He twisted it, hard; the hand opened and Cameron grabbed the bottle before it fell to the deck, but as he brought it down it hit a

stanchion and broke. Cameron threw the neck end overboard and then saw that the gunlayer of the port 4-inch had come across the well-deck.

‘Everything all right, sir?’

‘Just about, I think.’ Cameron still had a hold on the sergeant’s wrist and had forced him back against the bulkhead behind. The NCO was breathing hard but keeping his mouth shut now.

‘Do I smell whisky, sir?’ the gunlayer asked.

‘No, you don’t. The sergeant’s sick but he’ll be all right in the morning. Detail two of your gun’s crew to take him down to the petty officers’ mess and hand him over to his fellow sergeants.’

‘Leave the gun, at second degree of readiness, sir? The skipper—’

‘I’ll take any cans that are going. Just be quick, that’s all.’

‘If you give the order, sir.’ The gunlayer called up two seamen and explained the situation; the sergeant was handled gently but firmly and taken through the after door into the alleyway and out of sight. Cameron was left to wonder if he had given a display of weakness, if he had been guilty of subversion of discipline such as would react upon the ship’s company when the word spread, which it was bound to. If an officer turned a blind eye to one man’s drunkenness, how could he not do so in the case of a seaman when it arose—which, again, after the next spell in port, it was bound to? The men who went down to the sea in ships were never plaster saints and in Malta Cameron had seen some rip-roaring drunkenness making its way aboard to be put in the rattle by the Officer of the Watch. But it was done now for good or ill.

The following afternoon Rear-Admiral Vian hauled his cruisers off to the north-west and made his farewell good luck signal. He would be patrolling in his allotted sector off the Norwegian coast and in emergency could be

contacted on the radio frequency allocated for Operation Forestay. He had had no need to stress the ‘emergency’ angle: Forbes was only too well aware that once the *Castle Bay*’s WIT opened up, it would constitute a dead giveaway of his position and that would endanger not only the ship itself but also the whole of Vian’s force. A wireless call would be a final resort, only to be made if and when they made actual contact with the enemy at sea.

The departure of the heavy ships left a naked feeling behind: everyone on the *Castle Bay*’s upper deck waved them away and looked after them with a kind of wistfulness as they drew clear with tumbling wakes and streaming ensigns, eventually to fade from sight towards the far horizon. Now the *Castle Bay* was really on her own. Colonel Bell was on the bridge with the Captain when the departure was made. As the boatswain’s calls shrilled out in salute to the Admiral, to be answered by the distant strains from the flagship’s Royal Marine bugler, Bell said, ‘Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground.’

Forbes lifted an eyebrow, quizzically. Bell said, ‘Shakespeare. *The Tempest*.’

‘Don’t talk about tempests, Colonel! Anyway—you’re going to get your acre of barren ground pretty soon, only it’ll be a lot more than a perishing acre!’

‘Yes...’

Forbes said, ‘We’ll be off Vest Hammarfjord right on time, and after that there’ll be no delay. There’ll be a final briefing at 2100 hours in the wardroom, and from then on I’ll be on the bridge till our arrival, and probably most of the time after that as well.’

‘Hard life, isn’t it?’ Bell said with a grin.

Forbes laughed. ‘I’m not complaining, I’m used to it by now. All I ask is luck—that’s all! And I’ve a feeling we’ve had rather more than our share

already.'

The *Castle Bay* steamed on, moving fast, throwing back the seas from her blunt stem, the wind whistling through her standing rigging and around the pock-marked funnel above the shell-torn casing. Just before the light went, the Norwegian coast came into distant view ahead, craggy, inhospitable, German-held and dangerous. In normal times there would have been the promise of spectacular beauty in that closing view, but not now. No one's thoughts were of beauty as rifles and automatic weapons were given a last check through, as the inflatable dinghies were brought up from below and piled on deck, as the warrant officers and NCOs of the army contingent made last-minute inspections of equipment and personnel. There was plenty of ribald comment along the decks as the *Castle Bay* first raised the land: Adolf Hitler was about to get a nasty shock and at last it really was going to be a case of run, rabbit, run, if only the Navy delivered them successfully to do the fighting. Later, however, as the grim mountains came up more closely and began to loom through the darkness over the incoming vessel, tongues grew less active and the mood changed sharply. Men sat about in their platoon groups, waiting for the off and brooding until it came. Letters for home were scribbled on pads and posted in the ship's post box; if the writers didn't get back, perhaps the *Castle Bay* would. There was a lot of pencil sucking and many brows frowned in concentration; possible last letters were not too easy to compose.

The gunlayer of Number Four gun sought out Sub-Lieutenant Cameron.

'Beg pardon, sir. Sergeant Mullins would like a word.'

'Sergeant Mullins?'

'Last night, sir.'

'Oh. What was the outcome, Frewen?'

Leading Seaman Frewen closed an eye briefly. 'All well, sir. Pongoes stick

together, specially NCOS.'

'I'm glad to hear it! Right, I'll see him.'

Frewen vanished through a doorway; Sergeant Mullins came out and approached Cameron. He slammed to the salute, boots crashing on the deck.

'Just to say thank you, sir.'

'That's all right, Sergeant.'

'It meant a lot to me, sir. I'll never be a bloody fool again. I'm a regular, and maybe all I'll have left is the army before long. Thing is, sir, it's the wife. Just before leaving Iceland I got a letter, sir. She's not long to live. Got the TB, sir.'

Cameron felt a sense of shock: what a burden to carry into Operation Forestay. He said lamely, 'I'm very sorry, Sergeant. Perhaps it's not as bad as you think. Things get exaggerated sometimes.'

'Yes, sir. I hope so, sir. I'm very grateful.'

Cameron nodded wordlessly. One thing was sure: last night, he'd done the right thing, no doubts on that lingered now. Mullins saluted again and turned about smartly, then marched away, arms swinging. Cameron hoped he would be coming back to the ship again when it was all over. Another thought: he was very glad indeed he hadn't a wife to worry about... and that thought led to Mary Anstey in the Drafting Office in RNB Portsmouth. He was far from committed to her, which was currently just as well, but suddenly he found that he, too, had another letter to write to join the one already written to his parents in Aberdeen.

In the wardroom Forbes passed the final items of information. 'The ship will stop engines as soon as we're half a mile off Svalbard Point.' This was at the entrance to the Vest Hammarfjord channel. 'I estimate the time as being a little before 2300 hours. When the way is off the ship, the first pair of

inflatable dinghies will be put over the side—one to port, one to starboard. The disembarkation will start immediately, but no dinghy will leave the vicinity of the ship until the whole lot are in the water and filled.’ He rubbed at his eyes, looking dead tired from long hours on the bridge. ‘Over to you now, Colonel.’

‘Right.’ Bell got to his feet. ‘I don’t need to stress that silence will be maintained—total silence. And I’m offering prayers that there won’t be a moon—there shouldn’t be, according to the weather reports. Now, to recap a few other points: Sub-Lieutenant Cameron will be in the leading craft with the *Castle Bay*’s First Lieutenant. Cameron will navigate and his movements must be very closely followed by each craft in the flotilla. We don’t want an initial balls-up and we all know the channel into the fjord is narrow and extremely tricky. Any navigational orders passed back from Cameron are to be obeyed instantly and without question. If any dinghy happens to pile up, the men embarked will take their subsequent orders from the naval command. Obviously, there must be no wireless communication unless it’s absolutely unavoidable—personally, I can’t visualize any event short of total abortion that is likely to justify the use of radio.’ He paused, glancing at his watch. ‘I think that’s about all except that we synchronize watches at 2300 hours.’

The officers were dismissed and Bell climbed to the bridge with Forbes. Along the upper deck small cardboard packs of iron rations were issued to the commandos and the naval party: thick slabs of cocoa that could be eaten as chocolate, malted milk tablets, hard biscuits and the like, plus rudimentary first-aid kits containing bandages and iodine. Bell and Forbes didn’t talk much. Each had too much on his mind as the *Castle Bay* made in towards the coast, and the overall atmosphere wasn’t conducive to chatter. The ship slid through calmer waters now, in intense darkness; no moon, no stars. The long-range forecast had been miraculously correct so far. Forbes looked down

from his bridge at the troop-packed decks. They were a mass of steel helmets above boot-polish-blackened faces, of FN automatic rifles and Bren guns and Sten sub-machine guns, of 2-inch mortars and knives and grenades. There was scarcely a sound from below, other than normal ship sounds. The tension was immense.

In his magazines, the Gunner was supervising the return of the explosives to the Royal Canadian Engineers' demolition party. He held a mass of papers, bumph that needed signatures; he had taken the explosives on charge and he had to keep his yardarm square: the Admiralty ran on bumph. He ticked off the items as they were taken over, licking at a stub of indelible pencil, then he got his vital signatures and handed over the responsibility.

'All yours, sir,' he said to the sapper major. 'And the best o' luck with 'em.'

'Thanks. Seems stupid, doesn't it?'

Hanrahan stared. 'What does?'

'Signatures. Sheer bull! They're all going to be blown.' The major laughed. 'Or do I get the ferries to sign first?'

'It's just routine,' Hanrahan said. He sounded chokker and he was. Everything was just routine, had been ever since he'd joined as a seaman boy in the training squadron, back before the last war. Routine had been his life, really: lash up and stow, turning out from his hammock early on cold, wet mornings; hands fall in, hands to breakfast, both watches of the hands fall in to be detailed for work part-of-ship or special duties, stand easy, out pipes, up spirits, hands to dinner... right through the day to evening quarters, hands to supper, stand up for rounds, and pipe down. Bull, that sapper major had said. Maybe it was at that. But the Navy couldn't run without it. When war came, the routine stayed on; you got called back in after you'd retired to the missus and a two up, two down in North End, Pompey, rent ten bob a week. You

picked up the routine again as though you'd never left it. One day, as a matter of routine, you died. But in the interval you got signatures for all explosives.

'Stop engine,' Forbes ordered.

'Stop engine, sir,' the quartermaster repeated back. The engine sounds ceased; the *Castle Bay* drifted on in silence. The loom of the land, of the great mountainous coastline, was all around them now, closing them in as they drifted in the outer fjord off Svalbard Point. The silence was intense, almost tangible it seemed, as intense as the darkness, but that constant faint lifting of the dark over water, though not as noticeable here as out on the open sea, was just about enough to reveal the gap in the mountains that indicated the entry to Vest Hammarfjord. Forbes pointed it out to Bell. 'There you are. Your route in, Colonel.'

'Right. How long now?'

Forbes shrugged. 'A matter of minutes. Hang on till I can confirm we've lost way.' He turned and walked over to the starboard guardrail of the bridge. He looked down: a leading seaman was stationed in the wing of the lower bridge outside the wheelhouse, tending a lead-line. A moment later the report came up in a Scots voice: 'Ship stopped, sir. Line up-and-down.'

'Thank you, MacInnes.' Forbes turned. 'Away you go, Colonel. And good luck. I'll be here when you get back.'

'If you're not seen in the meantime.'

'That's unlikely. There's no life in these mountains and we're covered from seaward by a spit of land. Approaching the coast was the time of danger so far as being seen's concerned.'

'I'll take your word for it!' Bell grinned and held out a hand. Forbes took it in a firm grip. Bell went lightly down the ladder. Within the minute the first two dinghies were in the water and the disembarkation had started. Cameron

and Lonsdale, the First Lieutenant, went aboard the first dinghy and paddled clear to lie off once their quota of troops had been embarked together with Bell and a leading seaman carrying a boat's lead for the taking of soundings if and when required by Cameron. Two by two the dinghies were launched, two by two they were pulled to the lower platforms of the port and starboard accommodation-ladders and were filled by the troops slowly shuffling along the upper deck. As each came away from the ladder, it took station astern of the leader, which gradually paddled farther from the ship.

Within fifty minutes the entire force was waterborne: the whole thing had gone off with excellent military precision and discipline. As the last of the dinghies left the starboard ladder, a shaded blue light glowed briefly, twice, from the after end of the *Castle Bay's* bridge. This was the signal to go. Lonsdale passed the word to the craft astern by means of an Aldis, also blue-shaded.

The flotilla moved off, the paddles kicking up a light spray as they dug into the still, silent water. Apart from their motion, it was like a mill-pond. Cameron looked up at the towering peaks that surrounded the entry to the channel he had to navigate. Last time he had entered it had been daylight; now, in the near-total dark, he had the feeling that he was moving into subterranean waters such as those to be found in the cave systems of the Pennines. He moved on towards the narrow, twisting channel running through to the main fjord beyond, passing directions to the paddlers. Lonsdale, with the shaded Aldis, passed these directions as necessary, to be read off by the army signallers positioned at strategic intervals down the line of dinghies. The entry was taken cleanly; the following craft, keeping as close as possible consistent with safety, made in behind him. So far, so good. The progress was painfully slow but Cameron, expecting this, was not worried about time: the channel was no more than five miles long, indeed a

little under, and from the information passed by the Resistance the German base was within another mile of the channel's inward end.

A mile inside the entry itself, there was a fairly sharp turn to port, with some rocks and shallow ground on the starboard side which should yet give plenty of clearance for craft such as the dinghies that had virtually no draught. The danger was a possible gash in the sides that would deflate the rubber skin. Using his prearranged signals via the First Lieutenant's Aldis as they neared the turn, and hoping that all his detailed warnings had been well and truly borne in the soldiers' minds, Cameron passed the word that the first hazard was coming up. As he negotiated the turn, making it in safety, he sent back a single blue flash to indicate the precise position. Each of the dinghies came round without mishap: as the word was passed from craft to craft up the flotilla that the last was round, Cameron breathed easy again.

Bell asked, 'What's next?'

'The channel divides, sir.'

'Ah, yes. And we take the left hand waterway?'

'That's right, sir. And there's more rocks to be stood clear of at the fork. That's where it's going to be really tricky.'

'Not all that easy to see, is it.'

It wasn't; Cameron thought it would be a miracle if the whole flotilla entered the correct channel without some loss by tearing hulls. The banks were close, very close to starboard now, and for some distance there was a kind of ledge that he remembered, some three feet above the water, and behind this the sheer mountain-side. It wasn't just his own recollection; the Admiralty 'Pilot' had made mention of the ledge along which a man could walk... and it might be advisable for him to get out now, since he could perhaps the better direct each individual dinghy as it neared the divide in the channel, and the rocks with their sharp jags. He was about to make the

suggestion to Lonsdale when he heard a curious sound, alarming in the darkness, that seemed to be coming from high above, a sound like the close rumble of thunder.

CHAPTER SIX

The rumbling continued but changed its character: it became a mighty cracking sound as though some giant from legend was splitting the mountain peaks with an enormous hammer. That was when Bell ticked over.

He said suddenly, 'God, it's a fall of rock!'

'We'd better paddle like buggery,' Lonsdale said. The fall sounded as though it was immediately overhead. Lonsdale lifted the Aldis to pass the word down the flotilla line. Cameron fancied they might be better off to jump out, make the ledge, and press their bodies close to the mountain itself; but there was no time to dispute the order of the First Lieutenant and if they were to move, then the sooner and faster the better. Behind the leader, in obedience to the signal from the Aldis, the craft in the sternmost half of the line crowded back along the way they had come whilst the front half dug their paddles in to go ahead. The flotilla now began to bunch dangerously in its two halves; one or two of the dinghies, judging from the sounds, had spilled their occupants already.

The noise from above increased, though as yet nothing could be seen. Then, very suddenly, from out of the darkness, the fall hit them. It was like an avalanche in its sheer size. The whole mountain-side seemed to have split apart or at least to have shed its top. Rock after rock came down, plunging into the channel, into the fragile dinghies, into bodies. Cameron felt something take his shoulder agonizingly and spin him into the ice-cold water. More rock fell around him, raising splashes as he tried to haul himself up the bank and on to the ledge. The din was tremendous now; the whole terrain, the whole of their immediate world, seemed to be breaking apart in fury.

Smashed bodies were everywhere as Cameron stumbled ashore, men twisting in agony and screaming. It was almost impossible to tell who was who in the darkness, but Cameron was unable to find either Lonsdale or Bell in the vicinity.

Aboard the *Castle Bay* the PO Telegraphist took a wireless message with immense difficulty: reception was lousy when you were half enclosed by mountains, but he did his best to get it down on paper in its cyphered groups. In due course Paymaster Lieutenant Chamberlain had decyphered the signal; he entered the chartroom and woke Forbes, who was snatching some sleep on the settee.

The Captain sat up at once. ‘What is it, Pay?’

‘Cypher—and an important one, sir. Very badly garbled, a number of corrupt groups and a touch of informed guesswork.’ The Paymaster added, ‘Prefix Most Immediate... and I managed to get the originator—C-in-C Home Fleet. It’s addressed Flag Officer Force F repeated *Castle Bay*, sir.’

‘Let’s have it.’

Chamberlain passed him a messy-looking transcript.

Forbes said, ‘Good grief!’

‘I’m sorry, sir—’

‘What’s it all mean? What’s the gist, for God’s sake?’

‘It seems that an enemy force has been observed leaving Wilhelmshaven, sir. *Scharnhorst* and *Admiral Hipper*, on a northerly course. And the message ends quite cleanly: PQ convoy now nearing safe zone.’

‘Yes, I see that,’ Forbes said, staring at the doubtful-looking transcript. ‘What does that mean? About the convoy. What do you make of that?’

Chamberlain said, ‘I read more into it than it says, sir, always assuming my transcript is reasonably accurate in its other parts—and I think we have to

assume it is. I think C-in-C's suggesting the enemy ships couldn't expect to reach the PQ convoy before it gets into Archangel. Which means—'

'Means C-in-C thinks they could be after Vian—which also means us.' Forbes got to his feet. He looked for a moment from the chartroom port: it was daylight now, and their surroundings were clear. It was sheer beauty, breathtaking, wonderful, with deep blue water amid the high mountains topped with snow. Forbes gestured towards the port. 'Nothing we can do about it from here—except get out and go to sea, and I can't do that yet. Ask the navigator to come in, will you, Pay?'

'Yes, sir.'

The Paymaster Lieutenant left the chartroom. A few moments later Beddows clumped in from the bridge. 'You wanted to see me, sir?'

'Yes, Pilot. Take a look at this.' Forbes handed over the signal. 'What d'you think?'

Beddows thought the same as Chamberlain. He said, 'I suppose we just have to wait and see what happens.'

'Unless we're ordered out to sea by the Admiral, yes.'

'We're like a rat in a trap, aren't we?'

Forbes smiled tiredly. 'You could say that. But I have no bloody option, Pilot, until the troops get back. How long will it take *Scharnhorst* and *Hipper* from Wilhelmshaven to be off the entry here?'

Beddows frowned, doing some mental arithmetic. He said, 'Give them thirty knots... about thirteen hundred miles, say... a little under two days, sir.'

'Should be time enough to get clear of the area... I don't propose to worry too much.' Forbes paused, then added grimly, 'At any rate, not unless Cameron takes a lot longer to get back than I expect.'

Dawn had revealed the extent of the damage and the casualties too:

Lonsdale's body was dragged from the water with the head smashed in. Colonel Bell had been identified earlier, with a huge chunk of rock where his chest had been. Blood still moved sluggishly in the water; even the jagged rocks were reddened. Men were shivering from the cold of their soaked clothing. The sapper major was alive but wasn't going to last long without medical attention, and the RAMC captain who had accompanied the commandos was himself dead. The two majors in command of the individual units making up the force were injured, one seriously, the other—Major Rennie—only lightly, with a painful shoulder like Cameron's. Command would devolve upon Rennie; Cameron, now the officer in charge of the naval party since Ricketts, who had survived, was his junior by a matter of months, asked Rennie what his intentions were.

'Carry on, of course,' was the brief answer. 'I've had a count of my casualties—I don't know about yours. I have forty-eight dead, seventy-three injured. We're not too depleted, and the orders stand. I don't know why the devil you need to ask.' His tone was acid, his manner arrogant.

Cameron shrugged. 'Call it curiosity, Major.' 'There's no need to be bloody impertinent.'

'I'm sorry. The point is, we haven't enough dinghies left. Almost all of them have had it.'

'I know that. We'll have to march, that's all.'

'The ledge,' Cameron pointed out, 'doesn't go very far—'

'Swim, then! Or cross the mountain. I'm damned if I'm going to be beaten by lack of transport. What's the depth of water, through to the fjord?'

'It varies, sir. Maximum's forty-five feet. Minimum's thirty-six in the main stream, with some shallows that have to be avoided—'

'I see,' the Major said shortly. 'Can't wade it, in that case, what?' He looked around, face impatient, cane tapping a leg. He shouted for 90 his

sergeant-major; there was a conference during which the Major made the decision to attempt a swim, with the weapons and demolition charges being taken through in the remaining dinghies. It could be brought off, perhaps, but the time schedule was now inevitably thrown out. It would be a long swim: there was still, Cameron pointed out, a matter of about three miles to go. In any case they wouldn't be able to move out again before night.

'A three-mile swim is child's play to my commandos,' the Major said, 'but I take your point about waiting for dark. A daylight attack wouldn't have a hope—but the whole operation's at risk if any Germans come along in the meantime.'

'Then why don't we try to find a route over the mountains?'

'Hm,' the Major said. He brought out a soggy rolled-up map that had been prepared from the information supplied by the Resistance. If they could find a way of outflanking the intervening mountain, they might be able to come down on Vest Hammarfjord on the northern side of the German base instead of to the south as the sea route would have taken them. The attack could presumably be made just as well from that direction; and they might come down close to a roadway shown on the map as running around the northern end of the fjord, a roadway that according to the Resistance had been metalled by the Germans and was used as their supply route for the base.

The Major said, 'Shift of plan, Sar'nt-Major. We look for a track. You'd better come with me.'

'Very good, sir.'

They went off, marching in step along the ledge. Cameron watched as they investigated the sheer side, taking the eastern end first. When they returned, the Major was acid. 'No damn hope that way. We'll try westwards.'

They marched away again and were soon lost to sight around a bend. They were absent for some while, and when they reappeared the sergeant-major's

clothing was freshly wet: he dripped water at every step. Rennie said, 'My sar'nt-major noticed a deep cleft in the mountainside some way beyond the ledge. He swam to have a look. At the inward end there's a steep rise into the mountains. Could be a track. It's worth trying.'

'Right, sir,' Cameron said. 'What about the injured men?'

'They come with us. No alternative. The Huns might decide to use the channel.'

Cameron asked, 'And my party?'

Rennie looked him up and down. 'Up to you. You've virtually no flotilla left to worry about, and when we come back we'll have no alternative but to swim back to your ship. In the meantime I'm short of my full requirement. If you like to come along with me, you'll be welcome enough.'

'Right,' Cameron said, 'we'll come.'

'Under my orders, of course.' The soldier turned away, then halted and came back. 'There's the dead—poor devils. They can't be left to give the show away if the Germans do come along. We'll have to carry the bodies into that cleft and hide 'em.' He turned away again to give his orders. Cameron rounded up the Naval party: the First Lieutenant and Ricketts, plus one P05 two leading seamen and twenty ABS had left the ship with him; an earlier count of casualties had shown just Ricketts, the PO and fifteen ABS left. As quickly as possible the dead and injured were carried aboard such of the dinghies as remained seaworthy; with them went the commandos' weapons and the explosives. The rest swam from the end of the rock ledge and climbed over the lip of another, smaller ledge from which the cleft ran into the mountainside. It was deep and narrow, so narrow that scarcely any daylight penetrated. Off-loaded from the dinghies, the dead men were carried into the narrow way and left some distance in from the channel, and roughly covered with rubble. After this the deflated remains of the damaged rubber

dinghies were hauled from the water with the undamaged ones and concealed in the cleft along with the bodies.

All this took time; but Major Rennie wasn't worried. He had in any case to remain out of sight until nightfall and even though the commandos would be encumbered by the injured men and by their arms and equipment, he still expected to have time in hand. The distance couldn't be all that great.

For some way the floor of the cleft was level; then it began to rise as indicated by the sergeant-major, and the rise became steeper and steeper until it seemed to Cameron to be not far off the vertical.. Loose pieces of rock fell as the men climbed, making the going hazardous. The carrying of the many injured men turned the climb into a nightmare of sweat and blood; hands became torn on the rough rock surface as they scrabbled for a hold or did their best to protect their burdens from more injuries. During that appalling climb two more men died, one of them being the sapper major. When word of this reached Rennie, he gave the only possible order. Unnecessary burdens could not be accepted, and the two dead commandos were held in place until all the others had climbed past, and then they were let go. They crashed back down to the cleft, taking a shower of rubble with them to add to the covering of the earlier dead. The rest climbed on; no backward glances.

'Noon,' Forbes said. He looked around: the *Castle Bay* was dwarfed by the mountains rising sheer from the still, silent water. From above, she would look like a toy in a bath. 'Noon and no explosion. I don't like it, Pilot. We'd be bound to hear it.'

'Depends, sir. Whatever it is, it could be blown by small charges, I suppose, and well tamped. If the explosions took place inside the buildings—'

'Perhaps. I hope you're right, that's all, but I still don't like it. The attack was timed for first light—they should have been back by now.'

Beddows made no answer; he knew the Captain realized well enough that the job could have taken longer than Bell had expected and there was no point in labouring the obvious. But, like the Captain, Beddows felt uneasy for no real reason. There had been that distant sound, not long after the commandos had entered the channel. That was still unexplained; there had been plenty of speculation and it had started the worm of worry. Forbes had been adamant that it should not be investigated from the ship: he would not risk throwing any spanners in. The orders had been crystal clear and positive: the *Castle Bay*'s mission was to land the commandos and that was all, no trimmings; and Forbes had said, reasonably enough, that if Bell had been ambushed then he would most probably have used his radio if only to warn the *Castle Bay* to get the hell out and rejoin Vian's force.

They just had to wait. Beddows understood the Captain's anxieties and misgivings. Another thing he would have to decide would be when he should pull out if the commandos failed to return and for one reason or another were unable to communicate. Forbes had been given discretionary powers to make his own decision on withdrawal as circumstances developed. He would not like leaving the shore party to it, wouldn't like pulling up the drawbridge. And soon the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper* wouldn't be far off.

'You look puffed,' Rennie said, giving Cameron his up and down look.

'I feel it.'

'Everyone has a duty to be physically fit in wartime. Look at me and my chaps. Not even raised breathing.'

This was not quite true, but it was near enough. The troops had done wonders in bringing all the injured personnel up that bastard of a climb. Now, at the top where they were covered from view in a saucer-shaped concavity, they rested and would not move on again until dusk. Rennie had carried out a

reconnaissance and had found that the descent could be made by way of a gully running down from the eastern side of the saucer. The sides of the gully itself would afford some extra cover and by the time they were well down they would be right inside the tree-line; thick fir forests would hide them as they came down to the fjord. With luck, there wouldn't be a lot of ground to traverse in the open. Rennie's plan of attack need differ little from that laid down in the orders: it was simple enough in basis. The target was to be surrounded by seventy-five men moving silently through the night, and as soon as they were in position, Rennie would lead the rest of the commandos in the assault on the main gate in the perimeter fence. They would fight through and enter the central building, killing every German that came in sight, and then bring in the sappers with their explosive materials to set the charges, after which there would be a rapid withdrawal back the way they had come. From then on, movement would have to be fast; the Resistance had indicated that the base supply route around the northern edge of the fjord led to a military garrison, a Norwegian camp now used by the Nazis; and this garrison would be immediately alerted by the explosions, with the result that troops would be rushed to all likely escape routes and the presence of the *Castle Bay* in the outer fjord was almost certain to become known. Before that happened, they had to be back aboard and under way.

Rennie said, 'We can't hope to make it back to the ship as fast as we would have done in the dinghies. It's going to be a very close run thing. If there are unforeseen delays—if it takes us longer to fight in than I expect—we're going to end up in the bag.'

They waited for the dark, watching the tantalizingly slow passage of the sun down the sky, just sitting about and thinking ahead, wondering who was going to come out of it alive, and watching more of the injured men die. The inaction was enervating but there was nothing to be done about it. There was

something foreboding in the very silence of the mountains. Nothing moved anywhere, other than a few light clouds drifting high; there wasn't even an animal to be seen. Rennie spent a good deal of the time marching up and down with his company commanders. Whilst on passage in the *Castle Bay* Cameron had gathered that both Bell and Rennie were regular officers, Sandhurst trained; and Rennie had been commissioned into a Guards regiment a year before the outbreak of war. The rest of the commando officers were either pre-war territorials or the holders of temporary wartime commissions such as Cameron's. The difference tended to show: there was stiffness and formality about Rennie that was absent in the others, but not only that. He carried the extra authority of absolute certainty that his orders would be obeyed without question. The temporary officers had not had that utter sureness so completely instilled into them. In pre-war days they had not held authority and they were in effect still acquiring it...

The day passed; the sun at last sank below the far horizon to the west.

Rennie stood and watched the last rays of a splendid sunset and as the rim of the sun vanished to leave its afterglow hanging like fire in the sky, he said, 'Right. We move out now.'

They came in silence, unseen, down into the tree-line and the protection of the tall, close-growing firs. There was no moon; once the dark had come a wind had sprung up, bringing cloud with it. To that extent at least, luck was with the commandos. But as they came down farther they saw light: brilliant light that was reflected from the waters of Vest Hammarfjord, now visible below their line of descent. Floodlights: the Resistance had warned of these. The glow had the look of a yardarm group, a cluster of powerful bulbs customarily hoisted on a wandering lead to a yard when heavy work was being done on the upper deck at night. Cameron said, 'We may get a

preliminary view, sir—find out what we're going to blow up.'

Rennie nodded. 'You could be right. Interesting!' The advance continued; the troops already had their orders: they would halt at the bottom of the descent, lay the injured men down in cover, and keep out of sight in the thick fir forest until Rennie had thoroughly reconnoitred the ground through his field-glasses. Down they went, treading carefully, making no sound beyond the crackle of brushwood beneath their boots. The glow of light increased, sweeping out over the waters of the fjord. Now they could hear voices in the distance, the shouting of orders by the sound of it; and soon after this they could hear other sounds, the hum of machinery and the engine of a vehicle.

A few minutes later they had the base buildings in view beneath what were now confirmed as floodlights. It was a busy scene; there were many German Army uniforms around, plus the swastika armbands of the Waffen SS, and a number of civilian workers. 'Quislings, no doubt,' Rennie said in a hard voice. The advance was halted just inside the trees. They were within a quarter of a mile of the German base. Rennie brought his field-glasses up and took a long look. After a while he said, 'Something's being loaded on to a lorry. Can't quite make it out.' He went on looking. 'It seems to be some sort of aircraft in miniature, that's the nearest I can get to a description. We'll hang on a bit.' He added, 'I'd have thought the Resistance could have told us about this.'

'It could be the first time it's appeared in public,' Cameron suggested.

'Yes, could be. Could mean the buggers are nearly ready to go, and security's got a trifle lax.'

The road, the supply route running through to the military garrison on the far side of the fjord, was below them. Running out from the shore in front of the base was a jetty with a fast-looking power boat secured alongside, not the sort of boat that would take a heavy load. They waited a little over ten

minutes, then the lorry moved slowly out and turned from the main gate on to the roadway.

It came right below the watching men. Rennie stared. He said in little more than a whisper, 'It looks like a bomb... a big bomb, with wings and an engine. I suppose you could call it a flying bomb—no pilot needed. I wonder what its range is?'

The question was rhetorical. They watched in silence as the lorry vanished along the road. What was below them could be diabolical, could change the course of the war if Adolf Hitler was able to send pilotless aircraft across the air corridors to hit Britain. One of the main shortages on both sides was pilots and aircrew generally; if that could be overcome by mechanical means, the effect would be tremendous and victory for the Allies could begin to look hopeless.

Rennie brought up his glasses again to study the lie of the land around the base buildings. The base itself consisted of four large reinforced-concrete, dome-shaped strongpoints while the perimeter fence was constructed of heavy stakes and much barbed wire. Over the compound was the weird thrust of the mountain as reported by the Resistance, completely covering and protecting the place from above. The mountainside itself impacted against the rear of the base, forming in effect its back wall. No attack would be possible from there.

Suddenly, the floodlights went out. The darkness, by contrast, was intense. It took some minutes for Rennie fully to night-accustom his vision again. When he had done so he said, 'I'm going out for a recce. I want to get the feel of the defence. I have the impression there's complacency around. This could be a walkover.'

He moved out, taking it slow, the hammer of his heavy service revolver drawn back. So intense was the darkness beneath the mountain canopy that

he was lost to sight within some fifteen seconds. Then there was a sudden explosion and a spread of white light, brief but vicious light in which the hidden men saw the earth around Rennie erupt in a shower of debris as a mine went up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The heavy German units were not far off to the south now, steaming north at their maximum speed with the swastika-dominated naval ensigns of Hitler's Germany flying from the mastheads: the battle-cruiser *Scharnhorst*, 32,000 tons, wearing the flag of the Commander-in-Chief, West, and the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* of 13,900 tons. *Scharnhorst* carried a main armament of nine 11-inch guns, *Hipper* carried eight 8-inch in four turrets. They steamed now through increasing seas, with water tumbling back along the fo'c'sles from the stems, their turrets spray-drenched as the bows bit hard into the foam. The ships' companies were reasonably satisfied with their war performance to date, those of *Scharnhorst* in particular. During the afternoon the Admiral had delivered a pep-talk over the internal broadcasting system, reminding all hands of past victories: the so-glorious sinking of the British Armed Merchant Cruiser *Rawalpindi* as far back as 23 November 1939 the pop-gunned *Rawalpindi* had been despatched in fourteen minutes flat. In April of the following year, *Scharnhorst* had been prominent in the protection of the German armies landing in Norway, during which time she had bravely evaded the heavy guns of the British battle-cruiser *Renown* when a convenient rain squall had intervened. On 8 June she had sunk the tanker *Oil Pioneer*, the trawler *Juniper* and the great troopship *Orama*, the latter unfortunately returning to home waters empty; and on the same day she had encountered the British aircraft-carrier *Glorious*, wonderfully filled with RAF Gladiators and Hurricanes recently flown on during the British evacuation of Narvik, escorted by two destroyers. *Scharnhorst* had sunk the lot. Unluckily a

torpedo had hit her, but not too seriously, and, whilst repairing in Trondheim, a sitting duck for the unfair British, she had been savagely attacked by Skuas from the *Ark Royal*, which had caused a 500-lb bomb to fall upon her; amusingly, this bomb had failed to explode, which proved that God loved the *Scharnhorst* and the British were inept idiots.

Now both the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper* were about to add more lustre: Rear-Admiral Vian's force was to be annihilated along with the *Castle Bay* believed to be lurking with nefarious intent in one of Norway's northern fjords.

'Heil, Hitler,' the Admiral intoned into the microphone as he finished. '*Deutschland über alles!*'

Rennie had perhaps been over-confident; now he was dead. Without hesitation one of the company commanders, Captain Mason, had run out to his assistance. Mason brought the body in: there was little left from the waist down but strips of flesh and shattered bone and bloodied tatters of uniform. After the explosion there had been a strange silence from the base, an apparently nil reaction, but this was obviously not going to last. Mason, now in command of the operation, decided to go straight into the assault. The advantage of surprise had gone now, but to withdraw was not to be thought of, and nothing could be gained by a tactical delay.

Someone asked, 'What about the minefield?'

'Pray,' Mason answered tersely. 'And don't touch the ground more than you can help! Keep together in column to narrow the spearhead of the attack.'

He ran out. There was no purpose now in trying to surround the base even if such had been possible through the minefield. As it was the narrowed advance would mean that a path might be cut by the men in the van, who

would be the first sufferers in the interest of those behind. After Mason the whole commando force dashed from the trees, heading for the roadway. Cameron and the naval party went with them. Cameron was trying not to think about what might happen every time a foot hit the ground. The only thing to do was to run, run, run as more mines went up. The night became hideous with the explosions and cries from the wounded men. Debris flew; Cameron was bruised and battered by the upflung earth and stones. Beside him the RSM, all parade-ground varnish gone now that he was in action, trod on a mine and fell screaming. As he fell his elbow took another of the buried devices: his blood splattered over Cameron. The force ran like the wind and still there was no apparent response from the enemy. But it was not delayed much longer: the explosions died away as the commandos, or what was left of them, reached the roadway, came clear of the minefield and neared the main gate. Then there was a sputter of fire that swept right through them.

Mason called, 'Down!'

They went flat on their stomachs, breathing hard. Cameron's party had kept with him, in a compact group on the left flank of the commandos, where, as it had turned out, the minefield was thin. As the bullets swept over their inert bodies, Cameron became aware of someone creeping out from the main body, squirming forward across the open ground towards the perimeter fence as the machine-gun fire continued. There was still no light: the floods remained dead for some reason or other. A couple of minutes later there was an explosion at the perimeter, followed by cries of agony. In the brief light Cameron had seen a man running back: he had probably thrown a grenade. Then the floodlights came on, cruelly: the light showed up a concrete pill-box at the southern perimeter of the base, now in action with its heavy gun. The running man—it was Mason, Cameron saw—was caught by a shell and went down in a mangled heap while the shell sped on to explode on the side of the

mountain. The gun fired again. The commandos turned their automatic weapons on the floodlight bulbs. They went out. Then there was a shout, a rallying cry.

‘Come on, follow me!’

An officer got to his feet and ran for the gate. He didn’t get far: a beam of light had pencilled across now from the power-boat at the jetty, and Cameron saw the officer crumple. He saw something else: the power-boat carried some effective-looking armament, close-range stuff. A moment later it went into action. Rennie had said earlier that the job could be a walk-over; now the whole force looked like being slaughtered. But something had come within Cameron’s particular competence and he reached out a hand to Ricketts.

‘That power-boat.’

‘What about it?’

‘The attention’ll be off it. It’s not far to swim. We’ll go out and take it over. Pass the word, all right?’

‘Right!’ Ricketts passed the word on. The Naval party began to edge towards the water. Cameron made contact with Petty Officer Harbin.

‘We make for the after part of the boat,’ he said, ‘and get inboard fast.’

‘Right, sir.’ Petty Officer Harbin wiped a hand across his face. ‘How about a bit of a diversion, sir? A couple of hands to head for’ard—’

‘Engage the attention of the crew—right, good idea! You take charge for’ard, then. I’ll take the after part.’ Cameron glanced round at the Naval ratings. ‘All set? Off we go... and try not to make too much kerfuffle.’

They slid over the bank into the fjord: it was ice-cold, as it had been in the early hours back in the entry channel. Using a back stroke, doing their best to keep revolvers and rifles clear of the water, they headed as fast as possible for the power-boat, which was sending streams of tracer across: the curve of the fire could be seen, biting into the shore-bound commandos, adding to the fire

from the base, murderous and sustained. So far, at any rate, no one had noticed the swimmers. When they were some twenty yards from the jetty, Cameron saw Harbin taking his two seamen over to the right and heading for the power-boat's bows. With the others Cameron continued on course for the boat's stern, taking a wide arc so as to minimize the chances of being seen too soon. Farther out, he turned to head in towards the jetty and the assault on the boat's crew, whose whole attention was on the fighting ashore.

As his party neared the stern, Petty Officer Harbin was seen to be climbing on to the jetty, carrying his rifle. He wasn't spotted by the Germans at once: he brought up his rifle and fired point-blank at the gunners on the powerboat. There was a sharp cry and a body crashed over the side. Harbin and his two hands doubled forward and leapt aboard, and as they did so Cameron's party reached the stern and clambered over the gunwale.

It was all over within half a minute, and no casualties sustained by the boarding-party. Petty Officer Harbin and two gunnery rates took over the close-range weapons and swung them off the commandos and on to the base and the gate, where steel-helmeted German troops were kneeling in cover and sweeping the commandos with their fire. In the beam from the small searchlight Cameron watched the German defenders take the weight of the close-range weapons, take it full and shatteringly as the Naval gunners wove the barrels right and left in an enfilading stream. Within moments the Germans had broken ranks and were running hell for leather towards what seemed to be a funk-hole, an entry into one of the dome-shaped concrete structures. There was a savage cheer from the commandos as they came off their stomachs and closed the abandoned gateway. They could bring it off yet, always provided they could penetrate the buildings. Given time, the sappers would have the means to do that.

But time, after all, was not on the British side. In the next few moments

Cameron heard the sound of many vehicles moving fast along the roadway to the north. At once, he ordered the searchlight to be turned off. From the subsequent darkness an officer's voice hailed him.

'Tower-boat, there!'

Cameron called, 'Yes?'

'Reinforcements coming in by the sound of it. Stand by to take a party aboard, then bugger off somewhere. It's going to be up to you, now.'

Cameron waited, his heart thumping like gunfire. Within the next half-minute he heard men running along the jetty; they jumped aboard and Cameron saw that they were the sappers, carrying their explosives and charges, all the wherewithal to blow the base. A sergeant, speaking breathlessly in a Canadian accent, said, 'We've been ordered to join you, sir.' He jerked a thumb back towards the shore. 'Those poor sods have had it, I reckon... but they're staying put to give us a chance.'

'And you?'

'We live to fight another day.' The sergeant paused. 'The orders are get to hell out fast. Best do just that.'

Cameron wasted no more time. As the convoy of military vehicles screamed to a stop on the shore and the firing started again, he passed the orders to take the power-boat astern off the jetty and fade into the darkness of the fjord.

Another Most Immediate cypher had been received aboard the *Castle Bay*, with the groups badly garbled as before. The message, which was again from C-in-C Home Fleet, appeared to indicate that Vian's force was under orders to close in to cover the entry to Vest Hammarfjord and if necessary to engage the enemy at sea. In the meantime the orders for Forbes were changed. The *Castle Bay* was to remain in the outer fjord until further orders: Forbes'

discretion to move at will had been negated.

‘That solves one of my problems, Pilot,’ he said. It’s one decision I shan’t have to make! But it does raise certain speculations, all the same, doesn’t it?’

Beddows lifted an eyebrow. ‘I don’t follow, sir.’

Forbes said, ‘What if the Germans make the entrance before Vian gets there?’

‘They’ll enter, I suppose. Yes, I get the point, sir.’ Beddows blew out his cheeks. ‘It’ll be a nice, easy case of hail and farewell, won’t it? Just one salvo...’

‘Preparations,’ Forbes said quietly, ‘must be made in advance. First, the confidential books and coding and cyphering tables.’

‘Destruction?’

‘Not just yet. We may need them. But Pay’ll have to get ‘em ready to be bunged in the incinerator.’

Beddows said gloomily, ‘The whole ruddy ship’ll be one big incinerator, won’t it?’

Not necessarily. *Scharnhorst* and *Hipper* may not open on us. They’ll have the codes and cyphers in mind just as much as I have. What I mean is, they may decide to send boarding-parties, with the guns held back as the big threat. We still wouldn’t have a hope, Pilot.’ Forbes paced the bridge, his mouth hard. The next day could bring the end for them all; and the *Castle Bay* was his ship. The responsibility for her loss would weigh heavily. He was the Captain; the ship and captain were one and indivisible by Naval and Merchant Service tradition. Forbes was tradition minded; his father and grandfather before him had been master mariners, both of them trained in the old days of sail, driving their square-riggers down through the South Atlantic for the seething, wind-torn passage of Cape Horn and up into the Pacific before dropping down to Australia for wool. The sea lay deep in the family.

And everyone aboard a ship depended for his life on the Captain's judgment. Surrender was a dirty word; yet a captain's responsibility must include at least a consideration of it. If the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper* entered the outer fjord, it was all up with them. All up with them *whatever happened...* better perhaps to ensure that his ship's company lived rather than to put up a totally useless fight to the death. He would not be blamed in the circumstances. But it was not something he would discuss with any of his officers. It would not be fair, it would not be right.

It had to be his decision alone.

By now the final, horrible slaughter had come. Cameron heard the Nazi troops piling out of the lorries as he brought the boat off the jetty with two seamen below keeping their rifles in the back of the German engine mechanic. The enemy, by the sound of it, had arrived in strength and were pinning the commando force down between themselves and the face of the mountain. Cameron heard sustained, heavy firing: probably 98K carbines backed by 7.92mm MG34s mounted on tripods and capable of a high rate of fire. But the guns were not being directed towards the power-boat and Cameron wondered whether it hadn't even been noticed. There was some advantage in maintaining his anonymity, and he kept his own close-range weapons silent as he swept astern. Alongside him, the sapper sergeant gave support to the withholding of fire. He said, 'The officer's idea was for us to slip away without being seen. He knew the score... and he's giving us the chance like I said. He reckoned we might find another way of mounting an attack once the panic's died down.'

Cameron said, 'Some hope!'

'We've got the bloody charges, haven't we?'

'Yes. But no support troops, unless whoever's co now can withdraw some

of them into the mountains. As for us, once daylight comes, we're going to be like a sore thumb. We wouldn't have a chance, that's obvious.'

The sergeant said no more; he shrugged. It was in the hands of the Navy now. The powerboat headed away fast, out towards the centre of the fjord. Cameron's mind was in something of a whirl: the whole thing had landed on him fair and square and he had to make some quick decisions. Undoubtedly it could be said that the operation was already a total failure and he had been handed the possible means of saving the Naval party and at least some of the troops; it wouldn't be too difficult to navigate the powerboat back along the channel, re-embark aboard the *Castle Bay* and advise the Captain to take the ship out to sea before the Germans mounted an attack on her in land-locked waters. Maybe that was his duty now; but there was an obstinacy in him that was telling him the job couldn't be left to fizzle out. There was a sense of obligation towards the many men who had died already in the attempt...

But what could he possibly hope to do?

There was one thing in his favour: he still believed that the reinforcements hadn't been aware of the presence of the power-boat at the jetty and were certainly unaware that it had been taken by the British. No doubt it would not be long before they were informed by the base staff that a boat had been there; but they would still not necessarily be aware that it was in British hands. That just might give him a little time.

He racked his brains: how was he best to use that time, brief as it must be?

He looked around as the power-boat, moving ahead at slow speed so as to reduce her wake, which might be spotted, came well clear of the fjord's western bank. So far as he could see there were no other craft moving. Vest Hammarfjord was not large as Norwegian fjords went; away in the distance to the east Cameron could see a twinkle of lights, with more to the south village settlements, as he had already noted from the Admiralty 'Pilot'. But

there was no knowing who was Resistance and who was with Quisling—there might be help available or he might put their collective heads into a Nazi noose. And in any case, what help could he expect?

Beside Cameron, Petty Officer Harbin asked, ‘What do we do, sir? Go in again when the Jerries have pissed off?’

‘They’ll have left men behind to reinforce the base,’ Cameron said.

‘Maybe, maybe not, sir. If they don’t know we’re out here they’ll be thinking they’ve nabbed the lot.’

‘It’s possible. But we still haven’t the strength. What do you think, Sergeant?’ he asked the sapper.

Sergeant Horne was adamant. ‘That’s what we came aboard for, right? My lads can blast their way in—no trouble!’

‘In safety?’ Cameron asked. ‘I mean, if you blast the doors, isn’t there a danger you’ll blow the lot—and yourselves with it?’

There was a flash of teeth in the darkness. ‘We came to blow the bloody place. And we knew the risks before we started. We’re Canadians.’ There was a pause. ‘In the words of the song, “We came over for the fighting, not the fun.”’

Cameron grinned back. ‘That’s the RCNVR, isn’t it? “If you ask us who we are, we’re the RCNVR .”’ His voice tailed off, and he stiffened. ‘What’s that?’

‘What, sir?’

‘On the port bow.’ There was a pair of German binoculars on top of a locker in the boat’s cockpit. Cameron took them up and trained them on the bearing. He had seen a faint swirl of water in the darkness; with the aid of the binoculars he made out the loom of another craft, a fishing-boat it looked like, lying now with its engines stopped: the swirl of water had gone.

In a whisper Harbin said, ‘They don’t want to be seen, sir.’

‘It looks that way.’ Cameron, staring through the binoculars, saw the whitish loom of faces in the darkness. ‘If that’s the case, they’re probably not Jerries.’

‘Norwegians?’

‘Yes. I’m going to take a chance, PO. A chance that they’re the Resistance.’

‘I’d watch it if I was you, sir.’

‘We can’t be much worse off. Stand by... if I’m wrong, we open fire on them.’

Harbin moved away, shaking his head a little, and passed whispered orders for the rifles to be ready along the port side of the power-boat. Cameron stopped his engines, then called out in English to the apparent fishermen: ‘Boat ahoy!’

There was silence for something like a minute; then a hoarse voice called back, also in English: ‘British?’

‘Yes,’ Cameron answered. ‘British Navy. Who are you?’

‘Good friends. I shall come alongside.’

‘Right. But you have to prove yourselves. Don’t attempt to board me. I have armed men along the side.’

‘That is only prudent. Now we come.’

An engine started up; the fishing-boat moved in closer, and bumped along the side of the German boat. A big man with a head of thick white hair looked from a small wheelhouse, smiling broadly as he saw the British Naval and military uniforms. ‘You attack the German strongpoint?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘That is just why I come out. It was my Resistance group that sent the message to Winston Churchill. My name is Jakob Nordli.’

‘That means nothing to me. You must produce other proof.’

‘I have none,’ Jakob Nordli said. ‘This must be a matter of trust. I think

your attack has failed, yes?’

Cameron took a deep breath. Trust was all very well; it could be foolish and dangerous, yet there was the ring of honesty and they were in deep now in any case. He said, ‘Yes, it’s failed so far—’

‘So far, yes. I am glad you are not too defeatist, Englishman: So far! I, Jakob Nordli, will help to bring success from failure.’

Cameron said, ‘It failed because your people hadn’t warned us about the German minefield.’

‘The minefield... this was only to the north of the base. You—’

‘We had to take it from the north as it turned out. In any case, the information was important. Why didn’t your people pass it on?’

Nordli said, ‘We learned only today that the Nazis had mined the northern perimeter. I am sorry, my friend. It was thought unwise to use the radio again in warning, so near to the time when you British might come in. The Nazis are not fools. And we knew the southern approach was quite safe from mines, since that is where the Nazis exercise their soldiers daily. It is perhaps the fact that they were more expectant of possible attack from the north than from the south, from over the mountains, by our own men of the Resistance, rather than through the water channel from Svalbard Point.’ He added, ‘The southern approach is well covered by fire from the pill-box—and of this we warned your people, Englishman.’

Cameron said. ‘Let’s leave it at that, then.’ This wasn’t the time for inquests. ‘How do you propose to help now?’

‘I shall go to collect men, as quickly as I can. Very many men with efficient guns—you will see. What were you intending to do when you came—blow up the base?’

‘That’s bloody right,’ Sergeant Horne answered before Cameron could speak. ‘We have all the charges we need, still intact.’

‘Aboard your boat?’

‘Right. All ready to go. And we don’t want any more balls-ups.’ Horne’s tone was savage: he was blaming the Norwegian for the loss of so many men. ‘What sort of strength can you muster?’

‘You will see,’ Nordli said again. Now I must be fast. Wait, and I will return.’ He paused. ‘Or better, I think, that you come with me. You would be difficult to find again unless there was an exchange of signals. That would be too dangerous. You will follow?’

Cameron made up his mind. He said, ‘Yes. But if this is a trap, I’ll open fire on your boat immediately I get suspicious.’

There was a laugh. ‘It is not a trap, I promise you, Englishman. A trap would not be necessary. I could have opened fire on your boat from the darkness once you had hailed me, had I been a traitor to Norway like Quisling. In any case, when the morning comes the Nazis would have found you themselves. Now you will follow me, please.’

Cameron heard the Norwegian’s engine start up again; a moment later he got the power-boat under way and moved ahead, keeping close to the fishing-vessel’s stern. They ghosted across the fjord, moving slowly so as to keep the disturbance in the water to a minimum, too slowly for the impatience that gripped Cameron. He looked at his watch: a little after midnight. A whole day had been wasted so far. Forbes wouldn’t wait in the outer fjord forever. Cameron had a hard job to stop himself shouting at Jakob Nordli to get a move on.

The darkness was intense now; it was difficult to keep the fishing-vessel in sight, close ahead though it was. The wake’s small disturbance alone kept Cameron on course. There was a brooding silence broken only by the subdued engine sounds. It was an uncanny situation, being so deep into enemy-held territory with a boat under his sole command, heading for God

alone knew where. Tension was gripping the seamen as well as himself; Cameron sensed it in Petty Officer Harbin at his side in the cockpit. Harbin, a three-badge PO and a Fleet Reservist like so many aboard the *Castle Bay*, had developed a twitch that was making him sniff loudly every thirty seconds, almost spot on, almost as though he were timing it. The armed seamen along the sides were just visible as darker blurs against the water, and they appeared to be motionless, just waiting for the moment when they might be ordered into action. Only the Canadian, Sergeant Horne, seemed totally at ease. He had sat himself down in the after end of the cockpit, where there was a cushioned thwart. He sat back with his hands clasped behind his head, humming a tune, low and flat. It was 'Roll Along, Covered Wagon'... the tune that had been taken over by the Canadians to fit the words he'd used earlier: 'we came over for the fighting, not the fun'. Tension brought a stab of anger to Cameron. The sergeant was laughing at him, turning the RCNVR'S signature tune against their British counterparts. Canadians were all very well, but, like the Australians, they were irreverent and suffered from a distinct lack of tact.

The way seemed endless. There was still no moon, nothing to show them where they were in relation to the surrounding land, although the looming mountains could be seen distantly as a heavier line against the night sky.

Petty Officer Harbin went on sniffing.

Cameron snapped suddenly, 'For Christ's sake use a handkerchief!'

'Sorry, I'm sure, sir.' Harbin sounded startled and offended, but made no move to bring out a handkerchief.

Cameron, after a moment, said, 'I'm sorry too, no. I shouldn't have said that. I hope you'll accept my apology.'

'That's all right, sir. Forget it. It's getting me down an' all... moving at dead slow with the bloody Huns all round us. Like a bishop in a brothel with the

parishioners lying in wait outside.'

They moved on. It was now 0100, and the job had to be completed by first light.

They sensed the proximity of the shore before they saw it. Now the time stood at 0122. A light shone briefly from the wheelhouse of the fishing-boat, and was answered by an equally brief flash from the shore; then Jakob Nordli called back, 'We have arrived, Englishman. There is a pier. Take your boat alongside it.'

Cameron acknowledged the shout and as a torch came on to show the whereabouts of the small pier he took the power-boat ahead to go alongside. Two Norwegians were handy to take his lines and he was soon secured. There were other craft at the pier—more fishing-vessels, half a dozen of them visible in the torchlight, and beyond the pier was a cluster of small houses. Nordli took his boat in and saw her made fast, then came down from his wheelhouse and approached Cameron. 'I shall be as quick as I can be,' he said, 'but the men have to be collected from other villages. Messengers will be sent.' He left the pier, striding away into the darkness as the torch was switched off. More waiting, more tension: if anything should go wrong, they were handily placed for capture by either the Nazis or any local Quislings. Cameron kept his armed seamen watching out, all ready to open fire. Nordli's footsteps could be heard for a while, and when they ceased there was more silence, the silence of the grave it seemed to Cameron's taut nerves.

After half an hour footsteps were heard again and Jakob Nordli loomed up at the shore end of the pier.

'They come soon,' he said as he came up to the power-boat. 'The Resistance. We have cars and lorries. They will be in Nazi uniforms—you must not be startled.'

‘Thanks for the warning!’ Cameron said. ‘I might have opened fire on them.’

Nordli stood with arms akimbo. ‘The Resistance has been well organized,’ he said. ‘The uniforms were taken from a German supply train going from Kristiansand to Saltdal. There was an ambush... the train ran full into immense rocks, placed where the track curved. All the Nazis were killed either by the crash or by the rifles of the Resistance. It was so easy—too easy! There was satisfaction but little thrill. Perhaps tonight will be different.’

‘Perhaps.’ Cameron hesitated for a moment. These men who were risking their lives should be told what the base appeared to contain. He went on, ‘We got a sight of something interesting, Nordli: a kind of pilotless aircraft, what you might call a flying bomb—that’s our assessment, anyway.’ He described what he had seen aboard the lorry.

‘So!’ The Norwegian caught his breath. ‘That is what is going on... we did not know. The Nazis are swine.’ He said no more; they waited in silence. At last there was the sound of moving vehicles and Nordli said, ‘They come. It will not be long now.’

He moved away along the jetty. Within the next few minutes Cameron heard marching men. The torch came on again and in its light the Norwegians marched on to the little pier, tough-looking men in their German Army uniforms, armed with German 9mm MP40 Schmeissers; some carried the tripod-mounted MG 34s. They embarked without delay aboard the fishing-vessels. There was no time for a count, but Cameron estimated that there were around a hundred and fifty of them. As the last man went aboard, Nordli approached Cameron again.

He asked, ‘When the place is blown up, where will you go, Englishman?’

Cameron said, ‘There were some men injured in a fall of rock, back along the channel. They were brought across the mountain behind the base and left

in cover. If they're still there, I'll embark them and then navigate back along the entry channel and rejoin my ship.'

'Using the German boat?'

'Yes.'

'As I thought,' the Norwegian said. 'You will be willing to take a passenger, perhaps?'

'Of course. Any of you who want—'

'Not us. This is our land, our home. We stay to carry on fighting the Nazis until the war is won, as won it will be. No, not us, Englishman! One of your people.'

'Our people?' Cameron was surprised.

'Who?'

Nordli used his own torch and sent a flash towards the shore. Cameron heard light footsteps approaching along the pier, and as the person came nearer he saw that it was a woman. Nordli shone his torch again; she was little more than a girl, petite, dark-haired, dressed in rough fisherfolk's clothing, slim legs thrust into heavy seaboots. She smiled at Cameron as Nordli explained that the British officer would take her out. She said, 'Thank you so much.' The educated English tones were utterly incongruous.

She stepped over the gunwale. Explanations would have to wait, the girl presumably understood the danger she was about to face. Nordli gathered the other Resistance leaders around himself and Cameron on the pier and outlined his ideas for the attack. When the boats were within half a mile of their objective, they would increase speed and go alongside the jetty. The men would jump ashore immediately their boats touched and form up at the end of the jetty in their Nazi uniforms. The deception would help but could not be maintained for long and the attack would be mounted as soon as they were ready. They would double for the gate—it was obvious that there would

be no mines between the jetty and the base—and when it was taken they would be in the thick of it as the German garrison emerged from the buildings.

The defenders would be mown down as they came out and when the time was right Horne and his demolition party would go in and set their charges as widespread as possible. A separate party with rifles and grenades was detailed for concealment alongside the roadway to deal with any more lorries bringing troops along the supply road. Added to the attack would be the close-range guns aboard Cameron's purloined power-boat, plus, he hoped, fire from any of the commandos who might have managed to make their way into the mountains behind.

The plans formulated, Jakob Nordli returned to his vessel and gave the word to proceed. Cameron put his engine astern to come off the pier. There was a hope of success, but time was still one of the enemies.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘I take it you do know just what we’re going to do?’ Cameron asked.

‘Yes,’ the girl said. Her voice was quiet and attractive and there was no hint of fear or nerves.

‘You’re not worried?’

‘No. Should I be?’

‘Damn it all,’ Cameron said with a touch of exasperation, ‘it’s not every day a woman joins in an attack on a fortified base, or is it?’

There was a laugh. ‘You’re the Navy, aren’t you? We all rely on the Navy. You’ll bring it off—you’ll see!’

‘Thanks for the confidence,’ Cameron said drily. ‘Just who are you, or shouldn’t I ask?’

‘You shouldn’t really. Let’s just say I’m Jane, a FANY who lost her way in the dark. All right?’

Cameron said, ‘All right. I won’t pry.’ FANY—the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry—involved a multiplicity of jobs done by women. Drivers for senior officers and government ministers, largely, was their official role; but many found themselves chosen for work as agents with the Special Operations Executive. This, obviously, was ‘Jane’s’ part in the war—liaison, perhaps, with the Norwegian Resistance? No wonder she wasn’t showing any special fear over the business that lay ahead of them! He said, ‘When we approach the base, you’ll go below. There’s a cabin for’ard. Stay there—all right?’

‘I’m under your orders,’ she said. ‘I’ll obey!’

He grinned at her tone, which was faintly mocking. He had an idea she was

a year or two older than himself. She went on to say that she hoped not to be a nuisance; the Germans were after her, she said. She'd overplayed her hand a little and had been rumbled, or believed she had, and she'd been ordered by London to make her way out of Norway. Had she been in France or Belgium there would have been a pick-up organized, but not from north Norway. She was out on a limb, or had been until the Navy had so fortuitously turned up. She would say no more than that, and for his part Cameron kept his word and asked no questions, even personal ones, though he was intrigued by the girl: she didn't look the sort who went to war, but of course that might well apply to many or even most of the FANYs—he had seen them in their khaki uniforms when on leave in London, and before he'd been made aware of their other functions they'd struck him as mere socialites, young upper-crust women doing a soft war job that allowed them to keep up the peacetime routines of dinners and nightclubs and evening dresses and plenty of boyfriends. Which all went to show that one shouldn't judge too much by appearances...

'Light ahead, sir,' Petty Officer Harbin said suddenly.

Cameron looked: the light was still distant. He believed it to be the floodlights over the base: the shattered bulbs would have been replaced by now. Bringing up his binoculars, he identified it as such. Five miles to go, at a guess: distances over water were always hard to judge in darkness. He looked across at the vessels in company, keeping nicely together as he could tell from their wakes. Peaceful... but soon, all hell was going to be let loose and more men were going to die.

The operations room deep in the Admiralty's bunker by Horse Guards Parade was still thick with cigar smoke but the Prime Minister had gone for some sleep and was lying on his bed in his syren suit, behind twenty feet of

steel and concrete. Under the eye of a rear-admiral, a captain and a number of commanders and lieutenant-commanders, ratings of the WRNS moved counters on large charts hung upon the walls. Rear-Admiral Vian's force was shown in its sector off Norway's north-west coast, and at intervals a slight shift was made in the position of the *Scharnhorst* and the *Admiral Hipper*, an estimation of their northward progress being made by the Admiralty plot.

The Rear-Admiral said, 'The PQ convoy. What's the position now?'

The Captain turned. 'They've not yet made up time, sir.'

'God damn and blast these bloody delays...' The Rear-Admiral's tone was bitter, but he knew it couldn't be helped; ships did develop engine trouble from time to time and a lame duck couldn't be left behind. This time, after making good initial progress towards the safe zone, no less than three merchant ships in the convoy had broken down and two of the destroyer escorts had sustained damage in a night collision during the zig-zag. It was all calamity; but they were doing their best out there as they moved to the north of Bear Island, attempting to get the three merchantmen under the towing pendants and drawing them on however sluggishly for Archangel. Chain-smoking, the Rear-Admiral thought about the hazards of the Arctic convoys: they were no one's idea of an easy run. The weather conditions could be terrible, with storm upon storm as the cold winds blew from the North Pole or from the north Russian wastes of Siberia. In winter the ice was another enemy, as the decks turned into skating rinks and the guns themselves became layered in ice and the rigging expanded into great thick cylinders. It took a hell of a lot of warm clothing to keep the cold out, and if the other enemy—the German U-boats and surface ships and dive-bombing aircraft—sank the ships, then the men in the water were dead within minutes. Almost certainly that would have caused many of the casualties when the mighty battle-cruiser *Hood* had blown up in the Denmark Strait as a result of

a lucky salvo from the *Bismarck* penetrating her too-lightly armoured sides. A ship's company of 1,419 men, and just three survivors: one midshipman, one signalman, one stoker. Many more than that would have been flung into the sea; but the icy waters had done the rest...

An officer, a lieutenant RNVR, came into the ops room with a signal. He approached the Duty Captain and handed the message over. The Captain read it, and turned to the Rear-Admiral.

'From the Vice-Admiral in *Victorious*, sir: convoy now coming under attack by Stukas in position due south of Bear Island. Reconnaissance aircraft report German heavy units closing from the west.'

The Rear-Admiral nodded. Within the next ten minutes another signal was brought in. Two of the broken-down merchant ships had been sunk as a result of direct hits from the Stukas. The Rear-Admiral got to his feet and stalked over to the plot. He examined it carefully, pulling at his lower lip, then turned away and walked up and down the room. He wished he was on a compass platform somewhere at sea. The atmosphere of the ops room was not for him, vital though his job was—more vital, in the wider sense, than those of the individual seagoing officers. As he walked, he was called to his telephone. He sat down and took up the instrument. 'Operations,' he said in a clipped voice. 'Rear-Admiral speaking.'

'Charlie.' It was the First Sea Lord in person, on the scramble line. 'News for you. SOE's been on the blower. The Resistance in the Vest Hammarfjord area of Norway has contacted by radio. Jane's coming off in the *Castle Bay*. She's safe and sound, I'm delighted to tell you.'

The Rear-Admiral cut the call, suddenly, almost viciously, his face blank but a vein throbbing at his temple. *Jane...* too damn silly, he'd always said, why the hell don't they let you use your real name, it can't make any difference to the cover, but she'd told him he was way behind the times and

didn't understand her kind of warfare. Well—he didn't; but he understood his own all right and he knew exactly what his duty was and his voice was steady and almost matter-of-fact when he gave the order that he'd been about to give when the First Sea Lord had come through. He got to his feet again and said, 'Vian's force is to be diverted. He's to steam at maximum speed to join the PQ convoy. Inform C-in-C Home Fleet.'

'Very good, sir.' The Captain looked at him with a worried expression. 'What about the *Castle Bay*? She'll be left uncovered when Force F pulls out.'

The Rear-Admiral's face was still blank. 'Expendable,' he said abruptly. 'The convoy's safety has to come first.' To the extent that they could not be allowed to sway a senior officer's judgment, daughters had to be expendable as well.

Just as Cameron passed the word for the small armada to increase speed, the floodlights ahead went out again. Now it was going to be difficult to find the jetty. The fishing-vessels moved on faster; Cameron saw the jetty just in time, and put his engines astern to bring the boat up and lay her neatly alongside. As soon as the gunwales of the fishing-boats touched the men jumped on to the jetty and formed up under their leaders at the inshore end.

By this time the foray had been heard. Once again, the floodlights came on: the gate guards were seen clearly, their weapons at the ready and a look of puzzlement on their faces as they saw the German uniforms.

A challenge was made. One of the Resistance leaders, dressed as a *hauptmann*, gave the reply in excellent German. The sentries lowered their rifles. Cameron watched from the power-boat's cockpit, keeping out of sight: all the Naval ratings were concealed, although the line of supposed German soldiers was acting as a screen between them and the base. Cameron had no

German, but the sapper sergeant was able to get the gist. He whispered in Cameron's ear: 'The Norwegian's telling the guard that they've intercepted the power-boat—us. We've been brought in as prisoners. He's asked to speak to the base commandant as a matter of urgency.'

'What's the reaction?'

'I don't know yet.'

Cameron sweated in spite of the cool of the night. The atmosphere was eerie, even claustrophobic with that curious over-hang of the mountain above the base. The dialogue continued; Sergeant Horne was unable to follow it all. Then an officer came out from one of the buildings, leaving a door open behind him—the door through which the Germans had retreated from the commando attack before the arrival of the lorries via the supply road. Horne said, 'Wide open. Now's the time, I guess. Why in hell don't they go in?'

He had scarcely spoken when the Resistance leader seized his chance. Shouting his men on, he doubled forward, firing as he went. The German officer went down; so did the gate guard. The Norwegians piled in through the gateway. Cameron yelled at his seamen to man the close-range weapons and as a body of Nazi infantry appeared, running from the rear of the buildings, he directed his fire straight into them. It had a devastating effect; the German advance halted, and split up, leaving many dead and wounded. By this time the Norwegians had reached the open door and were piling through. As they did so, the pill-box opened towards the jetty: one of the fishing-vessels lost its mast as the shell whined on across the fjord. At once, a Resistance man detached from the main body, ran for the pill-box, and lobbed a grenade through one of the observation slits. There was an explosion and a cloud of smoke; after that, no more firing. Cameron's close-range weapons were ready to mow down any fresh gunners that might be sent in as replacements. The part of the force detailed to watch the supply road, kept

back on the jetty until now, doubled away to the right to take up their positions in tree cover clear of the minefield. So far there was no sign of anything coming along the road, but there was plenty of time yet and oncoming vehicles probably wouldn't be using headlights; on the other hand, Cameron had an idea that the earlier reinforcements had been already on their way to the base when the initial commando attack had gone in. The garrison on the far side of the fjord was surely too far off for reinforcements to have arrived so quickly as a result of the attack being either heard or reported by radio as it developed.

In that thought lay hope for the present.

As the last of the Norwegians vanished through the door, Horne put a hand on Cameron's shoulder. He said, 'Okay. I'm going in now, sir.' Without waiting for any response he climbed out of the boat's cockpit and mustered his demolition party with their gear. As the sappers scrambled ashore and ran towards the gate, Cameron stood by to give them covering fire. The German infantry were taking cover round the sides of the buildings or lying on their stomachs in the compound ready to snipe. Cameron's fire kept them nicely pinned down, but before they had made the door three of Horne's sappers had been picked off, one of them crumpling as he almost reached the door's cover.

Now the compound was deserted except for what was left of the Germans. Bodies lay everywhere, and here and there a wounded man cried out; some of them tried to drag themselves along the rough ground to safety. Two of the unhurt men ran out to help them. Cameron was about to give the order to leave them alone, but he was too late. One of the seamen opened fire from the power-boat's foredeck, and the Germans spun and dropped. The rest of them made a strategic retreat round the back of the building. Cameron felt a little sick, but the gunner had done the right thing; the enemy was the enemy and

Operation Forestay wasn't intended to be a picnic. Nevertheless Cameron called out, 'Next time, wait for my order before you open fire.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' The response was surly, and the gunner spat over the side. All Germans were bastards, better dead.

After that came silence. Except for the wounded, nothing moved anywhere. Under the floodlights, the dead looked stark and grotesque in their various attitudes. Worry dug like a knife into Cameron. By this time, surely, the German command would have ticked over that there was likely to be a British ship in the outer fjord?

There was much anxiety aboard the *Castle Bay* as well; Forbes was beginning to give up hope that the commandos would ever return. He stared from the bridge towards the entry into the channel past Svalbard Point as though willing the inflatable dinghies to paddle into view.

Beddows, who, like the Captain, had scarcely left the bridge since the ship had entered almost twenty-seven hours earlier, voiced, not for the first time, thoughts similar to Cameron's. He said, 'If anything's gone wrong, why don't the buggers come out and look for us?'

Forbes shrugged, head sunk in his shoulders as he hunched his body over the rail of the bridge. There was no answer he could give and Beddows knew it. Beddows tended to harp, and Forbes found it irritating, though he was refraining from saying so. All their nerves were on edge now and personal habits, under such circumstances, tended to grate. Forbes had no doubt that he had some bloody infuriating habits himself... thinking along these lines he decided to answer his navigator's question along the same lines as he had answered it so many times before.

'They don't bloody well need to, Pilot. They'll know the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper* are closing. So why bother?'

‘I suppose you’re right, sir.’

‘I know I bloody well am.’

Silence. Forbes went back to his useless scrutiny of the entry channel. The wait, the lack of all information since the last garbled signal from C-in-C Home Fleet, was agonizing. But when you chose the sea life you found yourself waiting for something or other half your time, even if, in the days of peace and Cunard White Star, it was only for some stupid sod of a VIP who hadn’t turned up at Southampton or at New York’s Pier 90 on time and was sufficiently VIP to be waited for while the Captain thought about tugs and tides and owners and bit his finger-nails down to the quick. If it wasn’t that, then it was the tides themselves: you fiddled about with your speed all the way across the North Atlantic so you could make your arrival when the tide was right, only to find that there had been some balls-up ashore and you had to wait for the next one. Or you waited for promotion... a hell of a long time that could be, too. Forbes sighed and shifted his weary body, stamping his seabooted feet against the Norwegian summer cold. Thank God it wasn’t winter... his thoughts went back to promotion and the years you could spend as Second Officer, doing the twelve to four watch at sea, the graveyard watch. He had done his apprenticeship in the Clan Line and had then got a berth as junior Third Officer in the old White Star Line—*Majestic*, *Olympic*, he’d sailed in both of them. When the merger came with Cunard it was the White Star officers who got the dirty end of the stick and their seniority went for a burton while they watched the old Cunard officers sewing on the extra gold stripes. Then, when you’d begun to get there and saw a Staff Captaincy looming, the ruddy war came along and because you were RNR you shifted to Grey Funnel. Forbes reflected on the periods he had spent in peacetime, training with the RN for varying stretches. They had been grand old ships, mostly gone to the breakers’ yards now: the battleship *Iron Duke*—not

broken up yet, but resting on the bottom off Lyness in Scapa, filled up with concrete after taking a Jerry bomb and now used as an accommodation ship for the naval drafts—once flagship of the Grand Fleet and wearing in succession the flags of Jellicoe and Beatty. Her sister ship *Emperor of India*, the battlecruiser *Tiger*, two light cruisers, *Caledon* and *Calypso*, and a course at the Whale Island Gunnery School: that was about the lot. There had been some good times, right enough... but if he hadn't been RNR he might still have been aboard the *Mary* or the *Elizabeth*, sailing the broad seas fast and independently of convoys, carrying troops to the battle areas. Not aboard a ship waiting outside Vest Hammarfjord for young Cameron to come back with his commandos... just how good a navigator had Cameron proved himself?

Footsteps clattered on the bridge ladder.

Forbes turned. It was the Paymaster. Forbes yawned and said, 'Still up, are you. You'd make a damn good liner purser. They work all hours too. What is it?'

Chamberlain said, 'Signal from the Admiralty, sir. For information only... Force F is withdrawing northward.'

'Jesus Christ! Didn't I bloody well forecast that? Any orders for us?'

'No, sir, nothing.'

Forbes blew out a long breath. Now they were really on their own, and still no Cameron.

CHAPTER NINE

In Vest Hammarfjord the strange and unnerving silence had continued until it had been broken by three separate happenings that came in swift succession. The first was rapid footsteps coming from the right of the base: in the floodlights men were seen doubling from the trees towards the roadway—the remnant of 20 and 21 Commandos. As they met the Resistance forces detached to watch out for German reinforcements, the second silence-breaking noise was heard. This was the still-distant sound of what seemed to be a large number of heavy lorries moving fast. The reinforcements, no doubt summoned by radio from the base.

The third sound was ‘something different: an explosion from right ahead of the power-boat as one of the dome-shaped buildings went up. Cameron went flat; so did all the Naval party. Debris hurtled into the air, smashed the floodlights, smacked against the mountain overhang, and came down again. Muck rattled on the deck of the power-boat like hail on a tin kettle. As the uproar ceased, Cameron came upright. Men were running fast towards the jetty: sappers, some of them covered with blood but keeping on their feet, some of them being carried like sacks. As they jumped aboard Cameron saw that Sergeant Horne was not with them.

‘What’s happened?’ he asked.

‘Balls-up,’ one of the sappers said briefly. ‘Total balls-up. Sar’nt Horne’s bought it. So have a lot of us.’ The man wiped a hand across a smoke-blackened face, a hand that shook. ‘The whole bloody show’s a bollocks... all the charges were blown by rifle fire, and blown right where they did no bloody good at all—in the barrack block.’

‘The barrack block... was that where the Resistance entered?’

‘I guess so, yes. There’s nothing left of the poor sods. And the Nazis told us they’d taken prisoner all the men from the rock fall—the injured—what was left of them. They’ve shifted ‘em out already. We’d best get out, sir. Nothing more we can do now, I guess.’

Defeat, total failure, lay as heavy as lead. So many lives thrown away for no result whatever. Under heavy fire Cameron took aboard all the men of 20 and 21 Commandos that he could manage and, badly overloaded, with troops finding a foothold wherever they could, some clinging like flies to the gunwale, brought the power-boat off the jetty. More commandos plus the Norwegians detailed for the road watch piled aboard the fishing-vessels. Cameron called across to the skipper of the nearer one.

‘You’d better follow me.’

‘Where to, Englishman?’ It was Nordli’s voice.

‘Out through the channel. No doubt you’re familiar with the pilotage?’

‘Yes. Very well, we shall come to transport your commandos, then we shall leave for another part of Norway for a while. If you wish, one of us will lead.’

Cameron said, ‘Right. You know it better than I do. I’ll act as rearguard if the Jerries follow in.’

The Norwegian waved an arm from his wheelhouse and turned south for the channel entry. Cameron fired a farewell burst from his close-range weapons, then moved away into the darkness of the fjord: dawn was not yet in the eastern sky but it wouldn’t be too far off now. As the boats put distance between themselves and the base, which by now was filled with Germans firing blind into the night, headlamps came on along the supply road.

They had made it only just in time.

Within ten minutes, so far unpursued, the fishing-boats were into the

channel for the outer fjord. Cameron followed in, keeping a sharp lookout ahead while Petty Officer Harbin watched out astern for any sign of a German craft. As he went, Cameron got the story from one of the demolition party.

‘I guess it was a trap, sir.’

‘How’s that?’

‘As soon as the Resistance entered, they were surrounded. No chance. Then the Jerries got us too. There was fighting... but the Jerries got hold of the charges and I guess they shoved them in with the Resistance. Result as intended: they got blown up in the exchange of fire.’

‘So how did your lot get away—those that did?’

‘We’d been forced back, away from the Norwegians. I guess we were meant to be interrogated. When the charges went up, we were just lucky. We were protected by a shelter wall, a blast wall.’

Cameron nodded; in effect the Resistance had blown themselves up by continuing to fight back. There had been plenty of heroism that night plus a lot of bad luck. The fortunes of war, but there was a sour taste to it all. So much planning, so many troop and ship movements, so many dangers to the Resistance in working away behind the Nazi backs, and it had all to end like this, in ignominious retreat and the leaving of so many dead behind them. Cameron forced his mind away from the contemplation of failure and concentrated on his pilotage, following the motions of the next ahead and watching out for rock projections and sudden shallows that could rip sides and bottom. When they had gone nearly half the distance the sound of an engine was heard astern, and Cameron passed the word to the fishing-boats for more speed. They went ahead a fraction faster, but it was not enough. Bullets zipped up from the rear and two men, commandos, died. They slid over into the water. Cameron brought his weapons into fast action, firing

blind. Evidently the aim was not too good. The Germans were coming still, and doing better: more men lost their grip and footing as the bullets hit, and slid over to join the first two. Soon the small flotilla was coming up to the ledge on the northern side of the channel; Cameron ordered one of the close-range weapons to be unshipped from its mounting, and handed the boat over to Ricketts.

‘Just follow the Norwegians,’ he said. ‘I’m going ashore for a while. Wait for me where the ledge ends.’ As Ricketts put the power-boat closer to the side, he jumped ashore with his gun and concealed himself behind a rock outcrop. The vessels moved on west. A few minutes later the German boat came up, its crew just visible as they stared ahead at the retreating British. Cameron let them draw level, then stood up as they went a little way past.

He took aim and fired, a sustained, sweeping blast of gunfire. The Germans hadn’t a chance. The boat drifted on a little way until it swung against the bank and stopped, wedged into a rock, its engine running still. It had been very satisfactory; some of the dead, at least, had been revenged. Cameron ran ahead along the ledge and jumped back into the waiting power-boat.

‘Right,’ he said to Ricketts. ‘Next stop, the *Castle Bay*!’

They came into the outer fjord, relieved to see the ship still intact and waiting for them. When all the boats had been secured alongside, Cameron reported to the Captain on the bridge, together with one of the commando Ncos he had brought off. Dawn was in the sky now, touching the mountain peaks, bringing splendid tints to the snow on the summits and lightening the water of the outer fjord. Forbes heard the reports in silence, then he said, ‘Just one building destroyed, and that not an important one. Was it worth all the loss of life?’

The commando sergeant shrugged. ‘So far as it went, sir—no, I don’t

believe it was. We have to admit it was a failure... but if we'd succeeded it would have been worth it, all right! I saw those contraptions the Germans are building and I'd say they're pretty lethal.'

'A kind of flying bomb, you said, didn't you?'

'Yes, sir, that's the nearest we could get to a description. A pilotless aircraft, radio-controlled presumably. They could be sent anywhere, and even if they were shot down, they'd still do the job they were sent to do.'

'No defence against them?'

'None that I can think of at this moment, sir.'

Forbes paced away across the bridge, then came back and halted. 'They could hardly be despatched from Vest Hammarfjord,' he said.

'No, sir. Not from the bases under the mountain, anyway. But that's just the construction and experimental site, I imagine. The launching-pads would be in France or Belgium.'

'But even if you'd knocked this place out... it wouldn't have taken the Jerries long to find another, would it? If not in Vest Hammarfjord, then somewhere else?'

The sergeant agreed, but said, 'At the very least it would have set them back for quite a while, sir. If their blue-prints and prototypes, all the experimental set-up—if all that lot was destroyed—'

'Yes,' Forbes interrupted, 'I take the point, of course. But it's a bit too late now to talk about what might have been—I've just been guilty of that, too. I'm simply damn sorry about the casualties. My job now is to do what I can to get the survivors out and home again. And just at this moment I'm feeling hamstrung. My information is that the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper* have been steaming north from Wilhelmshaven and are likely to be off the coast here at any moment. To make matters worse, Admiral Vian's been withdrawn to the assistance of the PQ convoy. And my orders are that I'm to remain where I

am until I'm told different. In other words I'm to be a sitting duck for the German heavy units to come in and shoot at—if they know we're here, that is. I can only assume it's because the Admiralty thinks they may *not* know that I've been ordered to remain inside.' He gave a harsh laugh. 'No doubt at all, we'll be finding out one way or the other before much longer! I've half a mind to force the issue by disobeying orders and taking my ship to sea.'

'Or into the fjord, sir,' Cameron said.

Forbes stared. 'What the devil! Into Vest Hammarfjord, d'you mean?'

'Yes, sir. Those concrete domes at the base must be pretty tough, but I doubt if they'd stand up to a bombardment from our 4-inch armament, sir.'

Forbes laughed again. 'Good God, Sub, we'd never get through the entry channel!'

'There's enough depth of water, sir—'

'Yes, I know that, and it's just wide enough too—just about! A bloody tight fit, in fact, especially on the bends—the chart makes it look like a ruddy snake. I wouldn't fancy coming to grief on the rocks.'

'I believe it can be done, sir,' Cameron said, suddenly stubborn. 'I believe we can pull the job off after all.'

Forbes looked back at him, frowning. Here was he, a Commander RNR with a master mariner's certificate, being virtually told his job by a sub-lieutenant of the RNVR on his own bridge. There was almost a comic element; but Cameron was being deadly serious and certainly there was no doubt about it that it would be just about possible to take the *Castle Bay* through. Possible—but they would need one hell of a lot of luck if they were not to stick fast on the rocks that lined the channel pretty well all the way through. Damn little clearance to port or starboard... but there was one thing absolutely certain and that was, neither the *Scharnhorst* nor the *Hipper* would be able to get through behind them.

Forbes said, 'You may have something there, Cameron. You just may.' He turned to Beddows. 'What d'you think, Pilot?'

'Crazy, sir. None of us has the experience, none of us has ever been through the channel even in a rowing-boat—'

'Except Cameron.' Forbes turned away, thinking hard, and paced the bridge again, backwards and forwards whilst the fingers of the dawn stole farther across the sky and brought up their harsh surroundings clear and bright and fresh. Beddows was something of an old woman at times, much too cautious. All the responsibility was his, the Captain's. He swung back and rubbed at tired eyes. He was nearly out on his feet in spite of constant cups of black coffee brought up by his steward. He said, 'I remember a story from the last war. Just before Coronel... the PSNC's *Ortega* was in the South Pacific, bound for the passage of the Horn. She sighted one of the German cruisers, one of the commerce raiders—the *Dresden*—and to avoid her the master took his ship through an uncharted channel north of Cape Horn, leading into the Magellan Strait. He sent a boat away with his Second Officer, to take soundings and lead him through. It was very successful. No reason why we shouldn't do the same. As it happens, we have local experience available—your Resistance fishermen, Cameron—right?'

Cameron nodded. 'They'd be only too happy, sir, I'm certain.'

Forbes said, 'Then we'll enter, and we'll not delay any more. Pilot, you'll have to take over poor Lonsdale's duties as First Lieutenant. Pipe the hands to stations immediately.'

Within the minute the boatswain's calls were sounding through the ship: 'Hands to stations for leaving harbour... cable and side party muster on the fo'c'sle... close X and Y doors... secure for sea.' On the bridge, Forbes grinned to himself at the traditional words, which were currently inappropriate but couldn't be altered. The RN was a shade hidebound and Mr

Hanrahan for one would be scandalized at any suggestion that the ship should 'secure for fjord'

Mr Hanrahan was in fact rubbing his hands with sheer glee as the *Castle Bay* moved slowly across the dead still waters towards the narrow entry. He was about to come into his own; he, the Gunner, was to have the whole show virtually to himself. It was to be *his* guns, *his* ammunition, that would blast hell out of Adolf Hitler's latest secret weapon. True, the pilotage was going to be tricky and they might never get there at all, but that wouldn't be his fault, it would be the skipper's. Assuming they arrived off the base, Mr Hanrahan was going to have the time of his life, the time that all his past training and experience had been leading up to. He glanced down at the single thin gold stripe on his uniform cuff: that, the indication of his warrant, had taken a lot of getting. Right through from Seaman Boy Second Class, then First Class... ordinary seaman, able-seaman, leading seaman, Petty Officer, Chief Petty Officer, plus the non-substantive rates that marched more or less in step, from Seaman Gunner to Chief Gunner's Mate. Now he was going to strike an individual blow at the bloody Jerries and that would be something to tell the missus next time he got some leave. It might also impress his son-in-law who was a company sergeant-major in the Coldstream and fancied he was God, being young for his rank. Mr Hanrahan's son-in-law had soured him about the army. Brown jobs, pongoes, squaddies, call them what you like, they were all right but they weren't the Navy. Mr Hanrahan didn't for a moment deny their bravery and he was as grieved as anyone else about the appalling casualties the commando units had suffered. But the Navy was about to show them a thing or two, and Mr Hanrahan preened around his magazines and stores and guns like a squat peacock, accompanied by his Gunner's Mate and Gunner's party, all of the latter being seamen with gunnery non-substantive rates.

At the for'ard 4-inch guns Mr Hanrahan stroked a finger across a barrel. It came away smeared. 'Dirty,' he said.

'Be a sight dirtier soon,' the Gunner's Mate said with a touch of sourness.

'Don't moan,' Mr Hanrahan said shortly. 'Get it cleaned.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' The Gunner's Mate transferred the rebuke to the gun's crew, who had manned their weapon when the ship had been piped to action stations just after getting under way. He transferred it sharply and vigorously. 'Get cracking, then, don't 'ang about, you 'eard what the Gunner said. Clean the bloody gun.' Many teeth were sucked by the gun's crew as the Gunner moved majestically on. Stupid old sod... any minute now he'd go the whole hog and get the skipper to pipe Hands to Quarters Clean Guns, right throughout the ship. But Mr Hanrahan did no such thing. His tour of inspection completed, he took up his position just abaft the funnel from where he could watch the lot and bawl out any man who asked for it. None of his gunnery rates was going to let him or the ship down this day of all days.

Forbes had been concerned about the girl: the girl who had said she was just Jane. Before getting under way he'd had a word with her, telling her what he intended to do. Like Cameron, he didn't pry: he, too, knew that the FANYs were rather more than met the eye. He felt a special responsibility towards her, firstly on account of her obviously undercover activities in Norway, secondly almost *in loco parentis*: Jane looked young and defenceless and very much alone. No doubt she was as hard as nails inside and more than capable of looking after herself but Forbes had a soft heart where young women were concerned. She had to be taken care of while she was aboard his ship. He didn't like the idea of taking her back into Vest Hammarfjord, but he had no choice despite the dangers—and dangers there were, for Cameron had reported her as saying the Germans were on her track. That was an anxiety;

Forbes had no illusions about what he was intending to do. He might well destroy the flying bomb establishment, but the question of escaping back through the channel afterwards was a fraught one: the enemy wasn't going to take it lying down. He gave the girl firm and unequivocal orders that she was to go below and stay out of harm's way from the moment the ship cleared the inward end of the channel until she was ordered up again. He would be grateful, he said, if she would help out in the sick bay if necessary.

This done, he turned his whole attention to the tricky business of pilotage in totally unfamiliar waters. In emulation of the *Ortega's* Second Officer back in 1914, Cameron had been sent away in the seaboat to take soundings ahead as the *Castle Bay* moved in at dead slow speed behind him. He was constantly to sing out the depth. Beddows was on the bridge with the Captain, but the handling of the ship would be left largely to the local fishermen, two of whom, one being Jakob Nordli, had volunteered to remain aboard whilst the remainder stayed with the fishing-vessels which had cast off to sail out to sea and head, as Nordli had intended earlier, for another part of Norway. One of the fishermen would be on the bridge itself, giving the helm advice to Forbes, another would be stationed in the eyes of the ship to pass back directions by hand signal if he should believe the *Castle Bay* to be standing into danger.

It was as good as they could make it, but Forbes' heart was in his mouth as he probed his bows past Svalbard Point into the entry. He seemed, so high and close were the mountainous rock sides, to be moving into a cavern. The ship was utterly dwarfed, her masts looking like matchsticks set against the side of a house. There would be no turning back: it would be quite impossible to turn the ship in the channel, and equally impossible to bring her out stern first without piling her up.

The German command was as ever efficient: already repair gangs were on the move, coming in along the supply road from the military garrison to the east. The barrack block would be quickly built up again, the bodies of the dead amongst the base defenders and amongst the British and the Resistance would be removed and incinerated. Fresh drafts were already coming in by lorry, to make good the effective defence strength.

A stiff-faced General came in a staff car to inspect the damage for himself. Descending importantly, he was met by the Colonel in charge.

The Colonel's arm shot out. 'Heil, Hitler! Welcome, Herr General.'

'Heil, Hitler! You have lost men. The Führer is not pleased, Colonel von Franke.'

'There has been no damage other than to the accommodation, Herr General,' the Colonel pointed out. 'All else is intact. The raid was a total failure, thanks to my very excellent officers, and men. Both raids were failures.' He added, 'The British are so stupid, Herr General.'

'Yes.' There was full agreement on that point. 'Some, however, got away as I understand.'

'Yes, Herr General. Unfortunately so. But they will have returned to their ship, that we know now to be in the outer fjord. The ship will not be allowed to return to a British port, of course.'

'Of course.' A gleam had come into the General's eye. 'The ship is to be left to the guns of the *Scharnhorst* and the *Admiral Hipper*. I have orders from Berlin, from the Führer himself. The Führer has had a dream, a vision. He had the great courtesy to speak to me personally on the telephone. Heil, Hitler!' The General gave a Nazi salute to no one in particular. 'The Führer saw in this vision the destruction of the British ship under the great gun-turrets of the *Scharnhorst*, he saw her sink, ablaze from end to end. He saw no survivors. Those who were thrown clear were picked off by rifle fire from

our sailors. For the Führer, this was enough.'

'The Führer is a great leader, Herr General. A genius.' There was no flicker in the expression of either of the officers; the solemnity was total. 'Heil, Hitler.'

'Heil, Hitler. I shall now make a tour of inspection, Colonel von Franke.' The General, followed by von Franke and his personal staff officers, clanked off to poke around the damaged building. Colonel von Franke was not too worried; the General's report would go, of course, to the Führer—this was inescapable, since this project was close to the Führer's sacred heart; but the overall responsibility lay not with von Franke but with Herr General, so the report would be quite a glossy one.

The *Castle Bay* went in, it seemed, by inches. Forbes watched everything closely, moving from side to side of his bridge as the cavernous sides enclosed the ship more deeply. There was an almost total silence throughout, above and below, a silence broken only by the muted sound from the engine-room and by the depth reports from Cameron. The Resistance man on the bridge, Jakob Nordli, passed instructions in a quiet voice, almost as though he were in church. From the bows, the hand signals came back, a little to this side, a little to that, or dead ahead. At one moment the ship shuddered violently and her head swung to starboard as she scraped some rocks.

Forbes said, 'Jesus Christ Almighty!'

Jakob Nordli smiled. 'Blasphemy is not necessary, Captain. All is well.'

It was; the ship slid away from the rocks and moved on, taking a bend without too much difficulty. Forbes passed orders for the shipwright to sound round below, to look for sprung plates or leaks from holing. The report came back that the ship was sound and watertight, and Forbes breathed easy again till the next time. The next time came when Cameron reported shoaling

water, very unexpectedly: the chart hadn't shown it. The warning came fractionally too late and although Forbes put his engine astern promptly it failed to bring the ship up in time.

There was a lurch; men were thrown off balance around the decks as the way came off suddenly. Forbes swore. Nordli said, 'I am sorry, Captain. She has run aground.'

'You're telling me!' Forbes' face showed red fury as he stopped the engine. 'All right, it's my responsibility, I'm not blaming you. But what the bloody, perishing hell do we do now—other than wait for the Germans to come in with a gunboat and blow us out of the water?'

As he finished speaking, there was a throbbing hum from the distance, coming closer. Aircraft engines: all heads went back as the men on the bridge and along the upper deck looked upwards between the sides of the mountains.

CHAPTER TEN

‘I think you have been reasonably efficient, Colonel von Franke.’

‘Thank you, Herr General.’ Von Franke clicked his heels and gave a small bow. ‘One does one’s best for the Fatherland... and the Party.’

‘Of course.’ The General, who had halted outside the vast building in which the experimental work was carried on, paced ahead followed by the Colonel. ‘What you and your men have been doing here will shorten the war according to the Führer. He places great hopes in the pilotless aircraft. All the south of England at least will be at our mercy. You are to be congratulated.’

‘Thank you, Herr General.’

‘And last night...’ Once more the General halted and gazed out across the still waters of Vest Hammarfjord. ‘There has been damage, yes, but nothing that is important. Until the accommodation is restored your men must simply live in the open, that is all—it is no hardship when compared to the trenches of the last war.’ The General’s hand strayed to the many rows of medal ribbons upon his ample chest, some of which bore testimony to his own part in that conflict. ‘And it will not be for long. The base has much priority.’

‘That is most gratifying, Herr—’ The Colonel broke off and looked skywards. ‘Aircraft, Herr General. Reichsmarschall Goering gives us most excellent protection.’

‘Yet his Luftwaffe was not in the vicinity last night,’ the General said sourly. Not that I criticize. Even our Luftwaffe cannot be everywhere at once, but last night would have been better than this morning, one would have thought.’

‘The ship in the bay, Herr General? The target, perhaps?’

‘No. I have told you, it is the Führer’s wish that the ship is left to our naval units. He is adamant.’

‘Because of the vision.’

‘Because of the vision, yes. It must always be followed to the letter.’ The General looked at his watch. ‘Perhaps it is early, but...’

‘Yes, Herr General?’ Colonel von Franke asked. Then, as the General said nothing further but looked irritated, he ticked over. ‘Schnappes, Herr General? But of course, it will be a pleasure and an honour.’

The two officers proceeded to the base mess.

The aircraft passed over the channel, flying high. It would, in fact, have been next to impossible for any aircrew to spot the ship except as a matter of the sheerest chance. But Forbes’ worry now was that the absence of the *Castle Bay* from the outer fjord would be noted and reported. It could, perhaps, be assumed that she had gone to sea, presumably unaware that the German heavy ships were closing the area; but such an assumption wouldn’t last longer than it took the aircraft, and others that might be sent in, to carry out a reconnaissance of the seas in the vicinity. Meanwhile, the *Castle Bay* was fast aground for’ard. The shipwright, sounding round again, found no damage but the engine, moving astern, was having no effect whatsoever other than to churn up sand and set the murky water boiling beneath her counter. Forbes said, ‘We can try to shake her free, Pilot. D’you know the pipe they used to use in the Navy to bring off grounded ships?’

Beddows shook his head. ‘No, sir.’

‘Hands to dance and skylark,’ Forbes said briefly. ‘Boatswain’s mate?’

The rating came forward and saluted. ‘Yes, sir?’

‘Hands to dance and skylark on the poop and after well-deck.’

‘Beg pardon, sir?’ The seaman looked astonished.

‘You heard, and I’ve not gone round the bend, Peters. Pipe the order at once.’

The calls shrilled out: there was a certain amount of surprise and ribald comment. The skipper had a screw loose, they’d better all watch out. The strain had affected him. Most of the ship’s company being hostilities-only ratings, they had no conception of the meaning of the order, but the older men, the Fleet Reservists, recognized something that they hadn’t heard for many years or had only learned about from the previous generation of seamen. One who knew was the Chief Boatswain’s Mate, another was the Gunner’s Mate, and another was Mr Hanrahan. These three seasoned sailors chivvied the hands aft with peremptory shouts and in the after well-deck the Chief Boatswain’s Mate told them the score.

‘Do as the pipe says, but don’t bloody dance like ponces in a dance hall, right? Jump up and down, plenty of vigour. *Shake* the ship so she vibrates and starts to lift for’ard.’ The Chief Boatswain’s Mate turned in some despair to Mr Hanrahan as the men tentatively hopped in the air and came down again, obviously feeling remarkably foolish. The Buffer said, ‘No spirit, sir, eh? No beef either, as skinny a lot of matloes I never did see. Remember when they was all like rum tubs?’

‘Speak for yourself, Buffer,’ Mr Hanrahan said; he was sensitive about his own figure. Then he lifted his voice aft: ‘Come on, put some guts into it! Jump, don’t bloody ‘op! I’ll come among you with a stonachie if you don’t watch it,’ he said in reference to the rope’s-end carried by PTIS to lash out at lazy backsides during physical drill. ‘This isn’t a game, it’s serious. If the ship doesn’t come off, the Huns’ll get the lot of us.’

With persuasion, they began to set up a vibration. Looking aft from the bridge, Forbes remembered the commando sergeant-major who had wanted to carry out PT. He would be in his element now, thoroughly vindicated, but

he wouldn't ever raise his voice again now. He was just one reason amongst the many why Forbes was determined to get through to the fjord and blast that base to pulp. His nails dug hard into his palms; the feeling of helplessness was enough to drive a man insane. Perhaps he was going over the brink: he was probably condemning his whole ship's company to death by entering Vest Hammarfjord. The fact that he was exceeding his orders, even acting in total disregard of them, didn't help.

He turned for'ard.

Bloody ship! She wasn't shifting an inch by the look of it, though there was plenty of vibration now. He gave a hail to the Norwegian still in the eyes of the ship. 'Any movement?'

'None, Captain. None. She is fast.'

Forbes smote a clenched fist on the polished teak of the bridge guardrail. His blood pressure, he felt, was rising fast. It couldn't be long before that aircraft sent in its reports and then it would be too late, time would have run out for, them and Hitler would continue to enjoy his wretched secret weapon. With almost his whole ship's company aft, the ship should have started to come up by the head, surely... there was one more thing that could be tried and Forbes decided to try it. He sent the bridge messenger for all heads of departments to muster immediately on the bridge, except for the Chief Engineer, the Lieutenant-Commander (E) whose presence was required on the starting-platform below: his deputy, the Senior Engineer, would attend in his place.

When the various officers were present, Forbes said, 'I want all inessential stores jettisoned over the side. Everything—except yours, of course, Mr Hanrahan. Don't get sentimental or over-cautious. We have to come off the bottom. If we don't, then we've had it anyway. Understood? Right! Start at once, no delay.' He added, 'Make a start on the wardroom stores. If necessary

it may come to personal possessions—every bloody centimetre’s going to count now!’

The winking signal lamps flashed from the Admiral’s bridge aboard the *Scharnhorst*, conveying the orders of the Commander-in-Chief, West, to the *Hipper*. The speed came off as the ships made a turn to starboard, heading into inshore waters for the outer fjord with their companies at stations and the decks cleared for action. A signal had been received, it was true, from an aircraft of the Luftwaffe, indicating that the British ship appeared to have left; but, as the Admiral remarked, the *Castle Bay* could merely have shifted berth and entered some side inlet where she hoped to remain hidden. The British were so devious; and the Admiral had raised no sign of the vessel at sea. Hence the precaution of being ready for action. The Admiral, immaculately dressed with starched cuffs and collar, said, ‘The ship is almost defenceless and will go pouf !’ He flung his arms wide, simulating the explosion to come. ‘Nevertheless we must expect knavish tricks—anything is possible, Flag Captain.’ He strutted the bridge, nose lifted, sniffing the good, keen air of Norway. The dirty weather had gone, it was a splendid morning, and there was no British squadron in the immediate vicinity according to the reports broadcast from Berlin. The British Rear-Admiral Vian had been supposed to be around but he had gone, and had been reported by the Luftwaffe as having joined the PQ convoy which was coming under heavy attack. With luck, Rear-Admiral Vian would have his wretched cruiser sunk under him, and would then freeze to death in the icy seas north of Archangel, which was a hell-hole at the best of times and thankfully not required to have convoys run to it by the German Navy.

The Admiral pondered, as his ships headed inwards for more glory, on the incredible wisdom of his Führer in mounting Operation Barbarossa to attack

the devilish Stalin and his horrible country. Russia was the abode of fiends but would shortly crack asunder under the hammer-blows of the Third Reich as the magnificent armies thrust with their armoured columns towards Stalingrad and Moscow. The end of the war was in sight and the victorious and gallant sailors, soldiers and airmen of the Fatherland would march with bands playing along the Unter den Linden, while the rest of the world cringed around them and metaphorically licked their boots. There was always America, of course, who had not entered the war as the stupid British had hoped and, indeed, expected. America might not be amenable; the Americans did not like the Fatherland over-much, it was true, but... the Admiral shrugged off the Americans. If they were difficult, a division or two, plus a fleet, could always be despatched—that should be enough. If not, the gallant Japanese, yellow though they might be, were friendly towards the Führer and could surely be relied upon to lambast the American west coast in support of the attack from the Atlantic.

All was well, all was very well indeed.

Scharnhorst, in the lead with her great turrets manned, probed through into the outer fjord, followed by the *Hipper*.

There was nothing to be seen: the area around Svalbard Point stood empty, totally deserted.

It was no matter; the Admiral shrugged again and ordered his ships to steam right in and then turn to port to explore the northern reaches of the land-locked water. He looked around; the scenery was splendid, and now virtually German. The Norwegians didn't count for much, though pockets of resistance existed. Splendid German mountains, tall and vast and topped with snow from heaven, a benison from the Almighty to show his love for Adolf Hitler...

‘No ship, Herr Admiral.’

‘Thank you, Flag Captain, this I have seen for myself. There is more water ahead, and this will be explored.’

‘Yes, Herr Admiral.’

Scharnhorst and *Hipper* moved on. The Admiral looked up again at the mountains, craning his neck until the starch of his collar bit uncomfortably into the back of it. So immensely high... the Admiral found he didn’t like them so much after all; they tended to make his squadron appear insignificant. There was a curious psychological effect in being made to look small.

And there certainly was no ship. There was no doubt about that after the Admiral had cruised up and down for the best part of an hour.

Now here was a quandary: the Admiral was under orders to attack a ship that was not there. What next? Should he return to the open sea and look for the *verdamnt* vessel, and risk exposure to some unreported enemy ships—such as the British Home Fleet, which could be at sea, with the *King George V*, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Rodney*, or so the Admiral suspected, plus a number of cruisers—possibly some aircraft-carriers also?

There was a risk. His ships were of much value to the Fatherland.

The Admiral paced his bridge, thinking hard.

Always, one had to take into account the possible and totally unpredictable reactions of the Führer when making one’s decisions. The Führer was a hot-tempered leader and flew into spasms of hair-tearing rage that could rebound with disadvantage upon a senior officer’s career. So—go out, or not go out? The *Castle Bay* might yet appear... but no, she wouldn’t. Not while his ships were there. The Admiral, after a close study of the chart, projected his mind towards the channel inwards of Svalbard Point. True, there was enough water there to take a ship of the *Castle Bay*’s draught, but only a lunatic would attempt to take a 6,000-ton converted freighter into such confined waters. It

would be suicide.

The Admiral pulled at his neat, dark beard. The Flag Captain asked, ‘What should we do, Herr Admiral?’

The Admiral, who disliked being questioned before he had made up his mind, snapped, ‘Hold your tongue, Flag Captain.’

The channel was now littered with all manner of jettisoned stores and equipment that could be considered non-vital to the ship’s safety and general ability to steam and fight: all the wardroom wine store had been emptied out and cases of whisky and gin supplied by Saccone and Speed lay forlornly smashed on the rocks or sunk to the bottom. They had been joined by a mass of horded material from the engine-room stores—metal, pieces of machinery that had been aboard for years—and drums of grey paint from the paint store, coils of heavy rope, spare pieces of deck gear—blocks and tackles, shackles of all kinds, even some spare links of cable that some peacetime boatswain had stowed away for no apparent reason that anyone could think of. Items of furniture went too: wash-hand basin cabinets from the officers’ cabins, wardrobes, chairs, carpets. Nothing was too small to count. Even a good deal of food was cast overboard.

Finally, and in desperation, Forbes ordered the jettisoning of all but a small quantity of the contents of the fresh water tanks.

That did it.

As the water level fell in the tanks, there was a shout from the Norwegian on the fo’c’sle-head: ‘She moves, Captain, she moves!’

Forbes, foot-sensitive now to the tenth degree, had felt the small shift for himself : the old ship had given a sort of waggle, like a duck’s tail only ahead rather than astern, as though in celebration of her freedom.

Licking at dry lips, Forbes ordered the engine astern dead slow. He held his

breath, as did everyone else. Cloudy water swept for'ard as the screw churned, and, infinitesimally, the *Castle Bay* moved. Forbes wiped his brow and blew out his breath. He caught Beddows' eye and said, 'God's changed his mind. He loves us after all. I think I've said the same thing before.'

'Yes, sir.'

Forbes cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted ahead to Cameron, waiting in the seaboat with his sounding-party, 'I'm taking her through now, Sub. No more balls-ups unless you want to be keel-hauled.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Cameron felt himself flushing but he accepted the rebuke. In point of fact, the Captain had been remarkably forbearing in not having issued a monster of a rocket long before this. Cameron took his boat ahead as the *Castle Bay*, with her screw moving at dead slow ahead now, nudged forward and brought her stem back over the patch where she had grounded. She went ahead smoothly and stood clear. Cameron called back, 'All's well, sir!'

'Thank you!' Forbes waved a hand, then spoke to Beddows. 'Two miles to go—a little under. Warn all guns' crews to stand by as we come into view in the fjord. I expect to be in action pretty quick.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

‘Stand by the seaboat’s falls, Pilot.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’ Beddows, calling for the boatswain’s mate, left the bridge. The ship was almost at the end of the entry channel now, in wider waters. Forbes felt a thrill of expectation run through him as Vest Hammarfjord was seen ahead, still and open.

He called ahead, ‘Sub!’

‘Sir?’

‘Bring your boat alongside for hoisting.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

Cameron gave the order to lay on oars and the boat drifted, standing off for the *Castle Bay* to come up. As the seaboat came below the outswung davits, the bowman and sternsheetsman hooked on to the falls and up top Beddows gave the order to hoist. Stepping on to the embarkation deck, Cameron went to the bridge to report to the Captain. As he reached it, Forbes flicked on the tannoy to speak to his ship’s company: the *Castle Bay* was coming out now from the narrows, emerging into full view and standing into deep water. Forbes said, ‘This is the Captain speaking. I intend to steam north past the base. All port-side guns will train and open together when ordered. When I’m past, I shall turn and go in again, and all starboard guns will fire. I intend to repeat the manoeuvre as often as may be necessary to destroy the whole set-up. That is all

He switched off. ‘Yeoman?’

‘Yessir?’

‘Hoist battle ensigns.’

‘Aye, aye, sir!’

Forbes moved to the voice-pipe. ‘Port ten,’ he said.

‘Port ten, sir.’ There was a pause. ‘Ten of port wheel on, sir.’

‘Midships... steady! Steer three-six-oh.’

‘Steer three-six-oh, sir.’

‘Engine full ahead.’

‘Engine full ahead sir.’ Bells rang and the quartermaster reported, ‘Engine repeated full ahead, sir.’

Forbes straightened and caught Cameron’s eye. ‘Well, Sub?’

‘Seaboat hoisted, sir.’

‘Right, thank you. You did well, Cameron, and I’m grateful.’

‘I’m sorry about the grounding, sir.’

‘That could happen to any of us. Charts sometimes aren’t a hundred per cent, and soundings can be a case of hit or miss in channels like that one.’ Forbes lifted his binoculars as the ship went ahead, coming up to her maximum speed and raising a breeze over her decks. ‘The Jerries are reacting now. I’ve no doubt there’s a good deal of surprise around at this moment!’

Cameron took a look at the base himself. There was much activity, and the shouting of orders could be heard thinly as the ship came closer in. Not unnaturally, the buildings were being battened-down against coming action, all doors being shut. But at the southern perimeter a gun-barrel was swinging round in the concrete pill-box; and as it found its target, it opened. There was a bright flash and a cloud of black smoke poured from the pill-box. A shell whistled down the *Castle Bay*’s port side. Mr Hanrahan’s guns’ crews had the edge on the Germans: as Forbes passed orders to gunnery control the 4-inch guns on the port side for’ard opened and took the pill-box with its first shell. There was a violent explosion and a blinding sheet of flame and both the gun and pill-box erupted as the reserve ammunition went up. When the smoke

cleared, there was little left except falling debris and a blackened hole in the ground. The *Castle Bay* moved on, the huge battle ensigns streaming in the wind raised by her passage. As she came abeam of the buildings, Forbes gave the next firing order. All the port side guns opened in a fury of smoke and flame. The din was tremendous as the shells burst on the concrete domes. Rock flew about as some of the projectiles hit the mountain behind and above the buildings. There was no sign of life now: the whole garrison had taken cover and were simply sitting it out. Moving past, Forbes brought the ship round and back again, this time opening with the starboard armament. The din, the smoke and the flame were repeated; but still the concrete held. Forbes' high hopes began to dim: his guns were simply not of large enough calibre. Beddows remarked as much.

Forbes said savagely, 'We go on, Pilot. There's nothing else we can do now. We may weaken the structure in the end.'

Once again, he brought the ship round. The pounding was resumed as he came abeam. There was a stench of hot metal and expended explosive. But the concrete refused to yield. There seemed to be no weak spots anywhere. Forbes stood like a statue in the bridge wing. He had been a fool to try: all he had succeeded in doing was to take his ship and her company into a trap from which there could be no escape. If he withdrew now and re-entered the channel for the outer fjord, the alerted Luftwaffe would be waiting for him at the other end. If not them, then the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper* with their immense guns.

He tried once more: the result was the same. He was using pea-shooters. It was just no bloody use at all. He turned to Cameron. 'Get the Resistance man back up here—Nordli.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Cameron left the bridge at the rush, sliding down the handrails of the starboard ladder as the ship came round under full helm. He

found Jakob Nordli on the upper deck, shaking a fist towards the shore and swearing in his own language. Cameron said, 'Captain wants you.'

'What for?'

Cameron said, 'I don't know—'

'I come.' Nordli went up with Cameron to the bridge. He said, 'Captain, you—'

Forbes broke in. 'I take it you know the fjord pretty well?'

'Very well indeed—'

'Is there any way out, other than the way we came in?'

Nordli pursed his lips. 'There is a connection with Skojafjord.'

'What's the connection like?'

'Like the channel we came through. Enough water and just enough width perhaps.'

'I see. And Skojafjord itself? Any German presence?'

'I believe there is not, no. But if you go through, then the Germans will follow, yes?'

'Very likely,' Forbes said through set teeth. 'But I'll fight a rearguard action all the way if they do! It just occurs to me that there could be a way through to the open sea. Is there?'

Nordli said, 'Yes, there is. But I do not know the waters, and it will be a very long way. I think there is little point, Captain.'

'I'll be the judge of that,' Forbes said.

'But it would be so much quicker to go back through the entry channel, Captain.'

Forbes gave a hard laugh. 'Damn right! But the German heavy ships will be there by now. We'd be blown up before we passed Svalbard Point.'

'They will be waiting for you wherever you come out,' Nordli said. 'A wireless message is all that will be needed—'

Not if I can manage to get lost somewhere,' Forbes interrupted. 'The northern fjords are something of a maze—right?'

Nordli agreed.

'Then perhaps we'll be lucky,' Forbes said with a touch of defiance. 'Any chance is better than a definite meeting with the bloody *Scharnhorst*!'

Nordli conceded; he nodded and gave the directions. Forbes brought the *Castle Bay* round and headed out across the fjord, making for the eastern side where, to the south of the supply road, the waters narrowed between the mountains, though there was still plenty of depth. This would bring him close to the German military garrison at the end of the supply road, which he would leave to port as he headed for the connecting channel for Skojafjord. That was the first of what might be many hazards. There could be no doubt at all that even if he could pass the garrison he would come under attack from other sources long before the night could conceal him and allow him to start the process of losing contact with the enemy. Vest Hammarfjord, however, stood clear enough: there was no attempt at interception until the *Castle Bay* came within range of the army batteries in the garrison to the east.

Not far off the entry to the narrow finger of water leading into Skojafjord, guns opened from the shore and spouts of water rose to port and starboard. Forbes immediately brought his own armament into action, lying and training by director control on the flashes and puffs of smoke. Luck, it seemed, was with them this time. As he waited for the bearings to come on for the turn into the mountain-protected finger, there was a huge explosion from the garrison area. Shock waves came out and a high, spreading column of black smoke lifted into the air, flame-filled and menacing. The batteries fell silent. Forbes called down to the Gunner in the fore well-deck.

'What do you make of that, Mr Hanrahan?'

'Don't know for sure, sir,' Hanrahan answered, 'but I reckon it could be

petrol.'

'That's what I thought. I'd go a stage further: aviation spirit?'

'It might be, sir.'

Forbes, grinning now, turned to Cameron. 'We won't be leaving without making our mark after all,' he said. 'If that was aviation spirit, it'll be the supply for the base. The loss of it may gum up the works for a while at least.'

'Yes, sir. And that leads to another thought.' Forbes raised his eyebrows. 'What thought?'

'Well, sir, that the experimental base must have storage tanks on site—'

'And we could blow them?'

'Yes, sir.'

'But we bloody well didn't, did we! They'll be as well protected as the rest of the place.' Forbes checked his bearings again. 'You don't like uncompleted jobs any more than I do, do you, Sub?'

'No, sir—'

'This time, we're both going to have to lump it, more's the pity.' Forbes, as the bearings came on, turned the ship to port and she came into the gloom of the high sides, moving through a fair depth of water. The feeling now was even more of being in a trap with the door about to close behind them as they moved deeper into Norway's land mass. For the time being, as the imminence of actual attack diminished, the hands were fallen out from action stations, the ship going to second degree of readiness so that a hurried meal could be taken. Cameron, going down to the wardroom, found Jane sitting in a leather armchair with her legs drawn up. She said, 'Hullo, there! How's it going?'

He told her the score. 'The Captain's hoping to make the open sea,' he said.

'What are the chances, d'you think?'

He shrugged. 'Jakob Nordli seems to think they're fair, always provided

we're not attacked by the Luftwaffe in one of the open fjords. How about you, Jane?'

She said, 'I wouldn't know.' She got to her feet and went across to a port and looked at the mountainside close by as the ship went past. She said. 'It's a pity we have to leave without blowing that place up.'

'Yes.' Cameron hesitated: he knew the girl didn't like being questioned and one had to be circumspect with SOE agents. But he tried. He asked, 'Did you get to know much about the base, Jane?'

'Not my job,' she answered, still looking out through the port. 'We're fairly departmentalized—right hand doesn't know what the left hand's doing. They say it has to be like that, in case of being taken and put under pressure.'

'Torture?'

'Yes, torture. They aren't civilized—the Nazis.' The voice was as hard as ice. 'I've not experienced it yet, but I know some who have. If ever I get a Nazi where I can kill him, believe me, I wouldn't make it quick. If you think that's unfeminine, you're welcome to.'

Cameron said lamely, 'It's turned into that sort of war, hasn't it?' He paused. 'But that base—'

'I told you. I don't know anything about it, except that it was supposed to be destroyed. Well, it hasn't been, has it?'

'And you'd like it to be—so would we all.'

'I know,' she said. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean—'

'That's all right. But look—when we caused that explosion ashore just now... the Captain thinks it could have been aviation spirit and that's given me an idea. I suppose you don't know how the base was kept supplied, do you? For instance, is there a pipeline either running round the shore, or submerged across the fjord?'

She said, 'I don't know, but I think not.'

‘Why?’

‘I’ve seen tankers going across. Small ones, like coasters.’

‘Have you seen them discharging?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I have. Or I assume I have. I’ve seen them connecting up to something on the jetty. They lifted the ship’s pipes with a small crane thing —’

‘A derrick?’

‘Probably. Then they connected them to a shore pipe—I saw all this from a distance, across the fjord, through binoculars. I could have got it wrong.’

‘I don’t suppose you have. It sounds logical. Did you see where the pipe ran—in other words, where the storage tanks were?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘I didn’t. But all the time it was going on, there was a man with a red flag standing back against the bottom of the mountain, behind the buildings at the southern end. I could just see him and he seemed to be turning some sort of wheel, or I think he was.’ She turned away from the port. ‘It didn’t seem awfully important, just part of the routine.’

‘Behind the buildings,’ Forbes said, and frowned, looking at Cameron through half-closed eyes. ‘Pity women aren’t more technically-minded! You’re suggesting that the aviation spirit tanks are situated right inside the mountain itself behind the base?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And that if those tanks could be blown there’d be a bloody great explosion leading to the collapse of the front of the mountain?’

‘Something like that, sir. I think there’d be a chance, anyway.’

Forbes gave a hard laugh. ‘So do I, Sub! If only we’d known earlier... God, the whole damn operation would have been chicken-feed! You just open the valve on the jetty and ignite the vapour and then up to heaven you go! And

that, of course, would have been the snag—and still is. One of them, anyway. The second is how the hell do we get to the valve now? That is, assuming we have some volunteers for the suicide squad!’

‘I don’t think it’s quite suicide—’

‘You don’t?’

‘No, sir. I believe it would be possible to lay a fuse trail from the valve on the jetty, back towards the entry channel—a slow fuse that would give us time to get round the mountain and into the channel before the tanks blew. Then the mountain range would act as protection.’

‘By that time,’ Forbes said, ‘since the valve would have to be opened, all the spirit in the pipe would have run out or evaporated, wouldn’t it?’

‘Probably, sir, but there would still be traces and there would still be vapour. And the fact that the main valve—where Jane saw the man with the red flag—would be turned off, that wouldn’t stop the lot going up.’

Forbes nodded; this was probably true. There would be a flash right around the valve, in effect bypassing it. Aviation spirit was sheer murder to handle... he returned to his second point. ‘How do we reach the valve, Sub? I couldn’t hope to take the ship back in and get away with it, that’s obvious enough, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir. But a small party could make it back over the mountains. Jane knows of a route to the entry channel from the south-west corner of Skojafjord. She was taken across it by the Resistance to meet a contact and according to her we could reach the base inside four hours.’

‘From the original southern approach?’

‘Yes, sir. We know from Nordli that it hasn’t been mined.’

‘Up to when—yesterday?’

‘Early hours of this morning, sir. I doubt if they’re bothering now, with us having moved off northwards.’

Forbes turned away and paced the bridge as the ship slid inwards towards Skojafjord, now only some five miles ahead. Four hours back to the base, say an hour to lay the fuse trail, and four hours back again. If the party left the ship at dusk they should rejoin by dawn, or maybe he could send them away before dusk so that they could return during the dark hours. There were so many imponderables: would the Luftwaffe attack and if so when? Where were the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper*, where were the handiest placed British battleships or cruisers? If he sent men back on a suicide mission—he still regarded it as that—he would be in breach of all his orders. But he was in breach of them already, and he had a very strong urge to bring this mission to a successful conclusion. Failure rankled, was sour in his mouth. But had he the right, the human right, to give the order—especially to the girl who would have to be the guide unless one of the Resistance men also happened to know the route? She was already on the Nazis' wanted list and if she was taken she would face worse than death.

Forbes temporized. He stopped his pacing and said, 'Get the girl up here, please, Sub. And Mr Hanrahan.' While he waited for the two to come up, he spoke to Jakob Nordli about the mountain route. Nordli said he didn't know it; he was a fisherman, and kept himself to the waters that he was so familiar with. He doubted if the other Norwegian aboard would know the route either; he was a fisherman from Nordli's own village. This was confirmed when the man was sent for: the mountains were not his habitat. When Jane reached the bridge, Forbes put the position to her without trimmings. He said, 'It appears no one knows the way but you. Would you be willing to act as guide?'

She nodded. 'Yes. Of course I would. It was my idea.'

Forbes said quietly, 'I admire your courage, Jane.' He turned to Cameron. 'Sub, the commandos have lost all their officers dead or very severely wounded—you know that. As far as the leadership's concerned we have to

make this a naval occasion. I'd like you to take charge, all right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Thank you.' Forbes put a hand briefly on Cameron's shoulder, then spoke to the Gunner, who had arrived with the Resistance man. 'Well now, Mr Hanrahan, what's your view of the work-out? Can it be done, or not?'

Hanrahan said, 'In theory, yes, it can be done, sir, that's if we have the proper sort of fuses aboard and I've yet to check that. In practice, it'd be tricky—that is, from the point of view of the party approaching the pipeline connection. The Jerries are going to be nervy after what's already happened and there'll be a good watch kept, if you ask me.'

Forbes nodded. 'Point taken, Guns, but I believe a small party would have a reasonable chance—one or two men, we wouldn't need more than that, could swim submerged and it shouldn't take long to open the valve and insert the end of the fuse-line—agree?'

'Yes, sir,' Hanrahan said, and added, 'There's still the question of fuses.'

'Tell me about fuses, then, Guns.'

'Right. There's the three main categories—slow burning safety fuses, quick burners, and electrical fuses. The slow jobs are used chiefly in mining and they consist of a core of compressed gunpowder covered with waterproof yarn—they burn at the rate of about a foot in thirty seconds. The quick burners, they consist of wicks coated with uncompressed gunpowder and burn almost instantaneously—thirty yards a second. Or faster—rapid detonating fuses made of nitrocellulose enclosed in lead, they burn at five thousand feet a second—'

'Rather too fast, Guns!' Hanrahan nodded and said with a grin, 'Aye, I thought it might be, sir. Best are the electrical fuses but I'm pretty sure we haven't got any. As you know, sir, I've reported before now on deficiencies in Gunner's stores—'

‘Yes.’ Forbes cut short what could prove a lengthy diatribe: Hanrahan had been eloquent in the past about the way the old *Castle Bay* had been stored by the Naval Armament Supply department at her fitting-out port. There were shortages right throughout the Navy, and the *Castle Bay* had been given the dirty end of the stick when allocations were made and much of her Gunner’s stores were old and obsolescent if not downright obsolete. ‘We’ll just have to make do with what we’ve got, unless the commandos can help out—’

‘I’ll manage, sir,’ Hanrahan cut in briskly, sounding offended. He wasn’t going to be beholden to any pongoes; he had heard more than enough remarks already about how his shells had failed to penetrate the concrete buildings. ‘I reckon the slow-burning fuse will do the job nicely, sir, especially since it’s waterproof and the party has to swim out. Only trouble is, it’ll be a lot to carry—we’ll need a good length for maximum safety, see, and they’ll have to take detonators, just to make absolutely sure—fulminate of mercury, which’ll go up when the fuse burns up to it.’

‘And have we got all these things, Guns?’

‘Detonators, yes, sir. I’ll check on the fuses. All right to carry on now, sir?’

Forbes nodded. ‘Yes, please, Guns—and let me know the score as soon as possible.’

‘Bastards,’ Mr Hanrahan said with extreme bitterness to his Gunner’s Mate. ‘Know what?’

‘What?’

‘I’d like to shove the whole bloody Armament Supply outfit into one of them concrete domes before Cameron blows it up.’

‘Cameron’s going, is he?’

‘*Mister* Cameron to you,’ Hanrahan said virtuously.

‘Sorry I’m sure, sir.’

‘To answer your question, yes, he’s going in charge. Can’t let that young woman out of his sight, I reckon.’ The Gunner sniffed. ‘To get back to the fuses, Tom. Just bloody look at ‘em!’ He held up a length of doubtful-looking material. ‘Talk about age, this died years ago. Still, I reckon it’ll do, just about.’

‘Still waterproof, is it?’

‘Yes, I reckon. Best test a length to be on the safe side, though. See to that, will you, Tom.’

‘Right. There’s what—just under a hundred feet.’ The Gunner’s Mate shut his eyes for a while in deep concentration. Then he said, ‘Fifty minutes maximum. Will that be enough?’

‘It’ll bloody have to be, won’t it,’ Hanrahan said, ‘seeing it’s all we’ve bloody got.’ He added, ‘Should be ample, barring accidents.’

He made his way to the bridge to report, reflecting on the forthcoming mission. It was going to be the biggest thing he’d ever seen in his life when the Jerry base blew. It wouldn’t be just the shattering of the mountain; for Hanrahan’s money, igniting the aviation spirit was likely to blow up every bit of explosive on the site—magazines, warheads, the lot. It was going to be worth seeing.

By now the *Castle Bay* was well into Skojafjord and there was something of a different sort worth seeing: the scenery. It was, in Hanrahan’s eyes at any rate, much more spectacular than Vest Hammarfj ord. The mountains were magnificent, set really close together; the fjord, or the part they were in as they headed for the south-western shore, was long and narrow. The sun was high now, and was slanting down between the snowy summits to bring an almost unbelievable beauty... the ship seemed an intrusion, even the guns seemed an irreverence as the grey barrels stared out over the still water, at the greenery that climbed the mountains. Mr Hanrahan stopped for a moment and

just looked and drank it in. Like Scotland so much beauty you got sated with it after a while, it was almost too much to take. In any case, the war beckoned.

Mr Hanrahan went on towards the bridge. As he got there, Forbes passed the order to bring the ship up. They were on station now, lying off the part of the shore where the overland track started according to the girl.

Forbes looked round. 'Well, Guns?'

'All correct, sir. I reckon we can cope.'

'Good.'

'Have you decided on the composition of the party yet, sir?'

Forbes said, 'Yes. The Sub-Lieutenant in charge, with two sappers to lay the fuse, and four commandos to cover them. Plus the young woman as guide, of course. Any comments, Guns?'

'Yes, sir. Can't this be a hundred per cent Naval show, sir? The army's done its part. What I mean is, the Gunner's party, they're all good hands—'

'I'm sure they are, Guns, but you know as well as I do, they haven't the experience of sappers trained in demolition. I can't take the risk of anything going wrong due to inexperience.'

'But—'

'I'm sorry, Guns, that's my last word. The army was sent in to do this job, and it's the army that's going to do it, basically. And I've no doubt they'll do it well.'

Mr Hanrahan looked stubborn. He said, 'In that case, sir, I've a personal request to make.'

'Go on, then.'

'I'd like to go myself if it's all the same to you, sir. They're my fuses, all said an' done. Don't want the army bugging 'em up, sir.'

Forbes gave a short laugh. He said, 'You're the only Gunner I've got... but

you can go if that's your wish, Guns.' He understood well enough: the Navy's warrant officers were always jealous for their departments and by and large they were the backbone of the Service, men who hadn't got where they were without a bucketful of guts and knowledge. One of their drawbacks was that, very often, they didn't trust other people to do their jobs for them, and that too was understandable when you'd been through a very hard mill. Andaman like old Hanrahan would be good stiffening if anything should go wrong.

'All set, Sub?'

'All set, sir.'

Forbes looked at his watch: the time was 1600 hours. By 2000 hours the demolition party should be approaching the inward end of the entry channel back in Vest Hammarfjord. Give them another four hours to ensure full dark and swim out to the jetty, then a total of, say, five hours back again. Forbes would not have the few hours of darkness he would have liked in which to move his ship farther north towards the sea, but that couldn't be helped and in any case they seemed safe enough currently though the future couldn't be predicted. Forbes was far from happy about that unpredictable future: the very fact that no apparent move had been made against them after they had left Vest Hammarfjord was disturbing. Their fate might already have been taken care of somewhere along the route ahead; but that was in the lap of the gods now.

Forbes looked at the blackened faces, at the anonymous woollen caps pulled down over the foreheads. Those men had guts; so had the girl. With her smudged face, woolly hat and camouflage she was virtually indistinguishable from the men.

Forbes said, 'Off you go, then. Good luck to you all. I don't doubt you'll

bring it off.' He was trying to sound cheerful but it was an uphill task. He shook each of them by the hand and then saluted them away as they left the bridge to embark. The fjord was gloomy now that the sun had passed across the gap between the mountains. Forbes felt the onset of an alarming depression as he watched the heavily-armed party being pulled away to the shore in the seaboat, together with the coiled fuse-line, the box of detonators, and tools for opening up the pipeline valve. As the boat reached the shore, the Petty Officer Telegraphist came to the bridge and approached the Captain.

'Beg pardon, sir.'

'Yes, PO?'

'Admiralty's trying to call us up, sir. I read their call sign and ours, and that's all I did read. The reception's just about non-existent, sir.'

'I don't doubt it! Keep trying, all the same. They'll be repeating it.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Petty Officer Blackman saluted and went back down the ladder. Forbes was left with another worry now: what the devil was the Admiralty trying to tell him? Was it orders, was it a warning?

There was just no way of finding out. Heavily land-locked as they were, very much more so than they had been whilst in the outer fjord, there wouldn't be a cat in hell's chance of receiving signals. There was just one thing to calm anxiety, and that was negative enough in all conscience: whatever it was the Admiralty had to say, there was nothing they could do about it in any case. They were committed, and the only way ahead, once Cameron was back, would be through the fjords as directed by Jakob Nordli.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In the Admiralty's operations room the Staff could do no more than make assessments, better perhaps called guesses. The *Castle Bay*'s wireless transmitter had, very properly, not opened up at all throughout, not even in acknowledgement of signals; as always, an assumption had to be made that any particular signal had been received as transmitted. What was worrying the Duty Captain, and a succession of Duty Captains before him in the watchkeeping rota, was the fact that the ship should by now have been into safe waters and at last in a position to break wireless silence and report.

But there had been nothing from any source at all, no information whatever. Even the Resistance in the locality had not come up again, and that in itself didn't look too good. The Norwegian loyalists could all have been wiped out, or at the very least gone well and truly to ground, not risking any transmission with the Germans on their track.

In the meantime the *Scharnhorst* and the *Hipper* had been spotted at sea by reconnaissance aircraft, heading north. So they had left the vicinity of Vest Hammarfjord: and, again, what about the *Castle Bay*? Destroyed by the guns of the heavy ships, or not? In case the answer was not, a warning as to the Germans' movements was sent out to the *Castle Bay*. And, by orders of the First Sea Lord, a signal was made to the C-in-C Home Fleet aboard the *King George V*, repeated to Rear-Admiral Vian and the Senior Officer of the escort guarding the homeward-bound convoy now coming in from Archangel—the outward PQ convoy having by this time passed into the safe area. This signal warned that the *Scharnhorst* and the *Admiral Hipper* had left the Norwegian coast and were steaming north. C-in-C Home Fleet was ordered to be ready

to cover the *Castle Bay* whenever her movements might become known, if only by reason of her being brought to action by the German Fleet.

The way over the mountains was hard going: Mr Hanrahan, no longer young, was taking it with many grumbles. He was a seaman, not a mountaineer.

‘You volunteered, Guns,’ Cameron said.

‘Yes, I did. And I must have been stark, raving, bloody mad! Never volunteer, that’s the motto I should have stuck to, Sub.’ The Gunner halted and wiped his streaming face. The evening was cool, but Mr Hanrahan was notwithstanding in a bath of sweat. Cameron took the opportunity to call a halt of the whole party; they had plenty of time in hand since they couldn’t go into action until after full dark. No point in pushing it. They all flopped on the ground. After a few minutes it was Hanrahan who got to his feet. He moved around, checking his fuse-line and detonators and irritating the soldiers thereby. They looked as though they believed him to be something out of history, a relic of the last war, which in a way he was and proud of it too. As a seaman boy first class he had seen action at Jutland, under Beatty in the old battle-cruiser *Lion*; and he had been in the old *Vindictive* when she had crashed the mole at Zeebrugge under Captain Carpenter... he felt half inclined to tell the ruddy pongoes all that, but he refrained. Some people looked long suffering when you talked about the last war, and if the pongoes looked back at him that way he might put a bunch of fives in their faces and that wouldn’t do at all. But he smouldered, and for safety’s sake shifted his thoughts across the sea to his wife, who was doggedly sitting out the war in London’s East End, looking after her mother who refused to move out of London and never mind Hitler. Mr Hanrahan’s mother-in-law was a tiresome eighty-six with a mind and will of her own, and if she should happen to become the cause of

his wife's death from bombs Mr Hanrahan was well prepared to swing for her the very next time he went home, if you could call it home, on leave. Mr Hanrahan pitied the civilian population and reckoned his mother-in-law was only remaining alive out of spite; what was the point, at her age, of living on one egg a week, a couple of ounces of butter and a tiny square of cheese, plus a meat ration you couldn't even see properly? That, and the bombs, and the air-raid shelters, and places familiar for a whole lifetime looking totally unrecognizable when you emerged after the all clear...

As a line of alternative thought it was too depressing and Mr Hanrahan found he preferred to think about the pongoes after all. He checked the fuse-line again. Too much handling might damage it, and already it had been swung from the shoulder of its carrier against the rock sides too many times for Mr Hanrahan's liking. He delivered a homily on the proper handling of slow-burning fuses. The pongoes looked bored stiff. The old seadog was as old as his perishing fuses... time the Navy brought itself up to date.

Cameron said, 'Press on, Guns, all right?'

'You're in charge,' Hanrahan said sourly. They got up and pressed on, still climbing. It would be easier down the other side but there was a long way to go yet. The girl didn't seem to tire at all. Mr Hanrahan accorded her a grudging respect: he didn't hold with unfeminine activities, not really, but she had the guts of a man. She was efficient, too; no hesitation in picking up the track, which wasn't easy. They certainly wouldn't have made it without her.

Further on, after they had passed the highest point and were beginning to twist down towards the entry channel from the outer fjord, the declining sun glinted for a moment on something bright in the distance, just clear of the close-growing trees farther down.

'Watch it,' Hanrahan said.

'What is it, Guns?'

Hanrahan pointed downwards. He said, 'Best get in cover. Could be metal badges.' The Gunner turned to one of the commandos. 'What do you think, son?'

'I think you could be right, sir. If we take cover, and if they come this far, we can get the buggers easily.'

'Wait for the officer,' Hanrahan said. 'Well, Mr Cameron?'

'We'll take cover,' Cameron answered, 'but I don't know about opening fire.'

'But look—'

'Cover first, Guns. We may have been seen already.' Cameron looked around. There was not in fact a lot of cover; all they could do was to leave the track and flatten themselves against a rock face lying at right angles to the track. They wouldn't be seen by anyone coming up from the direction of the entry channel—at least, not until any intruder had drawn level and was moving past. After that, it would take a miracle for them to remain unnoticed. Cameron indicated the rock face and ordered everyone off the track. Following them into cover he said, 'If we open fire, it's going to be heard for miles around.'

Hanrahan jerked a thumb towards the commandos. 'They know how to cope, Sub. Leave this to the army, right?'

Cameron nodded. The girl was close beside him and he was aware of the rapid beat of her heart: she was scared now. One slip, and she faced a grim future. And once again Operation Forestay was in the balance. Cameron moved away and peered cautiously round the edge of the rock. The view wasn't reassuring: the glint had come from uniform badges all right. He could see moving figures now, five men, carrying automatic weapons slung from their shoulders, steel-helmeted Germans climbing unknowingly towards an ambush that just had to be successful.

Cameron rejoined the others and passed the word.

‘Leave it to us, sir,’ the commando NCO said. ‘Six of us, counting the sappers. Easy!’

‘And quiet?’

‘As death. That’s what we trained for. No worry.’ The NCO turned away and ran along the rock face, which was not particularly high and appeared from below to have a flat top running back into the higher ridges behind. He disappeared; small pieces of rock were dislodged, making what seemed to Cameron’s overstretched nerves to be a bloody great racket but the other commandos didn’t seem worried. Within three minutes the NCO was back, grinning from his blackened face like a monkey. ‘Up top, you lot—with the officer’s permission?’

‘What’s your proposal?’ Cameron asked.

‘Lie flat—we won’t be seen—then drop on the buggers individually, sir. It’s safer that way. Get ‘em all at once, see, before they know we’re there. If we wait for ‘em to come round the rock one by one we could be seen by the leaders and then we’d have to open fire. Okay, sir?’

Cameron nodded. ‘Okay!’

‘Right you are, then. Come on.’ The NCO led the way and the commandos moved fast. It was a tense wait in total silence. Both Cameron and Hanrahan had been equipped with Sten guns; they were ready to shoot if it had to come to that. So was Jane, who carried an automatic rifle also provided by the army. She was as white as death now, and shaking a little but doing her best not to let it show. Cameron sent up a prayer for her in particular. She had mentioned torture, the bestiality of the Nazis; she was seeing that again in her mind’s eye.

Minutes passed, slowly dragging.

Sound began to come up, heavy footsteps drawing closer, and voices.

Laughter in snatches... the Germans hadn't spotted them and didn't expect to find anybody along the track. Probably a routine security patrol, and a careless one. Surely they might expect some of the commandos from the original attack to be still somewhere in the mountains? If they had come looking for them, it would be reasonable to expect a silent advance. Cameron recalled something the Greek partisan leader had said to him when he had been in Crete, landed from the *Wharfedale* to pick up a man with a vital message from Stalin, the warning that Hitler was about to turn on his ally... the Greek had said that the Nazis were stupid, with unresilient minds, unimaginative outlooks. If that was so, they might well believe that any British, perishing in the mountains, would be only too glad to surrender. For them, the war would be over; they wouldn't be offering any resistance.

Now the intruders were not far off. A matter of less than a minute... Cameron and Hanrahan moved instinctively as if to cover the girl, their guns ready. Their own breathing sounded as though it must give warning. But they scarcely heard the sudden drop from overhead. Just a small clatter as a boot scraped rock and some muffled gasps: that was all. The commandos knew their job. The NCO came round the rock.

'All over,' he said. Cameron moved round the side of the ridge. Five bodies lay with knives in their backs, the hafts sticking out and blood welling through their uniforms.

'Better hide 'em,' the NCO said. His face contorted, he kicked at one of them. 'That's for my sister,' he said. 'They got her in the Coventry blitz.'

Cameron looked at the girl. Her face, too, was filled with hate. The Nazis had poisoned human nature.

Down at last to the entry channel, right at its inward end with Vest Hammarfjord not far off, Cameron halted the party some way from the end of

the track, keeping them in deep cover and in silence until the day passed into night: a long day in the northern latitudes, and a long wait. Life seemed to be all waiting and keeping quiet. Time for the mind to rove into the future: what was the world going to be like when this war was over? How was brutality ever to be exorcised? As to the men who had been trained to kill as commandos, what would their trade be when peace returned and the killing was over? Intensive training went very deep—it had to, so that a man reacted instinctively and without revulsion. Once a seaman, always a seaman. Once a killer? It wasn't a nice thought but it could happen. Cameron cast it from his mind: time would tell. Peace would bring good things as well and the war wouldn't all have been in vain. There would be a massive rebuilding programme, industry would re-equip for peace and unemployment would be a thing of the past. The habit of pulling together would carry over and there would be less of the class war, perhaps fewer strikes. So much sacrifice couldn't go for nothing; there had to be a Providence that would see to that. In low voices, Cameron and the Gunner talked about the prospects. Hanrahan's view was a sour one. It hadn't worked out too well after the last lot; wounded ex-servicemen had sold matches in the streets, heaving their broken bodies about on crutches. Pipers from Highland regiments had played for pennies cast by the passing crowds; and the Navy had hived off any number of regular officers and men, throwing them out before their time with nothing in prospect except the soup kitchens in many cases. Seafaring skills were hard to sell ashore. And the General Strike hadn't been all that long after the armistice and the peace treaties, whilst in Germany the terrible inflation had helped to bring Adolf Hitler to power. 'And look,' Mr Hanrahan said, 'at Russia. You're too dewy-eyed, Sub. Nothing good ever comes of war.'

'It won't be the same this time, Guns.'

‘Bollocks.’

The night began to come down. All through the long wait there had been a total lack of sound from the experimental base beside the fjord, but this was not unexpected since the mountain-face lying between it and the waiting party could be assumed to reflect sound back towards the fjord. When full dark had come, Cameron passed the word to move out. They took it slowly; it was vital now to make no sound at all. They came down to the end of the track towards the water and the angle of the high shore, mere shadows in the night. Cameron had left the girl behind: he refused to risk her life in the final work-out. She was to remain in cover and wait for them to return, and if they didn’t, she was to beat it back along the track and re-embark aboard the *Castle Bay* in Skojafjord. She was to give them one hour and that was all, whether or not the base blew up. If they survived and she had gone, they would find their own way back.

Cameron, crawling painfully on his stomach, wormed ahead around the foot of the mountain until he had the buildings and the jetty in view. The place was in darkness but for a single light showing by the closed door into one of the concrete domes: no floods, thankfully. And no moon; the sky was heavily overcast and a wind was coming up, had been coming up since dusk. The surface of the fjord was ruffled with small waves and it had grown bitterly cold. It would be no joke swimming out to the jetty’s end. A long look through binoculars showed no sign of life but it could be taken for granted that there would be a guard mounted on the gate.

Cameron crawled back and reported what he had seen.

‘Sounds too easy,’ Hanrahan said. ‘We’ll have to watch out for surprises. Like—for instance—a bloody minefield after all.’ He repeated what he’s said aboard the *Castle Bay*: ‘I’d have expected a reinforced guard. Queer that there isn’t, Mr Cameron.’

‘As far as they’re concerned, Guns, the attack’s over. The ship’s gone. Anyway, there’s no sign of any extra guard and I’m going to assume there’s not one.’ Cameron turned to the waiting commandos. ‘All set?’

‘All set, sir.’

‘Right. You all know the orders. We go in now.’ He led the way; his reconnaissance had convinced him that there were no sentries or patrols extended towards the entry channel, but the small party went round the angle of the mountain slowly and circumspectly, making no sound and, despite all the assurances, on edge for the terrible eruption of mines and a repetition of the slaughter on the northern perimeter. There was some distance to cover and once round Cameron judged it safe to advance for a while on foot rather than crawl on their stomachs. They narrowed the distance and breathed easier: Nordli had been right—no minefield. When they were within some four hundred yards of the base perimeter, Cameron halted the advance and ordered the men down flat. The sappers, carrying the fuse-line, detonators and tools hooked to their bodies, moved for the water, dropping slowly in, making no splashes that could be seen among the wavelets lapping the rocky shore. Covered by the infantrymen with Sten guns aimed towards the perimeter gate, they swam out with a slow breast-stroke for the end of the jetty. It was expertly done: within seconds Cameron had lost sight even of their woollen-capped heads and blackened faces. Then he and his party crawled slowly ahead, closing the distance towards the point where the end of the fuse-line would be brought ashore.

‘Cocoa, sir.’

Forbes turned from the bridge guardrail. ‘Thank you, it’s very welcome.’ He took the mug from the boatswain’s mate. It was comfortingly warm in his hands. Warm, too, when it reached his stomach. It was a wretchedly cold

night, but not as bad for him as for Cameron's party: he could always go into the warmth of the chartroom if he wanted to... he *did* want to, but his place was on the bridge and never mind Beddows, who'd kept on saying he should get some sleep since he could be called in seconds if anything should blow up. Blow up! Forbes grinned to himself at his navigator's choice of words. He hoped fervently that something would blow up before long and had no doubts that, if and when it did, he would hear it all the way from Vest Hammarfjord. Perhaps he was being over-conscientious, but that was the way he happened to be made and he wouldn't rest easy if he left the bridge.

Keeping himself awake, he walked up and down past the binnacle, looking down at his manned guns that had so sadly failed to penetrate that damned experimental set-up. Two attempts, one by the army, one by himself, and the result had been total, abject failure. The Nazis must be having a good laugh over all that. Also, they must know he was hoping to make the open sea, would indeed be expecting him to be well on his way out by now. It was bloody odd that the enemy wasn't in evidence. True, there might be that trap ahead that he had expected he might run into, but, since he hadn't arrived at it, he would have thought they would have put on a search and found him here in a recess of Skojafjord. All he could do was to be grateful they hadn't; but it was still odd.

Forbes craved a cigarette. But he couldn't indulge himself; the ship lay darkened throughout, and glowing cigarette-ends could be seen a surprisingly long way in the dark.

It was a job now to keep his eyelids open. He cannoned into the binnacle and realized that he'd fallen momentarily asleep whilst on the move.

It was no good; Beddows had been right. A captain more than half asleep could become a menace to his ship and all her company. He was about to tell the Officer of the Watch, young Ricketts, that he was going to the chartroom

for a spell when something, perhaps that which he had been half expecting and which had kept him glued to the bridge, happened.

There was a ripple on the water, a small splash, no more than that, about three cables'-lengths off his port beam. Forbes brought his binoculars up and focussed. He saw nothing, but remained convinced that his unaided vision hadn't failed him. He lowered the binoculars again and stood frowning and wondering.

'Red nine oh,' he said to Ricketts. 'See anything?'

Ricketts brought up his own binoculars and looked. 'No, sir,' he said. 'Something on the water, do you mean, sir?'

'Yes...'

Ricketts continued looking. He reported, 'Nothing moving that I can see, sir. It's very dark, though. Shall I put the searchlight on it, sir?'

Forbes hesitated. 'No. Just keep watching very carefully. I don't want to show the ship up unnecessarily.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

'But pass the word, quietly, to the close-range weapons' crews to stand by their guns and be ready to open immediately they get the word.' As Ricketts carried out the order, Forbes went on searching the sector. No result; then he fancied he picked up another slight movement, some small disturbance in the water, still on the same bearing but closer to his port side. It was so small it could easily have been a fish.

Forbes blew out his breath and relaxed.

A fish!

Of course, it must be a fish. He was getting too old for command if he allowed himself to be rattled by a fish swimming peacefully about its nocturnal business of swallowing up creatures smaller than itself, or simply taking exercise... but he saw the movement again just as he was about to pass

another message to the close-range weapons and something made him decide not to put the crews off the alert. God knew why... some sixth sense, fish or not.

Ricketts said, 'I still can't see anything, sir.'

Forbes mentioned fish, and Ricketts agreed. Reluctantly, Forbes settled for fish; and then, from deep in the ship, right below the waterline, there came a noise. It was hard to identify: a dull thud, and then a clang, though not quite a clang. And then a dragging sound.

Suddenly, blinding awareness came to Forbes. He said, 'Fish my backside!' He moved fast for the voice-pipe to the wheelhouse. 'Clear the engine-room and lower deck immediately, all hands on deck!' He turned to Ricketts. 'The buggers are clamping a limpet mine to the plates. Get the commandos to man the sides with all the guns they can muster. And swing out all boats.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Smudges on the water's surface indicated the two sappers swimming back. They were assisted ashore by the commandos and came out shivering in the cold wind. There was still no sign of life from the base other than the movement of a sentry who tramped up and down more, probably, to keep his circulation going than anything else.

One of the sappers reported, 'Detonators in place and valve half shut over the end of the fuse. We led the fuse where the spark won't be seen—along the underside of the jetty, working from the water.'

'A cold job,' Cameron said.

There was a quiet laugh. 'Jesus, you can say that again.' The soldier indicated the end of the fuse-line. He said, 'It's wet but it should be all right—anyway, we'd better hope it's still waterproof. It's bloody old material, I suppose you know that, sir?'

Hanrahan took up that one. 'All I've got. Blame the bloody Admiralty, not me. Getting stores, even armament stores, out of the buggers, it's like expecting milk from a nun. Give us the end, son.'

The sapper passed the fuse-end over and Hanrahan gave it a pull. It lay on the ground, stretching back through the darkness to the jetty, in near enough a straight line. The Gunner brought matches from a pocket, took up the end of the fuse again, felt it and sniffed it and then brought out a jack-knife. Opening this, he cut a length off the end of the fuse and stuffed the rejected piece into his pocket. Then, shielding a match with his body, he struck it and applied the flame to the fuse. It caught at once and began sputtering. From now on until the spark reached the jetty would be the most risky part of the

operation. The sputter was not much, but it could be seen as it began to close towards the jetty, and there was no chance of lowering it out of sight below the edge of the fjord: the waves were just too much. In no time the fuse would be extinguished. Hanrahan said, 'I'll back along with it as far as the jetty and shield it from prying eyes, Sub.'

'You'll go up with it—you can't risk—'

'Yes, I can.'

'Look, Guns, I'll go. It's up to me—'

'No it bloody well isn't, Mr Cameron. I'm the Gunner and it's my bloody fuse and I'm going,' Hanrahan said obstinately. 'There's not a lot of risk. I'll nip back soon as the spark reaches the jetty, and then if they do see it, they'll never react in time to do anything about it, the Jerries won't. That'll give me long enough.'

'It won't and you know it, Guns. You can't have it both ways. Either the Jerries have got long enough to deal with it, or you've no time at all to get safe away. By my estimate, you'd only have ten minutes—'

Hanrahan said, 'I can run a long way in ten minutes, you'd be surprised.'

He started backing away; Cameron said no more. This was no time for argument and to pull rank could be just a joke. Sub-lieutenants RNVR might well outrank warrant officers, but if you were wise you didn't tell warrant officers that. And Mr Hanrahan obviously wouldn't have taken a blind bit of notice in any case.

The commandos watched the Gunner move away till he was lost to sight in the darkness. The fuse burned on, its sputter dimming as the distance increased. Now was the time for the rest of the party to beat it back around the corner into the entry channel. In the vast explosion to come no one would live along the front of the mountain: when the fuse-trail reached the jetty end of the pipeline and flashed along into the storage tanks there would be an

inferno of fire and massive chunks of flung rock. The commando NCO made the point. He asked, 'What about us lot, then?'

Cameron said, 'We stay till Mr Hanrahan's in the clear. We still have a part to play. He may need covering fire.'

Aboard the *Castle Bay* the upper deck was filled with men. On the bridge Beddows asked, 'Aren't you going to abandon, sir, get the hands ashore?'

'No, Pilot, I'm not. There's no damn rush! These buggers don't set their bloody machines to go up before they're well away and clear themselves. Are those commandos ready yet?' He peered aft.

'All ready, sir.'

'Why the hell didn't you say so before?' Forbes shouted down from the after rail of the bridge: 'Below there! As soon as you see anyone in the water, open fire on him but don't kill him if you can avoid it. Wing him and then bring him inboard for questioning.'

A voice came back: 'They'll swim submerged, sir. We won't get a sight of them.'

Forbes swore: the commando was right. He called down savagely, 'Very well, pepper the water and we'll hope to take one of the buggers alive. Open fire now.'

As the automatic weapons fired downwards, the water became speckled like the result of a hailstorm. Forbes, watching over the side in the beam of an Aldis—no point now in trying to remain anonymous—was the first to see a flaccid body break surface, a bullet-riddled torso wearing breathing equipment, head and arms hanging down into the water and trails of blood swirling. There was satisfaction in that but not much advantage. Forbes shouted down to the upper deck again. 'Hold it for a while. I want one of them alive. Be bloody careful. I have to know where the buggers have fixed

the mine and how long we've got before it blows.' He broke out into a profuse sweat: that time could be hours or minutes and never mind what he'd said to Beddows.

He was in luck. Another man came to the surface, showing signs of life even though his breathing apparatus seemed to have been punctured by the commandos' fire. An able-seaman went over the side, carrying a life-line attached to a lifebuoy. Striking out, he had the German in his arms quickly, and raised a hand. The men tending the line hauled in and brought the two alongside a jumping ladder put out from the after well-deck. The swimmer was shoved up the ladder and more men came down to drag him inboard. From the well-deck he was taken up to the bridge.

Forbes said, 'Talk and make it fast. I want to know where you put the mine and how long we have before it goes up.'

The German looked as though he was half drowned but he wasn't going to talk. He gathered saliva and spat full at the Captain. Forbes brought out a handkerchief and wiped the spittle away. He said evenly, 'As one serviceman to another, I can't blame you for doing your duty. But I don't propose to sacrifice my ship's company, or my ship, for your duty. I have mine too. Chief Boatswain's Mate?'

'Yes, sir?' Chief Petty Officer Tanner took a pace forward, coming from behind the German.

'Take him below to the double-bottom amidships, please, Tanner. He's to stay there till he decides to talk. When he has decided, he can bang on the deckhead.'

'Aye, aye, sir!' Tanner said with a certain amount of relish. It was bad enough being detailed to clean out the double-bottoms, let alone be shut down there. The double-bottoms stank of all manner of muck, there was precious little air and certainly no fresh air, and they were as far down in the

ship as it was possible to get. The bottom, in fact, where the limpet mine was stuck. There was a snag: the skipper hadn't said who was to stay on top of the double-bottom and listen for the Jerry's bang. Tanner, as the senior rating present when the order had been given, decided it had to be up to him. The skipper hadn't bothered to ask if the Jerry spoke English, and, having no German himself, had simply said his piece. But, taking the man below in custody of two seamen, Tanner elucidated the fact that the Hun did speak some English. This he established by saying calmly, 'Hitler's a bastard. Deserves all he's going to get. Eating carpets, my word!'

'The Führer,' the German said, 'does not eat carpets. Heil, Hitler!'

'You , heil who you like,' Tanner said vigorously as the Jerry was shoved down into the double-bottoms, 'I don't care. Just as long as you have a good ponder and then bang on the deckhead above you. If you don't, you'll fragment.'

He shut the hatch and put the clips on. Then, folding his arms across his body, he leaned back against a bulkhead and waited. It wasn't a nice job. He brought out a packet of Players. He took a fag out and before lighting it his eye was caught by the familiar wording on the packet itself. It said: DUTY FREE HM SHIPS ONLY. He laughed, hollowly. HM Ships. Jesus! The missus had so often said that he'd given his life to HM Ships, that they were more important to him than she was, or the kids even. It wasn't true, of course, though any minute now it could be. Tanner reflected on that limpet mine: one thing they could do, perhaps, would be to drag the bottom, put a long wire over aft, with the ends inboard, and pull it along the bottom from aft to for'ard. That held dangers—dislodgement could set off the mine for all he knew, even if it was on a time fuse. Also, the wire could foul on other projections, such as the echo sounder. They were in a cleft stick, dependent for their lives on the Hun in the double-bottom, unless they abandoned ship.

It was a nasty decision for the skipper to have to make, but if he didn't make it, then Tanner would soon begin to feel very vulnerable indeed. The Jerry somehow hadn't looked the sort who would crack.

In his fuse-shielding role, Mr Hanrahan backed at the rate of a foot every thirty seconds towards the jetty. When he was about half-way between the jetty and the concealed British party he swore and stopped.

The bloody fuse had gone out.

Seawater, or rather fjord water, had penetrated the outer covering. Mr Hanrahan brought out his knife, cut off a little over a foot of fuse and some thirty seconds of his time, struck a match in the lee of his body and relit the fuse. Once again it sputtered nicely and the Gunner resumed his backward motion. Now and again he cast glances over his shoulder towards the base: thanks to the thick darkness he was still totally anonymous. He could see the German sentry clearly enough in the solitary light that was still burning. The man had no suspicions at all; but Mr Hanrahan began to feel uncomfortably exposed as his rump neared the jetty. His luck wasn't going to hold: it was a sort of inner feeling he had, a nasty conviction of failure. He would go and make a noise, just enough to alert that sentry, something like that—and if he went too bloody close he stood a bloody good chance of being seen anyway, noise or not.

He looked round again.

Forty feet to the jetty, give or take a few. Forty feet for that small spark at the end of the fuse-line to show if he left it and buggered off south. It was much too risky. He had to go with it all the way to the jetty; once the spark had gone that far, it wouldn't be seen thereafter—the jetty itself would hide it nicely, as planned. There was just one way for him to remain unseen while he got it there: get himself below the level of the shore, below the fjord's bank.

Mr Hanrahan moved sideways, cautiously, with the fuse.

He set his teeth and lowered himself carefully over into the water. God—it was bloody cold! He shivered, but held the fuse-line clear of the water and just below the hard-packed ground that formed the shore. It was well hidden from the sentry now. Mr Hanrahan swam towards the jetty, somewhat grampus-like but taking great care not to splash. He had reached it and was watching the spark move up the fuse to become lost in the jetty's supports when the floodlights came on over the base.

Mr Hanrahan, half in the water and half out, clinging to the metal framework, stayed dead still with his heart thumping like a blacksmith's hammer. He had ten minutes left.

Aboard the *Castle Bay* the minutes were ticking past as well, only no one knew how many were left. Forbes sweated: he was still reluctant to abandon ship. He believed that the explosion of the limpet mine might do no more than blow a hole in the ship and put her flat on the bottom—soundings had shown that he had only eighteen feet of water beneath him. His upper deck would be above water. If that happened he would never take the ship out to sea, of course, but at least he would be able to fire his guns so long as the magazines didn't flood and he could go down fighting, taking plenty of Germans with him when they came in.

Beddows wanted to abandon. He said, 'It's likely the magazines'll go up, sir. If they do, the casualties will be heavy.'

'Yes, I realize that, Pilot, but these limpet mines aren't all that big. I'm pretty sure it'll just flood us if it goes up. Also, it may be sited well clear of the magazines—a matter of luck, that.' Forbes rubbed at his eyes: he felt he was too tired to think straight, even to make proper decisions as quickly as he ought. 'If only that bloody Hun would break! If we knew where it was—' He

broke off, stared at Beddows. 'What the hell's that?'

Sounds were coming from below, clanging sounds, possibly from beneath the ship. Beddows said, 'Another mine?'

'I doubt it. Could the thing shift, I wonder?'

'I've no idea. Maybe it's about to go up.' There was accusation in Beddows' voice: too late now to abandon and the order should have been given long ago. The sounds continued for a few moments, then stopped. Then they started again. Below, right atop the double-bottom, CPO Tanner heard them more clearly than did Forbes on the bridge, and he went fast for the ladder and grabbed a sound-powered telephone to call the skipper.

'Tanner here, sir. Noises—'

'Yes, I've heard them. What do you make of it?'

'Dunno, sir. Must be to do with the mine, sir. That's all I can say.'

'Get up top,' Forbes said down the telephone. 'Fast!'

'Yessir. And the Jerry?'

'Leave him. You're worth more than he is.'

Forbes slammed the phone down. Below, Tanner wiped his face with his handkerchief and thought briefly about the German. Poor sod—but he'd been about to deprive Mrs Tanner of her breadwinner. Tanner went up more ladders, very fast, to the upper deck. On the bridge, Forbes was about to give further orders when there was a heavy explosion from the port side aft and for a moment brilliant light flared, on the surface of the fjord. Forbes grabbed for a hold of the bridge guardrail. Spray, flung into the air, spattered down over the bridge; small fragments of metal came down with the spray. The explosion had been close enough to the ship to send shock waves clanging through her hull, but there was no perceptible loss of buoyancy or stability nor any other indication of damage. Forbes stared in utter astonishment, looked along the decks below and saw the craning necks along the port side.

Then Beddows, behind him, said something in a tone of horror.

Forbes turned. Beddows was staring down at the deck of the bridge.

‘What is it, Pilot?’

Beddows pointed, wordlessly. On the deck was a man’s arm, severed at the elbow but otherwise intact, with the hand clenched around a piece of metal, a ringbolt by the look of it. Round the wrist the identity disc was still in place, a dull red circle. Forbes said, ‘Shouldn’t have worn it there, should he, Pilot. The neck’s the place... so they tell us.’ He was conscious of the absurd inanity of his words but he couldn’t help it. It was becoming a filthy war, all right. He shouldn’t have been so affected by just one more death; but his brain, however weary, was telling him what had happened. He bent and flicked on a pocket torch and read the details on the identity disc: Cpl Savage, John Fredk, C of E, 9 SWB. South Wales Borderers... one of the regiments that had retrained as commandos. They’d been at Narvik and now they were aboard the *Castle Bay*. Corporal Savage had taken it upon himself, without orders, without even asking permission, to dive down, release the mine, and swim away with it.

Forbes resisted with difficulty a strong urge to bring the German up from the double-bottom and hand him over to the commandos with *carte blanche* for them to do just as they liked with him.

There appeared to be no reason why the Germans should have switched on the floodlights; possibly, Cameron thought, it was at routine intervals and it was just their bad luck that it should have happened while the Gunner was out there. Hanrahan couldn’t get back now; to run out into the open would be suicide and he wouldn’t stand much chance of remaining unseen under those floods if he tried to swim for it, either. And each second was bringing the sputter of the fuse closer to the end of the pipeline and the detonators.

There was nothing else for it now: the Gunner had to be given his chance.

Cameron said, 'Fire for the floods. Now.'

He lifted his own gun; streams of lead swept towards the big arc lamps and the light over the door. They died; the Germans must have been having quite a time of it, continually replacing bulbs.... After that, they waited, flat on their stomachs, behind what cover they could find from the rough ground as bullets zoomed across from the darkened perimeter, close above their heads. Cameron was unable to see the spark of the fuse: too far, or had it gone out? After a minute or two, he heard the Gunner's voice.

'Get the hell out now, Mr Cameron. I'll be right behind you and the buggers can't see us.'

'Right!' Cameron called back, and scrambled to his feet. The soldiers did likewise. As they belted for the safety of the entry channel, bullets swept down. The Germans were firing blind. But Mr Hanrahan had been wrong that they would remain unseen: a searchlight flickered on, its beam wavered for a moment, then came down and steadied.

They were cruelly silhouetted. As they ran on like the wind itself, there was a cry from behind, and Cameron halted to look round. The Gunner was flat on the ground, clearly seen in the searchlight's beam. Bullets were thudding into his twitching body. Instinctively Cameron started to run back, but was taken in a grip of steel by the commando NCO.

'No, you don't. It's bloody suicide and too bloody late anyway, he's dead. Don't linger or you'll kill us all.'

The NCO was right, however much it grated. They ran on, leaping over the boulders. There didn't seem to be any pursuit as such; they were still within range of the Germans' automatic weapons and probably the Jerries were expectant of an attack from the other side and didn't want to deplete the defence of the base. And in spite of the searchlight, they reached the angle of

the shore intact but for a number of wounds, mostly in the fleshy parts, though one of the sappers got it in a knee joint and had to be carried on.

They had just made the corner, and were around it into the channel, when the Gunner's fuse blew the detonators. As the aviation spirit caught and flashed back into the tanks inside the mountain behind the base, the violence of the explosion seemed to shatter the whole neighbourhood; a wind, a hot wind of near gale force, swept up into the channel itself. The waters of the fjord lay under pyrotechnic brilliance far brighter than the day. They were pock-marked and turbulent as rock flew, punched out by the tremendous force of exploded aviation spirit and the contents of the magazines, including the warheads of the flying bombs themselves. The huge explosions went on and on and on; when they had finished they were replaced by a continuing roaring sound as of the whole mountain behind the base collapsing. Clouds of dust swept across the fjord and into the channel, borne along the still-hot wind.

When the racket lessened a little, they moved back, around the corner, to take a look. There wasn't much to be seen. The base had vanished as though it had never existed at all, lying beneath a vast pile of shattered rock. The whole front of the mountain had been blown out so far as could be seen, leaving clear sky above where the overhang had been. Over it all flickered red, angry fires, the very fires of hell.

Cameron said in a taut voice, 'Right, that's it. Back to the ship now.'

They trekked back through the night; the girl had stayed to guide them. Dawn was in the sky as they came down to the shore of Skojafjord. The *Castle Bay* was there still; and a hail from Cameron brought in a boat to take them off.

Cameron reported to the Captain on the bridge. Forbes listened in silence

then said quietly, 'Very well done, Sub—all of you. It's bloody rotten about poor old Hanrahan. Hard to have that happen when you think you've retired and finished with it all. I happen to know he didn't want to come back. He wanted some time with his wife and family... but he didn't let that stop him doing what the service demanded.'

'No, sir.' Cameron paused for a moment. 'What now, sir?'

'What now, Sub?' Forbes gave an edgy laugh. 'What else but take the ship to sea? And no time like the present!' He turned to Beddows. 'Cable and side party, Pilot, and special sea dutymen. Remainder of the hands to stay at action stations.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Beddows saluted and left the bridge with the boatswain's mate. As the pipes began shrilling throughout the ship and echoing off the mountains, Forbes bent to the voice-pipe.

'Warn the engine-room,' he said. 'I shall be getting under way immediately. Tell the Chief Engineer to be ready for very sudden alterations in revolutions.'

He straightened, and glanced at Cameron. 'You're tired, Sub.'

'So are you, sir.'

Forbes smiled. 'I can't afford to be. You can. Get below and get some breakfast, then turn in. You've done enough.'

Cameron stood his ground. 'I won't sleep, sir, and I've no appetite for breakfast.'

'So what are you asking?'

'I'd like to be on the bridge, sir. We're two officers short now, with the First Lieutenant and Mr Hanrahan—'

'Yes. All right, if that's what you want. I can do with you, I admit. First job: send down to my servant for coffee, hot and strong, and toast and marmalade.'

‘Aye, aye, sir—’

‘For two,’ Forbes said firmly. ‘You’re going to bloody well have some breakfast! No one but a fool fights on an empty stomach.’ He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and handed a rather crushed packet to Cameron.

According to Jakob Nordli, they had some sixty-five miles to steam before they would emerge into the open sea off Hjelmsoy Island not far to the westward of the North Cape. If they got as far as that then Nordli and the other Resistance man would leave the ship. Nordli had some good friends in some of the tiny, remote settlements of the far north.

‘What about your families on Vest Hammarfjord?’ Forbes asked.

Nordli shrugged. ‘We fear for them, Captain, we fear very much. I say no more.’

‘Yes—I’m sorry. If ever England’s occupied by the bloody Nazis, I can only hope we’d have as much guts as you.’ Forbes lifted his binoculars and changed the subject. ‘That’s the next fjord ahead now.’

‘Yes. A short but narrow connecting channel.’

‘Then one more fjord after this next one.’

‘Yes. That is where I think the danger will come. The second of the fjords is very wide and open.’

‘So you said. We’ll be ready.’

The *Castle Bay* moved on, leaving Skojafjord. Forbes nosed the ship at dead slow into the connecting strip of water: there was very little to spare on either hand. As the bows emerged into the next fjord Cameron spotted a grey-painted craft, just becoming visible round a spit of land to the west.

‘Vessel to port, sir,’ he reported. ‘Looks like an MTB.’

‘Warn the guns’ crews,’ Forbes ordered. He thought: here it comes! The ship moved on; Forbes increased speed to half on the telegraph as he came

out from the channel's constriction. The MTB became fully visible, the German naval ensign flaunted at her stern, and the port lookout reported a torpedo trail already in the water.

'Port fifteen,' Forbes ordered in a tense voice. 'All guns that can bear, open fire.'

The 4-inch guns crashed out as the ship turned towards the oncoming torpedo in order to present a smaller target. The shooting was good: a shell took the MTB slap amidships on her starboard side, and she went up as her remaining torpedoes exploded. Debris flew into the air, came down again to dapple the water; the torpedo sped past only a matter of feet from the starboard side of the *Castle Bay*. Half a minute later, as Forbes put the ship back on course across the fjord, there was another explosion. The torpedo had hit the shoreline. By now there was optimism around; they all felt they were going to get away with it. All except Nordli.

'There is still one more fjord, Captain,' he said. 'That is where I fear the most. And after that, the open sea—and the possibility of the German battle-cruisers.'

Forbes nodded. 'Well, we'll just take what comes. I don't doubt the buggers'll do all they can to get us after what hit them in Vest Hammarfjord, but we're not far off now, and the chances are that Admiral Vian's somewhere out there—and the Home Fleet battleships not far off, too.'

Nordli pursed his lips and gave a gloomy shake of his head. The Nazis were tenacious, whatever else they were. The *Castle Bay* steamed on, making good speed across the fjord.

Three hours later they were moving across the next and last and were almost standing clear when the menacing sound of aircraft engines was heard approaching from the south.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It had been murder, it had been hell a hundred times over.

Cameron dragged himself through deep waves of giddiness; the boat drifted, thrown this way and that by the waves of a cold sea. Blood was everywhere: over the bodies, over the living, over the thwarts and swilling about, salt-sodden now, over the bottom boards. The stench of blood and death filled the nostrils. Cameron leaned over the gunwale and was violently sick. Beside him, the girl stirred and moaned. She wasn't badly hurt: just a glancing bullet across the forehead, from one of the lead-spitting dive-bombers that had made a final run over the *Castle Bay* as she went down. That spray of lead had just caught the whaler as it made into a tree-lined inlet running off the fjord; after that, the aircraft had left them and flown away to report success to Reichsmarschall Goering.

Cameron found it difficult now to recall the exact sequence of events. At the start, the Stukas had come out of the sun, screaming down on the northern extremity of the fjord where the old *Castle Bay*, with her screw turned at emergency full ahead, had attempted the last run out for the open sea beyond. One of the Stukas had dropped its load in the water slap behind the poop; after that, the ship lay at the mercy of the Germans, out of control, with both screw and rudder gone. She had drifted on under her own impetus for a while; then more bombs had come down, most of them near misses that had shaken her plates from stem to stern.

Then a machine-gun attack, as though the Germans meant to prolong the agony. Forbes had gone, sliced through by the same burst that had ripped into Beddows and Jakob Nordli. Cameron had survived only by diving head first

down the starboard ladder to the Captain's deck, then down to the main deck. In the next run in, the signalman and the bridge messenger had been killed, together with many of the guns' crews. Within minutes the close-range weapons were out of action; as men ran to take the places of the dead, they too were met by the stutter of the diving machine-guns. Bodies had lain everywhere, draped across the guns themselves, on the deck, on the ladders until they had fallen away, at the searchlight—just everywhere, grotesque and horrible and pathetic.

The next bomb hit had been on the bridge itself: that took the wheelhouse with it, together with the quartermaster and his helmsmen. After that the fo'c'sle. Cameron had watched Ricketts die as he ran to man one of the few remaining Oerlikons. Ricketts had simply ceased to be, seen for a brief fragment of time spreadeagled like a broken puppet and blackened in the middle of brilliant flame. Fires had broken out below: the ship was a shambles. Then, already down by the stern, she had levelled out after the hit on the fo'c'sle and had begun to sink on a more or less even keel. Earlier, her impetus had carried her in towards the shore, towards the inlet where the final attack had come: Forbes had been so close to his goal of the open sea, had been on the very verge of making the last exit channel. Cameron, seeing that instant decision was vital and that to abandon was the last frail hope of saving anyone at all, had found a petty officer and a handful of seamen and had set about lowering the one boat left undamaged in the attack—a whaler under oars. The proper lowering procedures were overtaken by the sinking action of the ship: in the end the whaler had just floated free and the naval ratings and some soldiers and the girl had piled aboard in the last few minutes before the ship went down. They had nearly succumbed to the vortex—nearly, but not quite. Some desperate pulling got them away just in time, and they were able to hold the boat away from the swirl of water and the clouds of steam as the

boiler-room began to flood. Finally, as they made the inlet under a hail of bullets, there had been a massive explosion that had blown the water up into the sky and had hurled parts of the sunken ship in all directions; it had also thrown up the dead and those who had tried to swim away. The fire below decks had presumably reached the magazines and shell handling rooms before they had flooded. When the handful of survivors had pulled themselves together, Cameron, scarcely knowing what he was doing, had taken the whaler out through the short channel into the sea behind Hjelmsoy Island. He had been surprised to find Jane with them; she told him he had come down for her, down to the sick bay, and had made her leave. There had been no one else there; they'd all been up topsides, trying to help the wounded. The doctor had ordered her to remain below.

Cameron said dully, 'I don't remember.'

'Well,' she said, 'you did. You got me into the boat.'

He nodded. If she said so, it was probably true.

He listened now to the groans of the wounded men. Not many of them were going to live. That last aircraft had seen to that. Cameron was scarcely conscious of his own useless leg; it hurt like hell when, in rowing, he thrust it against the stretcher, but he didn't wholly realize there were two bullets in it, just thought maybe he'd strained a ligament or something... another man, the petty officer, was pulling too and they had made some sort of progress out to sea. Later, the seas themselves took the whaler in their grip and swept them out past Hjelmsoy. Out in the Arctic Ocean, how long could they last now?

It was some twenty-four hours after the *Castle Bay* had gone that the girl said, 'Look.'

'What is it?' Cameron tried to concentrate. She said, 'Ships, Donald. Warships. And I think they're ours.'

He made an effort, and swung his body round, and looked. He looked long

and hard. He saw white and red, he saw many ships, both naval and merchant. After some more concentration he saw a white flag with a red St George's Cross, and two red balls in the quarters nearest the mast. He said, 'It's Vian. Vian, with the homeward-bound convoy from Archangel.'

Four days later the escort parted company with the ships of the convoy and entered Rosyth, coming beneath the great, friendly span of the Forth Bridge. The bullets had been extracted from Cameron's leg and he was feeling fine by now; so was Jane. Of the other survivors, they'd all made it except one. According to Vian's Surgeon Commander, they would be fully fit inside a week or so. Leave was the next thing on the agenda; that applied to Cameron as well, once his leg had fully healed. But first there was someone to meet, someone who had come up from the Admiralty by the night train as a result of signals made once the escort was safely in home waters. He was brought to see Cameron next day in the base hospital ashore.

It was the Rear-Admiral from the operations room. He didn't give his name, nor was it used when Cameron was introduced. But he said, 'I'm told you saved Jane's life, Cameron. I'm grateful... very grateful. She's—of value to the war effort, believe me. Well done.'

'Thank you, sir—'

Not in regard to Jane alone, Cameron. Other things. Some of your survivors have told the story as far as they know it. When it's all pieced together, certain recommendations will be going in. I'm authorized to mention the DSC.'

The Rear-Admiral clapped him on the shoulder and turned away, looking a little emotional, Cameron fancied. It was odd: there was a distinct likeness between the Admiral and the girl. Could be coincidence... but Cameron, who believed it wasn't, read into the Admiral's reticence a hint to keep his mouth

shut as to identities.

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