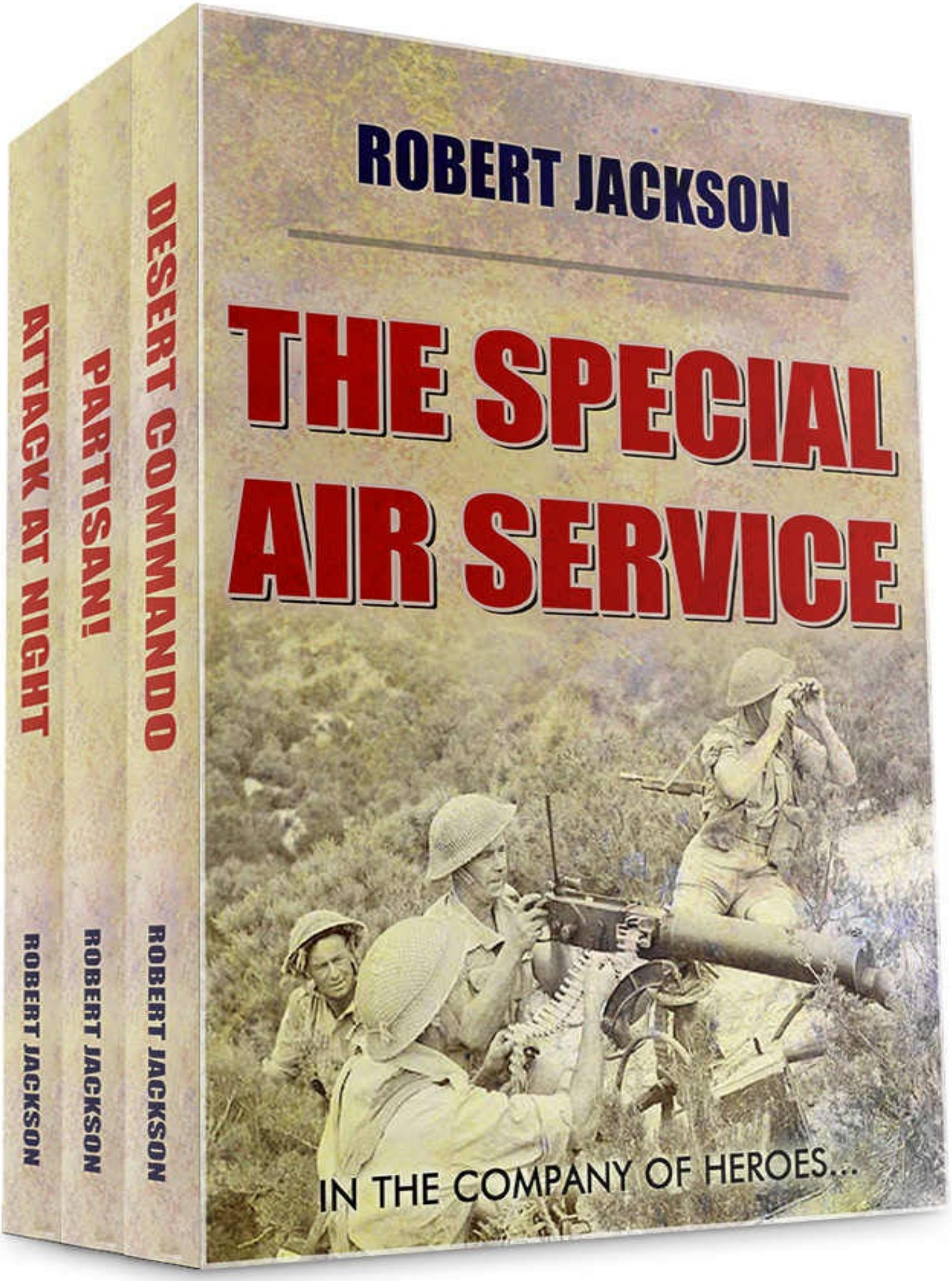

ROBERT JACKSON
THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE
IN THE COMPANY OF HEROES...
DESERT COMMANDO
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PARTISAN!
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ATTACK AT NIGHT
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THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE

Robert Jackson

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Chapter One

The tarmac road was narrow and full of potholes, a leprous grey snake that grew increasingly vague until, at the limit of vision, it disappeared into a haze of blown sand and drifting exhaust fumes. The sky was overcast and the afternoon was cold, for the Egyptian autumn was in its early days and the overall feeling of rawness and depression was intensified by a biting wind that knifed across the Canal Zone.

The driver of the 30-hundredweight Chevrolet truck swerved sharply to avoid a motorcycle combination that seemed to appear from nowhere and swore loudly, sticking up two fingers at the helmeted rider. The latter returned the gesture and dropped back in the Chevrolet's dust wake.

'Be glad when we're clear of this lot, sir,' the driver said, touching a light to his cigarette without slackening the truck's pace.

Lieutenant Callum Douglas glanced at him briefly and nodded. To speak was to invite a mouthful of swirling dirt. He huddled deeper into his sheepskin jacket — a non-regulation item of his equipment for which he was, at this moment, heartily grateful — and flexed his legs, for his feet were perched uncomfortably on an ammunition box and cramp was beginning to set in.

Every spare inch of the truck was crammed with equipment — ammunition, explosives, weapons and other paraphernalia that was the life blood of the Long Range Desert Group, to which both the truck and its driver belonged. In addition, the vehicle carried two LRDG sergeants, wedged uncomfortably between crates of hand-grenades in the open back. They were returning from leave in Cairo, and Douglas sensed that they were a little put out by the fact

that he occupied the front seat, where he could travel in comparative ease as the driver had picked him up first.

Both NCOS were undeniably the worse for wear. The conversation that had so far reached the back of Douglas's head had been monosyllabic, the longest exchange having centred on the sexual prowess of an unidentified lady who, it seemed, had shared her favours on a kind of shift system with both of them. She was obviously a woman of some intelligence, for neither of the sergeants had suspected that the other was at it as well — not, that is, until she had neatly relieved both of them of their remaining money on the same day and prudently disappeared from the scene.

The truck was painted a dull pink, a colour that provided excellent camouflage against the background of the desert. Idly, Douglas wondered how many LRDG raids it had taken part in. The Long Range Desert Group had come into existence in September 1940; now, two years later, its exploits were legendary. It was a constant thorn in the enemy's side, its patrols crossing areas of the Libyan Desert previously believed to have been impassable and striking hard at the enemy lines of communication, as well as carrying out its primary and invaluable task of reconnaissance.

It was several months since Douglas had passed along this road. The desert on either side still presented a dismal scene; the only difference now was that it was much busier. At intervals of every few hundred yards, or so it seemed, the truck passed extensive tented encampments and laagers that contained neatly-parked lines of tanks, armoured cars, artillery pieces and every conceivable type of military transport. They were not protected against air reconnaissance by camouflage netting; enemy reconnaissance aircraft had not ventured as far as the Canal Zone since the previous May, thanks to the efforts of a squadron of high-flying Spitfire fighters of the RAF at Aboukir.

Without doubt, there was something big brewing. The sheer weight of

equipment that passed Douglas's gaze as the truck jolted along spoke of it, as did the high-level changes of command that had recently taken place in the Middle East. And not before time, thought Douglas grimly as he turned over in his mind the succession of disasters that had pummelled the Eighth Army in that summer of 1942.

The agony had started during the last week of May, when the redoutable commander of the German Afrika Korps, General Erwin Rommel, had launched an all-out offensive against the Eighth Army's positions along the Gazala Line, a static defence stretching southwards from the coast forty miles west of Tobruk. After a hard and bitter battle, Rommel's Panzers had broken through, virtually destroying the Eighth Army's armoured formations and cutting off thousands of British, Commonwealth and Free French troops, whose only alternative was to surrender.

Douglas had bitter memories of those summer battles. His own regiment, the 20th Hussars, had suffered appalling losses on a hot and hazy June day in what was later to be called the Battle of Knightsbridge. The flimsy little Stuart light tanks scurried, shattered and burned amid the smoke and the swirling sand as the enemy's Panzer IIIs picked them off like flies on a wall. Douglas did not like to think about Knightsbridge; he had lost too many friends that day, and during the days that followed.

There had been no respite. On 25 June, with the Panzer divisions in hot pursuit of the British as they streamed back in disorder over the Egyptian frontier, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief Middle East Land Forces, took over personal command of the Eighth Army from General Neil Ritchie, just in time to prevent the latter fighting a disastrous do-or-die battle at Mersa Matruh — a battle that would probably have ended in total victory for the enemy.

Instead, after fighting a holding action at Mersa Matruh, Auchinleck

ordered the army back with all speed to straddle the only access route into the heart of Egypt — the forty-mile corridor between El Alamein, on the coast, and the Qattara Depression, the great impassable salt marsh in the south. It was the last line of defence before Alexandria; if Rommel broke through, the Nile Delta would be in his grasp. An armoured thrust northwards through Palestine into Iraq would follow, the Afrika Korps linking up with the German forces advancing through the Caucasus to forge a ring of steel around the Mediterranean.

But Rommel badly needed possession of the Nile Delta for another, more immediate reason, for his Mediterranean convoys, plying between Italy and Tripolitania, were suffering crippling losses at the hands of the Royal Navy and the RAF units based on the bombed and besieged island of Malta. This, and the fact that its lines of communication were extending all the time, meant that the Afrika Korps was being increasingly starved of fuel, supplies and reinforcements.

As his armour plunged along the coast road between Mersa Matruh and Alamein, Rommel knew that his resources were not sufficient to launch a frontal attack on the Eighth Army. Instead, his tactics envisaged insinuating the Afrika Korps into the Eighth Army's defensive line at its weakest points, gradually levering the British out of one position after another. There was a good chance that this might work, for Auchinleck did not have enough men to hold a continuous line. The best he could do was to string them out in defensive pockets between the coast and the Qattara Depression, blocking the gaps between them with armour and artillery.

But Rommel underestimated the depth of Auchinleck's defences, and when the Panzers struck at two key points they became bogged down in a slogging match — the very kind of battle that the Germans, short of fuel and provisions, could not afford to fight. Two Italian divisions, held in reserve

and committed at the last moment, were shattered by accurate New Zealand artillery fire.

Then Auchinleck played his trump card, striking hard at the Italian divisions wherever they were to be found, and compelling Rommel to come to their aid with German forces that were desperately needed elsewhere. Before long, all his reserves were committed and the initiative had passed to the Eighth Army. For days the battle swayed to and fro in a series of attacks and counter-attacks, with six major assaults launched against the Italian units in mid-July. By the time they ended, the 2nd New Zealand Division had reduced the Italian Pavia and Brescia Divisions to ruins in the Ruweisat Ridge area, but the attacks were not followed up by armour and the New Zealanders had over a thousand men taken prisoner when the German 8th Panzer Regiment swept over them.

Douglas had memories of that affair, too. The armoured brigade, of which his regiment had formed part, went belatedly to the New Zealanders' assistance, only to be stopped dead by newly-laid German minefields and by fire from the enemy's deadly 88-mm anti-tank guns. In all, the brigade lost a hundred tanks and over two hundred men. Douglas's tank was knocked out very early in the engagement, its port track blasted away by an 88-mm shell. By some miracle, the crew escaped unhurt and reached safety clinging to the hull of one of the few tanks that survived.

What was left of the 20th Hussars were pulled out of the battle area to rest and refit. Meanwhile, great changes swept through the Middle East Command; Auchinleck was replaced by General Sir Harold Alexander, and command of the Eighth Army was given to Major-General 'Strafer' Gott.

Gott's appointment, however, was short-lived. Early in August, the aircraft bringing him to Cairo was shot down and he was killed. His replacement was a highly professional soldier who had commanded the 3rd Infantry Division

and later II Corps during the retreat to Dunkirk in 1940. The newcomer's name was Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery.

Douglas and the 20th Hussars, still in the throes of re-equipping, missed the battle that finally threw the Afrika Korps on the defensive. It happened on the last day of August, when Rommel — determined to make a last supreme attempt to break through the Alamein line — concentrated his forces opposite what he believed to be the weakest point in the Eighth Army's defences, the stretch between Bab el Qatarra and the Depression. It was a desperate gamble, relying on a night advance through thirty miles of unreconnoitred minefields, followed by a drive east and north past the Eighth Army's defensive position at Alam Haifa Ridge to cut the coast road at El Hamman and encircle Alamein. Rommel had little in the way of reserves and petrol supplies, although he had been promised that 6,000 gallons of fuel was on its way. He could not know that the tanker carrying it was at the bottom of the Mediterranean, sunk by Malta-based aircraft.

At first, it seemed as though the gamble might succeed. A sandstorm blew up, grounding the fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force and bringing some respite to the battered German columns. The armour ground on, only to run into the teeth of substantial defences that Montgomery had created in anticipation of an assault on this sector. As the Afrika Korps approached Alam Haifa Ridge, the leading echelons encountered heavy fire from dug-in British tanks and 6-pounder anti-tank guns. The Germans managed to overrun a few of the British positions, but they could make no further headway and the attack was called off.

There was no sleep that night for the exhausted men of the Afrika Korps. The sandstorm had blown itself out and the Desert Air Force was free to resume operations, hammering the enemy hour after hour while Montgomery filled the gaps in his defences and stubbornly refused to be drawn into a

pursuit. On the next day Rommel attempted several small-scale attacks; they achieved nothing and cost him more men and equipment as the RAF pursued his columns relentlessly.

At last, his position clearly hopeless and threatened by Australian infantry attacks from the north, Rommel sanctioned a cautious withdrawal. Montgomery attempted to frustrate the German retreat by launching British and New Zealand infantry attacks, supported by Valentine tanks, but these became jammed in narrow corridors between the minefields and were stopped by accurate artillery fire. The New Zealanders penetrated some of the forward German defences, but without armoured support there was little they could do and they suffered heavy casualties.

By the end of the first week of September 1942, the battle of Alam Haifa was over, with the Afrika Korps on the defensive all along the line. It had been a decisive engagement, for it marked the end of Rommel's initiative. From then on, it was to be Montgomery's actions that would dictate the course of the desert war.

*

Douglas's driver slowed abruptly, occasioning a screech of brakes from a vehicle behind, and peered at a truck that had broken down by the roadside. Some soldiers were standing beside it disconsolately, their shoulders hunched against the cold; two more were bent under the bonnet. The driver grunted and accelerated again, offering a few words of explanation to the officer.

'Thought I'd spotted one of our blokes among that lot. It wasn't, though. They're new boys, judging by their faces.'

Douglas knew what he meant. The soldiers' faces were pale; they had not yet been subjected to the scourging of the desert sun and wind, like his own. In fact, many of the troops who now made up the expanding Eighth Army were new to the desert, and the shrewd General Montgomery had realized

that it would be a mistake to make too many demands on them at first. Accordingly, he had ordered his subordinate commanders to give new units tasks that were well within their present capabilities — and at the same time he had imposed a strict physical training programme on all personnel under his command. There were no exceptions, and now, as September drew to a close, Montgomery was well on his way to commanding the fittest British army in history.

Nor was that all: the equipment would be fitter than ever before, too. As his truck passed a tank park, Douglas surveyed its bulky occupants with a professional eye. The Valentine and Crusader tanks of Auchinleck's campaigns, puny by comparison with Rommel's Panzers, belonged to the past. These new fighting machines were American Shermans, which had just begun to arrive in Egypt. They were a match for anything the Germans had in the field, and — a fact of vital importance — they could stand out of range of the enemy's wicked 88-mm guns and pick them off.

For a moment, Douglas felt a pang of regret that he had left tanks behind him, presumably for good. Then he thought of the new challenges that lay ahead, and suddenly the chill afternoon air seemed warmer.

More vehicles were leaving the road now, turning aside to their individual destinations, and progress was easier. Visibility up front was better, too, and in the distance Douglas picked out the black silhouettes of a pair of Hawker Hurricane fighters slanting down out of the eastern sky, their wheels lowered. The driver saw them too.

'Won't be long now, sir. That's Kabrit over there, where those planes are heading. Your camp is on the edge of the Great Bitter Lake, between the airfield and a naval camp.' He grinned and added, 'It's a bit spartan.'

Douglas made no comment. After several weeks of bedding down beside the hull of a tank in the middle of nowhere, most places would seem like

luxury.

Ten minutes later, the driver turned the truck aside from the main road and took it down beside a well-worn tributary that led to the Great Bitter Lake. Under the overcast and the gathering dusk it looked a cheerless place, the grey and gloomy water ruffled by the wind, and there was a depressing air about the tented encampments that spattered its shores. Douglas noticed a good deal of activity, especially on and around a group of landing craft that were riding at anchor.

The driver halted the truck beside the first of a long row of tents.

'That's where you want to be, sir,' he said. 'They'll look after you in there.'

'Fine,' said Douglas, climbing down from the vehicle. 'Pass my kit over, will you?'

One of the NCOS in the back obligingly heaved the officer's gear over the side. A quick glance assured Douglas that none of it had been left behind. 'Thanks,' he said. 'And thanks for the lift.'

'That's okay, sir,' the sergeant replied, with a distinctive Yorkshire accent. 'I daresay we'll be seeing you again one of these days.'

It was the longest speech he had made to Douglas during the journey; the young officer wondered if his remark was prophetic.

Douglas hefted his kit and trudged through the soft sand to the tent. Dumping his baggage outside, he lifted the flap and peered into the interior, which was lit by an oil lamp.

'For Christ's sake, come on in and shut the door, old boy. There's the most awful bloody draught.'

The words came from a youthful major who was standing with both hands resting on a trestle table, looking up at the newcomer. The other occupant, a stocky corporal, was busily sticking pins into a map that was pinned to a blackboard mounted on an easel beside the tent's central pole.

Douglas did as he was told, straightened his back and saluted, explaining who he was.

The major frowned. ‘Douglas?’

For a moment, Douglas thought that some sort of horrible mistake had been made and that he might have been dropped in the wrong place. He was greatly reassured when the cloud lifted from the major’s brow.

‘Oh, yes, Douglas. Of course. Sorry, old boy. Things have a habit of moving so quickly around here that it’s a bit of a job keeping up with them. My name’s Marrick.’ He stuck out a hand. ‘Got your papers somewhere. Wait a bit, though — first things first. Where’s your kit?’

Douglas told him that he had left it outside, and an expression of pure horror crossed the major’s face. ‘Oh, for God’s sake, don’t do that, old boy. It’ll get swiped faster than you can blink. Jones, go and retrieve Mr Douglas’s stuff and find somewhere for him to bed down.’

‘We’re a bit short of tents,’ the corporal objected.

Major Marrick’s brow wrinkled again. ‘So we are,’ he said. ‘Oh — I know. What about Captain Trent’s?’

‘His stuff’s still in there, sir. And there’s a chance he might turn up.’

‘Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. In the meantime, put his kit to one side so that Mr Douglas can doss down.’

‘Sir.’ The corporal laid aside a handful of map pins and put on his beret. As he left, he said to Douglas, ‘It’s the fourth one down the line, sir. I’ll make sure everything’s in order.’

Douglas thanked him, then turned back to face the major, who was surveying the map on the blackboard.

‘Tomorrow’s exercise,’ Marrick explained, ‘or at least one of them. It’s a bit busy around here at the moment. Been pushing a lot of new chaps through lately.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Don’t know about you, but I could do with

some tea. Let's go over to the mess tent and have a chat.'

A few minutes later, they were pouring themselves mugs of steaming tea from an urn that stood in a corner of a tent that appeared to serve as a communal mess for all ranks.

'It's a bit informal,' Marrick said, half apologetically, 'but I expect you'll soon get used to it. All, our chaps have to be completely dependent on one another out there' — he waved a hand towards the tent wall, and the desert beyond — 'so the more they live together, the better for everyone's sake.' He looked hard at Douglas. 'Don't be fooled, though. For the same reason, our discipline is very strict, probably more so than anyone else's. One chap who arrived here thought it was all a bit boy scoutish and started voicing his opinions on how it should all be done inside an hour or two; he was on his way home the next morning.'

Douglas nodded. 'I'll take the hint,' he said.

Marrick laughed. 'Oh, I shouldn't worry, old boy. There's always the odd one who slips through the net, but we weed them out pretty quickly.' He took a sip of his tea. 'Damn it,' he said, 'I quite forgot to pick up your file. You'll have to refresh my memory. Tell me about yourself.'

Douglas had the feeling that Marrick knew his background off by heart, and that he was simply taking the opportunity to assess someone who, as yet, was an unknown quantity. As concisely as possible, he gave the major an account of his career to date, up to the moment of his encounter with the man who had set him on his new road.

'It was all quite accidental,' he explained. 'I was on my way into GHQ in Cairo on some errand or other when I almost collided with an officer in the corridor. We both apologized, and then I think we recognized each other at the same moment, even though the last time we'd seen one another neither of us was wearing uniform. We were, in fact, half-way up a Scottish mountain,

sometime in the spring of ’39. I was going up, and Colonel Stirling was coming down. My father was with me. We stopped for a chat, and Colonel Stirling told us that he was getting in a bit of practice before going off on a mountaineering expedition to the Rockies. He wasn’t a colonel then, of course — wasn’t even in the army. He told me later that he had come back home from America and joined the Scots Guards on the outbreak of war.’

Douglas smiled at the recollection of their unexpected second meeting in GHQ. Recognizing Stirling had not been difficult; few officers stood six feet five inches tall, and fewer still were of such athletic build. Douglas had been surprised by Stirling’s amazing power of memory. Drawing only on the strength of an hour-long conversation held more than three years earlier, Stirling had remembered that Douglas’s father had explored great tracts of Libya in the years after the First World War, under contract to search for oil; he had remembered, too, a chance remark that the elder Douglas had made, to the effect that he had taught his son to speak reasonably fluent Arabic.

The brief conversation at GHQ had decided Douglas’s career.

‘I need officers with language qualifications like yours,’ Stirling had told the younger officer bluntly. ‘You’re wasting your talents in tanks. Have a think about it overnight, and give me a call tomorrow. I can offer you a real chance to use your initiative, and the prospect of a lot of action. And don’t worry about any objections — I’ll take care of the formalities.’

It had not proved to be quite as simple as that; but it had not taken Douglas long to make up his mind, and Colonel Stirling had seen to it that the necessary strings had been pulled. So here Douglas was, feeling slightly bewildered but nevertheless ready to tackle just about anything.

Marrick listened to his story then nodded, smiling. ‘Well, we’re glad to have you with us, old boy. Now, there’ll be a meal laid on at six; it won’t be very well patronized, I’m afraid, because most the chaps are out on exercise.

Have a look round until then, if you like. After dinner I suggest you get some sleep. You'll have a hard day tomorrow.'

Dinner proved to be a very passable curry, followed by a fig pudding and strong, sweet coffee. Douglas ate with relish, finding that he was extremely hungry. Afterwards, feeling suddenly weary, he returned to his tent, intending to take Major Marrick's advice.

The oil lamp was lit, and Douglas entered to find a tall, powerfully-built soldier bending over his camp bed, arranging his sleeping-bag. The soldier straightened up, turned and snapped rigidly to attention.

'Guardsman Murray, sir,' he announced, in an unmistakably Irish brogue. 'I'll be looking after you, sir. If there's anything you want, just let me know. I've stowed your kit over there, sir, next to Captain Trent's.'

'Thank you, Murray. I don't need anything just now, apart from some sleep. What time's reveille?'

'Oh five-thirty, sir,' the big Guardsman told him. 'I'll call you in good time. Major Marrick will be expecting to see you at breakfast, sir. Now, if you're sure there's nothing I can get you, sir, I'll bid you goodnight.'

Douglas looked up at the Guardsman's friendly, open face and smiled. 'I'm quite all right, Murray,' he said. 'Goodnight to you.'

Murray departed and Douglas stretched out on his bed, fully clothed, hands clasped behind his head. After a while, finding himself drifting off into a doze, he rose to undress and extinguish the oil lamp. A makeshift shower had been rigged up behind the tents and he decided to take advantage of it before retiring. Throwing aside his clothes, he padded across the tent to retrieve a towel from his kit.

As he did so, he noticed that someone — presumably Murray — had neatly folded the missing officer's uniform and laid it on top of his belongings. Crowning the little pile was a sand-coloured beret. Douglas picked it up,

turning it round in his hands and inspecting the badge. It depicted what appeared to be a winged dagger, light blue on a dark blue background. Later, he was to learn that the dagger was no such thing, but a representation of King Arthur's sword, Excalibur.

Beneath it was a striking motto: Who Dares Wins.

On an impulse, Douglas put on the beret, straightened it, and peered at his reflection in a small shaving mirror that stood on a camp table nearby. The beret fitted — and suited him, he thought.

There was a sudden guffaw of laughter behind him and he whirled round, conscious of the fact that apart from the beret he was stark naked. An apparition thrust itself through the tent flap, its grimy, bearded features creased in mirth. It was clad in a torn and stained burnous. Despite the fact that it was grinning from ear to ear, its face exuded an unutterable weariness.

'That's my hat you're wearing,' the apparition said. 'You can have the rest to go with it, if you like. You must be Douglas. Marrick told me you were here. Welcome to the Special Air Service. Christ, I'm tired.'

The grin suddenly disappeared from the man's face and he stumbled over to the bed, collapsing face down on it. Douglas looked down at him and found he was already sound asleep. Captain Trent was back.

Chapter Two

The past fortnight had been absolute hell, but Douglas had never felt fitter. His baptism of SAS training — the back-breaking, foot-blistering forty-mile forced marches across the desert, carrying a load of seventy-five pounds — was behind him, and he had learned a whole range of new skills. Blindfold, he could strip every known make of infantry weapon, including those of the enemy, and put the pieces accurately back together; he had learned to navigate his way across the desert wastes with a precision he would never have dreamed possible, even though he had already considered himself to be reasonably proficient in the art; he had mastered new techniques that included jumping from a vehicle travelling at thirty miles an hour, rolling, and then coming up to fire accurately at a target.

He knew, too, how to move noiselessly in the dark, how to overpower an unsuspecting sentry and despatch him with a single swift knife-thrust; how to place little explosive packages called Lewes bombs — concoctions of plastic, oil and thermite — on aircraft and soft-skinned vehicles so that they would do the most damage. The bombs were named after their inventor, ‘Jock’ Lewes, a Welsh Guards officer who had been a founder member of the Special Air Service and who had lost his life on an early operation behind enemy lines in December 1941.

Between training sessions, Douglas had pieced together the astonishing history of the Special Air Service since its beginnings in the summer of 1941. A young subaltern named David Stirling was its inspiration and driving force right from the start. In 1940 he transferred from the Scots Guards to No. 8 Commando, a newly-formed force under the command of Captain Robert

Laycock. In the autumn of that year it arrived in the Middle East together with two other Commandos totalling 2,000 men. Early in 1941 Laycock's force were briefed to land on the Greek island of Rhodes and secure it against an enemy invasion, but this plan was thwarted by the swift German campaign in Greece and the subsequent capture of Crete. Layforce, as Laycock's organization was known, was split up piecemeal, part of it fighting a desperate rearguard action in Crete, part engaged against the Vichy French in Syria and another part defending a sector of the perimeter in the besieged port of Tobruk.

Word had come down from Middle East Command HQ in Cairo that Layforce was to be disbanded, a decision that by no means found favour with its founder and a number of other tough, efficient young officers, among them David Stirling and Jock Lewes. They saw Layforce, or a derivative of it, as an ideal means of striking hard at the enemy's lines of communication, which, in the summer of 1941, were growing steadily in length as Rommel's Afrika Korps plunged eastwards through Libya. Stirling and the others felt that small commando groups, operating deep behind the enemy's lines, could wreak as much havoc as a couple of divisions. The groups could either be parachuted to their objectives or landed on the coast from small craft, and both techniques were practised while Layforce was still in existence. David Stirling, recovering in hospital from a parachuting accident, made up his mind to try to form a special commando unit for just that purpose. But at that time Stirling was still only a second lieutenant, and he knew that any formal approach would be bound to meet with a blank wall of refusal. So, with characteristic determination, he decided to circumvent the usual channels and take his case directly to the C-in-C Middle East Command, General Auchinleck.

Miraculously, the scheme had worked. Bluffing his way into Middle East

Command HQ in Cairo, Stirling secured an interview with Auchinleck's deputy, General Ritchie — or rather, walked into Ritchie's office unheralded and presented him with the plan he had carefully drawn up during the long weeks in hospital. Ritchie was impressed, and promised to take up the idea with the C-in-C. He kept his word; Stirling was summoned for an audience with General Auchinleck, and as a result received authority to form a new commando force built initially around a nucleus of sixty-six officers, NCOS and soldiers drawn from what remained of Layforce.

The new force was to be called 'L' Detachment of the Special Air Service Brigade. No such brigade existed; the title was designed to fool the enemy into believing that large-scale commando-style operations were soon to be mounted against them. Its headquarters were to be at Kabrit, on the shores of the Great Bitter Lake, and training was to be completed by the beginning of November, when 'L' Detachment was to mount its first operation — an attack on five enemy airfields in support of a plan to relieve Tobruk.

The raid was disastrous. The commandos were to be dropped near their targets by five Bristol Bombay transport aircraft, but strong winds whipped up a sandstorm, blotting out landmarks, and when the parachutists were dropped they were blown miles from their objectives. Of the sixty men who set out, only twenty-two survived to be picked up at a predetermined rendezvous by patrols of the Long Range Desert Group.

The disaster might have spelled the end of the embryo SAS; instead, General Auchinleck wisely realized that the adverse and unexpected weather conditions were solely to blame. As far as Stirling and his colleagues were concerned, the failure of the airborne raid provided a salutary lesson in tactics: parachuting down to objectives was obviously not ideal, and closer cooperation with the Long Range Desert Group seemed to be a better alternative. The LRDG could take the commandos by truck within marching

distance of their targets, and pick them up again afterwards.

Subsequent operations vindicated this theory. Within a few weeks, working in conjunction with the highly experienced LRDG, SAS commandos had destroyed over a hundred enemy aircraft on the ground — even though the unit was now only twenty strong as a result of the earlier tragedy. The success of these operations led, by the summer of 1942, to considerable expansion of the SAS with the addition of French paratroops and the provision of the force's own vehicles, mainly armed jeeps. The 1st SAS Regiment came into being, and it was shortly after this that Callum Douglas became part of the organization.

Although the SAS no longer parachuted to its objectives, parachuting was still part of the training, as Douglas was now learning to his dismay. For this purpose the RAF at Kabrit kept a careworn Whitley bomber, one that had originally been flown to Malta from England to carry out some sort of special operation, been judged unfit to make the return flight and had so ended its days in Egypt, where it was used as a 'hack'. It had clearly been intended to drop parachutists on its mission from Malta, because there was a circular hole in the floor, just aft of the bomb-bay.

Cheerfully, Captain Trent assured Douglas that jumping from a Whitley was a piece of cake. It had been different in the early days, when parachute training had been carried out from an elderly Bristol Bombay transport. There had been nothing wrong with the aircraft, but the clip that attached the static line — the webbing strop that automatically opened the parachute after the wearer made his exit — to its rail inside the aircraft had caused problems. Two men had been killed, plunging to earth with unopened parachutes, before it was discovered that under certain conditions the clip could detach itself.

The biggest peril lay in what was known as 'ringing the bell' — smashing

one’s face on the far side of the exit hole. With six jumps behind him, Douglas had managed to avoid this painful experience, but he had seen one or two trainees who had not, with their noses splashed across their faces.

The lead-up to every one of the six jumps had terrified Douglas. Each time, the RAF despatcher in the Whitley had assured him that it would be better next time, but the next time had given the lie to the statement. Douglas prayed that after this, the seventh and final time in his training, he would never be called upon to jump again.

There were four men in the stick of parachutists, and Douglas was the first. He was standing upright in the vibrating fuselage, conscious of the others behind him as well as of the moistness of the palm that gripped his static line. Beside the floor hatch, a red light glowed. The despatcher motioned him forward and he sat down awkwardly on the edge of the hole, giving his static line a final tug, his legs dangling in the slipstream. He glanced down past his booted feet at the crawling, featureless desert.

The green light flashed on and the despatcher’s hand made a chopping motion. Douglas levered himself off the lip of the hole with both hands, straightening his body, chin back to avoid ‘ringing the bell’. He popped out of the Whitley’s belly with startling speed.

The fierce slipstream plucked at him and there was a brief roar from the Whitley’s engines, then silence apart from his own heavy breathing. He had jumped from a thousand feet and already the desert seemed to be coming up at him. Christ, his parachute wasn’t going to open. The static line had come adrift. In panic he looked up, just in time to see the white twenty-eight-foot canopy starting to deploy. He had got used to the shock of its opening by now, and it was not too bad; the relief, on the other hand, was as good as an orgasm.

He was swinging a little, and he knew that this was caused by the canopy

sliding to and fro on its bubble of compressed air, spilling some out in puffs from alternate edges. To check it, as he had been taught, he reached up and pulled on a pair of lift webs until his hands were level with his shoulders. He held them there until the swinging died away, then gradually released them.

Looking down, he picked out the white square of material that was his aiming point. He was descending towards it nicely, his parachute under control, and to his amazement he discovered that he was actually beginning to enjoy himself. Everything he had been taught was coming to him automatically now. ‘Head tucked in, shoulders round, feet together, watch the ground’ — that was the piece of doggerel that had been drummed into him, the key to a successful landing.

The white square came up at him rapidly; he fell towards it at twenty feet per second. He tucked his elbows into his sides and kept his feet and legs close together, with his feet almost parallel to the ground. A few moments later he made a near-faultless landing, falling loosely along the line of least resistance, as he had been taught, and distributing the impact progressively along the whole length of his body. Rolling over, he hauled on the shroud lines, collapsing the canopy, and released himself from his harness before gathering the parachute into a bundle, feeling exultant at an exercise so well done.

The other three parachutists had also touched down safely, two of them close by, the third some distance away. A truck came out to pick them up.

Douglas and the other three clambered into the truck, one, a little painfully, for he had twisted his ankle slightly. The vehicle called first at RAF Kabrit’s parachute-packing section, where they offloaded their equipment, and then drove on to the SAS encampment, where it halted outside Major Marrick’s tent. Marrick was seated outside, working on some documents at a small table, his head bent. Douglas noticed for the first time that Marrick had an

expanding bald patch on his crown, which gleamed in the afternoon sun.

It was strange, Douglas thought, how the sun showed up things that would otherwise have passed unnoticed. The sun, which had finally ousted the grey clouds, had also brought a new measure of comfort to the spartan encampment; the waters of the Great Bitter Lake, which had seemed choppy and forbidding when Douglas had first arrived, were now an inviting, placid blue.

The four parachutists got down from the truck and lined up in front of Marrick. Douglas, as the senior man — the other three were NCOS — stepped forward a pace and saluted. Marrick grinned and got up.

‘So that’s it, then,’ he said. ‘I’ve just had a call from Kabrit to let me know you all got down in one piece. Now, I haven’t got time to stand on ceremony, so you’d better put these up right away.’

He came forward and pressed something into the hand of each man. Douglas did not need to look to know what it was, and he felt a strong surge of pride. He and the others, having made their seventh qualifying parachute jump, were now entitled to wear the coveted SAS wings on their right arms. They were normally presented by Stirling himself, but the SAS commander had been called away to an urgent conference in Cairo. Sometimes, members of the SAS also earned the right to wear the light blue wings on their left breast — but this was a very special favour, bestowed on a man for distinguishing himself in action.

‘Now then,’ Marrick went on, ‘that’s the formalities done with, and also your training — almost. We’ve had to compress your training into a very short period because we are shortly going to need everyone. Fortunately, you were all fairly experienced desert men before you came here, which has made my job a lot easier. There’s just one thing left before you can call yourselves fully operational. Tomorrow, you’re going out on a recce with the LRDG.’

He smiled. ‘I’ve a feeling you’ll enjoy yourselves. A truck will pick you up at 03.00. You’ll be going to Alexandria, where the briefing is. Good luck, and see you in a few days’ time.’

*

Douglas slept little that night, with the result that he found himself dozing during the following morning’s journey. Not a good start, he told himself, as the sight of Alexandria brought him fully awake. The view told him how much he had been missing in his drab environment of the past few weeks; his eyes registered the white houses, gleaming in the morning sun around the blue sweep of the bay, and his senses tingled.

The truck disgorged its occupants at the heavily-guarded Naval Intelligence Office at Raz-el-Tin, where the briefing was to be held. As LRDG and SAS operations were often directed against enemy-held ports or coastal gun batteries, briefings were usually held here as a matter of expediency, for Naval Intelligence had amassed a wealth of information on such objectives. Moreover, the Intelligence Office at Raz-el-Tin was secure, which was more than could be said of many other locations.

Douglas had been told to report to a Captain Moynahan of the LRDG. He turned out to be a burly ex-rugby player, a former Ireland international whose battered features were partly masked by a fiery red beard. He shook Douglas warmly by the hand.

‘You’ll be coming along with me,’ he said. ‘I’ve assigned the other three SAS chaps to other patrols. I expect you’re disappointed that your first operation is going to be with us and not your own fellows?’

Douglas had to admit that he did not exactly know what was going on. ‘We’re just completing our training,’ he told Moynahan. ‘We completed our qualifying parachute jumps yesterday and were told that we were to go out on a recce with you to gain some experience of operational procedures and so on

before we get thrown in at the deep end.'

Moynahan's beard twitched and he laughed gruffly. 'Is that what they told you? Well, I can see the logic behind it. Don't expect a Cook's Tour, though; this is likely to be quite a tricky business.'

He was not inclined to elaborate further, and Douglas had to await the briefing to satisfy his curiosity. At nine o'clock, after a leisurely and very good breakfast of porridge, sausages, biscuits and hot, strong tea, all those participating in the forthcoming operation were summoned to the briefing room. Douglas did a quick head count; there were some forty men present, mostly officers and NCOS. They all stood as the briefing officers entered the room and made their way to a low dais at the far end; a naval captain lead, followed by David Stirling, a Royal Air Force wing commander and a major of the LRDG.

'Sit down, please.' The naval captain's educated voice was precise.

He coughed, then turned and pulled a cord; a roller blind shot up, revealing a wall-map depicting a stretch of North Africa that extended along the coastline from El Alamein to beyond Benghazi, and inland to the uncharted wastes of the Libyan Desert's Great Sand Sea.

'Most of you, I daresay, will be familiar with this area of operations,' the captain remarked drily. No one laughed, and the naval officer looked slightly embarrassed. Recovering his composure, he went on: 'You are about to embark on a joint operation that has several objectives. The principal objective, however, is to bring about the maximum possible disruption of the enemy's lines of supply.'

'Bloody Benghazi again,' said someone behind Douglas in a stage whisper.

The captain glared in the direction of Douglas, who felt himself redden slightly, like a schoolboy unjustly castigated for someone else's misdemeanour.

‘Rommel,’ the captain continued, ‘is not firmly on the defensive. I am not giving away any secrets when I tell you that the Eighth Army is getting ready for the big push that will drive the enemy back across Libya and eventually eliminate him; you all have eyes in your heads and have seen the preparations now in force.’ He turned and indicated the map, picking up a pointer and tapping two spots. ‘Rommel’s main lines of supply are funnelled through the ports of Tobruk and Benghazi,’ he said. ‘Those lines are already being hard hit in the Mediterranean by the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force; further disruption is bound seriously to weaken his capacity to withstand an offensive by our forces.’

Douglas leaned forward in his chair, staring at the map. The two ports of Benghazi and Tobruk were encircled in red; the naval captain tapped the more easterly circle again.

‘The principal operation, code-named Crocus, is directed against Tobruk,’ he went on. ‘It will be a simultaneous attack by land and sea and will have the twofold objective of capturing or putting out of action the coastal defence batteries, and of destroying as much as possible of the harbour installations, in particular the fuel storage tanks. As you may be aware, these are very strongly protected and are virtually bomb-proof, which means that the RAF has been unable to inflict any damage on them. It is only at Tobruk that Rommel is able to land petrol in bulk from tankers, so if the storage tanks can be eliminated it will add immeasurably to his problems.’

The naval officer glanced briefly at David Stirling, and said: ‘This will be the task of the SAS, as will be the second operation, code-named Cactus. This will be directed against Benghazi and will have broadly the same objectives as Crocus — in other words, to sink shipping in the harbour and do as much damage as possible to the harbour installations. The LRDG will have a part in both these operations, providing transport on the outward and inward

runs and creating diversions where necessary.

‘The other two operations, Rosebud and Daisy, will be carried out by the Long Range Desert Group. Rosebud’s objective will be the capture of Jalo Oasis to provide a forward base for further SAS operations in Cyrenaica, while the Daisy group will have the job of raiding the enemy airfield at Barce and creating as much mayhem and fury as they can. That’s the broad outline; now I’ll let the individual force commanders have their say.’

David Stirling, the RAF wing commander and the LRDG major rose to speak in turn, elaborating on details of the operations for which they were responsible and on certain important aspects that might affect the overall co-operative effort. Then, after a period for questions, the assembly split up so that the commanders of the various groups involved could carry out their own detailed briefings.

Douglas followed Paddy Moynahan into a smaller room in which about twenty other LRDG men quickly assembled. They looked curiously at Douglas — all except one, whom he recognized as one of the NCOS who had accompanied him on his original journey to Kabrit. Moynahan introduced him as Sergeant Fox.

Moynahan fished in an attaché case and pulled out a folded map, which he smoothed out on the table top.

‘Well, gentlemen,’ he commented, ‘you heard what the man said. We’re off to Barce. It’s a long trek, I’m afraid.’ His finger traced a course across the map. ‘We’ll jump off from El Faiyum, here, then take the old route to Ain Dalla. From there we’ll strike out west across the Sand Sea to Big Cairn, then set course north-west to come out of the sands at Garet Khod. After that, it’s as fast as we can go across the open desert to hit Barce. Same way out, of course. Distance to the target is about eight hundred nautical miles, which means that the navigators are going to have to keep their fingers out.’

Douglas listened as attentively as he could to the briefing and did his best to absorb all the details. Later, he confessed in private to Moynahan that he felt somewhat akin to a spare prick at a wedding. The bearded Irishman laughed.

'Don't worry about it,' he told the young Scot. 'We're glad to have you along. Might need your Arabic — you never know. Look, I've got an hour or so to kill — let me explain a bit more of the organization.'

Douglas learned that the patrol of which he was to be part would consist of five trucks carrying two officers — Moynahan and himself — and eighteen men. He expressed surprise at the small size of the expedition.

'We've found that the size is about right through trial and error,' Moynahan told him. 'In the early days a patrol used to consist of eleven trucks, all armed to the teeth — we even carried a 37-mm Bofors gun — and about thirty men, but it was far too unwieldy, too difficult to keep together in the confusion of a raid, and much too easy to spot from the air. Our trucks, as you've already seen, are 30-hundredweight vehicles, but they'll actually carry up to two tons, which in practice means that they can accommodate up to three weeks' rations and water, as well as the men and weapons. They'll go for eleven hundred miles without refuelling. Barce's outside the unrefuelled range, so we'll be topping up at Howard's Cairn on the outward run; that's about half-way between Ain Dalla and Garet Khod.'

Douglas was beginning to realize the thoroughness with which the LRDG had set up its chain of bases and depots in the heart of the desert, and said as much. Moynahan nodded.

'It didn't happen overnight,' he said. 'Luckily, we had an enormous amount of experience to draw upon. As long ago as 1915, special Light Car Patrols were formed to deal with a chap called Sayed Ahmed esh Sherif, a Senussi leader who'd joined forces with the Turks and who was making a thorough bloody nuisance of himself up north. The Light Car Patrol chaps became

expert at driving through the desert and punching Ahmed on the nose before vanishing again. They perfected a lot of the techniques we use now.' He smiled. 'Funny thing — we sometimes come across their tyre tracks around the Qattara Depression, even after all this time. They used Ford Model Ts with three and a half-inch tyres. We use ten-inch balloon tyres, and still get bogged down from time to time. God knows how they managed.'

'And after the war there were the civilian expeditions into the desert,' Douglas commented. 'I know about those from my father.'

In a few words he told Moynahan about his father's pre-war role as an oil prospector.

The big Irishman was impressed. 'Perhaps you'll be more useful than I thought,' he said, grinning. 'Something must've rubbed off from your old man.'

Later in the day, Douglas got to know the two men who, together with Moynahan and himself, were to form the crew of the lead truck. They were New Zealanders, Sergeants McMurdoe and Pargetter. McMurdoe was the driver and Pargetter the signalman; Moynahan himself would do the navigating, while Douglas was to be responsible for the 20-mm Breda cannon mounted in the back.

Moynahan told Douglas that New Zealand soldiers had formed a large part of the LRDG from the very beginning. They had taken to life in the depths of the desert like ducks take to water, and had formed a superb fighting team. In many respects they were more British than the British, and so were unforgiving of any errors on the part of British officers whose lot it was to command them. Fortunately, in the LRDG such errors were rare.

Douglas wondered why members of the LRDG all held relatively low ranks in view of their considerable experience. The Irishman grinned at him.

'What you've got to realize,' he said, 'is that this is a pretty exclusive club

and that competition to join is fierce. Most of our chaps have had to drop at least one rank to get in. McMurdoe and Pargetter were both sergeants in the Divisional Cavalry; they dropped to private to join the LRDG and have since worked their way back up again. I was a major and came to the LRDG as a second lieutenant, but I've never regretted that for one moment.'

Moynahan's patrol was scheduled to move off after dark, arriving at El Faiyum before dawn. Douglas, together with the others, spent the remainder of the day in loading the vehicles, meticulously checking every item of equipment, and in learning first hand as much as he could about the finer points of LRDG work, which would make his forthcoming task easier.

Moynahan openly approved of Douglas's enthusiasm. 'Talking of making one's job easier,' he said, 'we had many a laugh in the early days — and many a frustration too, when we were trying to get hold of the equipment we needed. We caused fits among the staff types at GHQ with some of our requests. I remember we once slapped in a chit for an Arab shopkeeper's entire stock of bicycle clips, because we didn't have any other clips to pin our maps to map-boards. Then we indented for a couple of dozen theodolites, and that caused an uproar. Why the hell did we want theodolites, they wanted to know. For accurate navigation across the desert, we told them. A staff major told us that he'd done a twenty-mile march across the desert using a prismatic compass and that he had only been four hundred yards out at the end of it; when we said that he'd have been five miles off course at the end of a four-hundred-mile leg, he began to see the point.' The Irishman laughed again. 'I won't bother to tell you what happened when we requested two hundred Arab head-dresses,' he said. 'Suffice it to say, we ended up scrounging most of the stuff we needed. We nicknamed the staff the Short Range Desert Group, because most of 'em can't see further than the ends of their noses.'

His afternoon's tasks completed, Douglas decided to take Moynahan's

advice and get some rest, for there was a hundred-and-fifty-mile night drive to Faiyum ahead of them, and that was only the start. He fell asleep without difficulty, the previous night’s lack of sleep now catching up with him, and when someone shook him awake four hours later he felt completely refreshed. His final act, before pulling on his clothing, was to shower thoroughly and shave as closely as possible. He had no idea when the next chance to do so would be.

Chapter Three

The barren, windswept ridge of El Faiyum lay sixty miles south-west of Cairo, straddling the unmarked frontier that separated the desert from the fertile, cultivated strip, which drew its life blood from the Nile. Six months earlier the spot had been virtually deserted; now it was one of the LRDG'S principal bases for deep penetration into enemy territory.

This was a result of the loss of Siwa Oasis, a first-rate base that lay between the Sand Sea and the Qattara Depression. It had been overrun during Rommel's June offensive, and the closing of the British defensive line between El Alamein and the Depression shortly afterwards had left the LRDG with no alternative but to set up a new base two hundred and fifty miles to the east of Siwa. Still, as Paddy Moynahan pointed out, although El Faiyum had its drawbacks, it was at least well away from Cairo, which was swarming with thousands of troops and where units were subjected to endless annoyances, not the least of which were staff inspections.

Moynahan's group reached El Faiyum, dusty and hungry, to see a glorious desert dawn. The orders were to breakfast, provision the vehicles, rest up for a few hours and then push on as fast as possible to Ain Dalla. The sense of urgency affected everyone, and Douglas found himself bolting his breakfast of tinned sausage. He forced himself to eat slowly, savouring each mouthful.

Half-way through the meal, which they ate squatting round a field kitchen, Moynahan suddenly set aside his mess tin and jumped to his feet with a roar, staring over Douglas's shoulder.

'Suleiman, you wily fox of the desert!' he cried in Arabic. 'By Allah's toenails, it does my eyes good to see you!'

Douglas, understanding the greeting, looked round, startled. A few yards away, his back to the sun, a tall figure in Arab robes stood like a statue, a German Manser 98 carbine cradled in his arms. The figure returned the greeting softly, in a voice evocative of a snake's hiss; Douglas felt a shiver creep along his spine, despite the growing heat of the day.

'And I rejoice also in the sight of you, Batl es Sahra.' The title was a high compliment for an Arab to pay a European; it meant 'hero of the desert'. 'By Allah's will, once more we shall have good hunting together.' The two men stepped forward and embraced briefly, then Moynahan led the newcomer to the stove and offered him tea, which he accepted. After a few formalities Suleiman was introduced to Douglas, who greeted him politely, also in Arabic. Above a face lined and blasted by years of merciless sun and wind, eyebrows were raised fractionally and piercing black eyes scrutinized the Scot.

'I thank you for your courtesy in speaking the language of my people,' the Arab whispered sibilantly. 'The words come easily to your tongue.'

There was an unspoken question in the remark, so Douglas, in a few sentences — the words coming haltingly at first, then more rapidly as he gained confidence — told Suleiman how he had come to learn Arabic. Suleiman nodded, and without another word turned aside to drink his tea.

Speaking in English now, Moynahan said: 'Suleiman will be coming with us. He's been on several of our long patrols, and he's worth his weight in gold. He's a member of the Seifen Nasr family. Have you heard of them? No? Well no one hates the Italians more than they do. They've been fighting them on and off since the war between the Turks and the Eyeties in 1911 and they have a lot of support, because they're the chiefs of one of the biggest nomad tribes in North Africa, the Awlad Suleiman. Their cavalry smashed the Italians at Qasr bu Hadi in 1915, but in 1931, after years of skirmishing,

the Italians got the upper hand at Garet el Hawaria, near Kufra. The tribe was broken up and forced to flee into Egypt and Chad. When our war broke out, their chieftain, Abd el Galil, and his brother, Ahmed, offered their services to us, and they've been among our most important assets ever since. Suleiman is Abd el Galil's nephew, and you can trust him with your life.' Moynahan grinned. 'Just one thing — he chews tobacco and spits the juice all over the shop, so I suggest you stay upwind of him.'

Douglas soon learned the wisdom of this advice when, with the tobacco-spitting Suleiman sitting next to him in the back of the leading Chevrolet, Moynahan's group set out from Faiyum on the three-hundred-mile leg to Ain Dalla that afternoon. This stage of the journey was uneventful, for the track to Ain Dalla had been well worn by the tyres of many vehicles over the past few months; the tyre marks became even more pronounced where it joined a second track that ran north-eastwards towards Cairo. This, Douglas was told, was the LRDG's old 'underground' route into Libya, a route pioneered long before the war by hardy adventurers of the Royal Geographical Society and by commercial entrepreneurs such as Douglas's own father.

Douglas had never been this far south before. Apart from his period of training at Kabrit, his experience of the desert had been limited to the coastal strip along the Mediterranean where the Eighth Army's battles had been fought amid a nightmare climate of blistering heat by day and freezing cold by night, a climate made still more unbearable by the powdery sand, churned up by wheels and tracks, that got into every human and mechanical crevice, and by the constant swarms of bloated flies between dawn and dusk.

Here, in the south, on the edge of the great wilderness that stretched across the heart of North Africa, it was different. Here the flies were absent, and the desert itself was clean and unruffled, uncontaminated by the filth of mankind. There was beauty too, when the sun was low and casting its shadows across

the dunes. Then, early in the morning or with the approach of night, a man could forget for a brief spell the heat of the day, and with his belly full, relax amid the shadows and contemplate that once,' these sands had been fertile and populated by the wandering hunters of ostrich and antelope; but that now, if he were to venture only a few hundred yards away from the well-worn track, his feet would make their imprint in sands that had probably last been trodden five thousand years ago.

Beyond Bahariya Oasis, which lay midway between Faiyum and Ain Dalla and where the column halted for a half hour's leg stretch, the route became less distinct so its course was marked with poles. As the trucks ploughed on after dark, making good progress with the aid of their headlights — there was no need for concealment here, so far to the south — Douglas noticed, in the headlight beams, a dark mass at the foot of each pole that appeared to move as the beams caught it.

'Oh, they're birds,' Moynahan told him. 'It's the tail-end of the autumn migration. They get this far, and then drop exhausted. A couple of weeks earlier, with the migration at its height, you'd have seen masses of them. If you halt during the day they'll pile under your truck by the dozen, desperate for shade. They use those poles for shade, too, and get moisture from the dew that forms on them after dark.'

'Can't we put a little water out for them, or something?' asked Douglas.

He saw the shake of the Irishman's head, silhouetted against the lights.

'There's really no point. Those that are strong enough will fly on in the morning. The others will die, and that's all there is to it. Nature in the raw, old man.'

It was a sensible enough explanation, a verdict on how the fittest would survive. Yet for the rest of that night, Douglas could not get the birds out of his mind.

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They came to Ain Dalla, on the edge of the Great Sand Sea, early in the morning. There was not much to recommend the place, nor to emphasize its importance in the LRDG's sphere of operations. It consisted of a few sorry-looking palms, a few wooden huts, a fuel dump — and, most important of all, a warm spring that gave the base its name.

They rested here for several hours, snatching some sleep in the shade of the huts after a welcome breakfast of porridge and tinned bacon — the porridge laced with whiskey to help drive away the chill of the long night drive. Douglas went out like a light and, as before, woke refreshed; together with most of the others, he indulged in a pleasant dip in the spring, which lay in a gravelly depression, before the trek resumed. Then the trucks were loaded again, their petrol tanks topped up, and the convoy pushed on westwards again to the Sand Sea.

There was only one route from the gravel depression to the desert plateau that marked the beginning of the Sand Sea. It was named 'Easy Ascent', but it was easy no longer; the passage of many vehicles had since churned up the sandy slopes, and negotiating them required a great deal of care. Nevertheless, all five trucks made it safely to the top, where they halted for a few minutes to enable the navigators to take accurate bearings. It also enabled Pargetter, the signalman, to set up his equipment and tap out a short coded message to Faiyum, telling those at base of the group's progress.

'Comin' up to the difficult bit, now,' he remarked to Douglas as they resumed their journey.

It must, Douglas thought later, have been the understatement of the century. The 'difficult bit' was a two-hundred-mile slog through some of the worst terrain in the world, most of it uncharted.

It took them two days.

After Easy Ascent, on the eastern fringe of the plateau, the going was not too bad and there was still a visible track left by a previous LRDG patrol, so Moynahan decided to push on in the early afternoon, while the sun was still high. The slight breeze caused by the movement of the vehicles made the heat tolerable. By the time the old track swung away to the north, in the direction of Siwa, Douglas was beginning to appreciate the wisdom behind Moynahan's decision.

Then they entered the country of the dunes. Ahead of them, as far as the eye could see, great barriers of sand lay across their path. The dunes ran north-west to south-east, like frozen breakers, scourged by the winds of countless centuries, and when the sun was at its height, casting no shadow, they were invisible. That was why Moynahan had taken advantage of the existing track to point their way for them, and to put some distance beneath their wheels.

By the late afternoon, the sun was beginning to throw appreciable shadows, indicating where the dunes lay, so they were able to see their way ahead fairly clearly.

McMurdoe, who was driving, was an old hand at the dune-riding game. Douglas noticed that the New Zealander tried, wherever possible, to keep to ribbed patches of sand that were the colour of butter; these were generally the firm parts. Approaching a dune, he changed down into second gear, and once on the slope kept the truck moving at all costs, for to stop was to risk sinking axle-deep. Meticulously, the drivers of the other trucks stuck to the lead vehicle's wheel-tracks.

More than once they were confronted by a dune that was at least four hundred feet high. McMurdoe's technique was to pick a low point in the crest and charge it at speed, changing to first gear as the Chevrolet reached the top and allowing the vehicle to teeter slowly over the edge. This manoeuvre was followed by an exhilarating toboggan-style slide to the bottom of the steepest

part of the slope on the other side, a wake of sand spraying out on either side of the truck. Then, as the angle levelled out, he cautiously completed the descent in a zig-zag pattern, keeping height so that if he hit a soft patch of sand he could turn into it and slide through.

Night came swiftly to the desert. As the sun plummeted below the line of dunes, which were now giving way to limestone patches, Moynahan halted the group near a small cairn, placed there many years earlier by some forgotten survey party, to make camp. The Irishman was content with the day's progress; he told Douglas that there had been fewer holdups than was usually the case, and although vehicles had become bogged down on several occasions it had not taken long to unstick them. Each truck carried sand mats, and five-foot sections of perforated steel channels that had originally been designed as dug-out roofing material. Placed under the front and rear wheels, they provided the necessary grip to get the vehicle moving — and the secret then was to keep it moving.

Douglas was an old enough desert hand to know how quickly cold accompanied the onset of darkness, and pulled on his greatcoat before helping with the preparations for the evening meal, which consisted of hot bully stew cooked over a fire — made by pouring a little petrol into a can filled with sand — and tea, laced with a tot of rum per man. After they had eaten, the men filled their water-bottles from the tank carried on each truck in readiness for the following day. Pargetter dug out a thermos and handed it to Douglas with the words, 'Put your water in that and leave it open during the night. Then you'll have a cool drink tomorrow.'

Each man was allowed six pints of water a day. Of these, one was used in the morning brew-up, one was taken with lime juice at midday, two were brewed up with the evening tea, and two more were carried in the water-bottle to be drunk sparingly throughout the day. Each man had his own way

of eking out his ration; Douglas preferred to restrict himself to small sips, drinking the remainder at the start of the evening halt. It was something to look forward to, and it meant that he could drink his tea at supper time slowly and with relish instead of using it merely to slake his thirst. Usually, he took the last of his water with a pinch of Eno's salts, which made it more palatable as well as providing a necessary bulwark against dehydration.

Douglas helped Pargetter to unload his signals equipment and erect his aerial, and watched as the New Zealander sent and received the day's signals. Afterwards, as they sat around the still flickering fire, the signalman tuned in to Radio Belgrade, the German forces' station, and they enjoyed a few minutes of dance music before Pargetter packed away his gear again. Then, as the fire died down, each man picked a soft patch of sand on which to spread his sleeping-bag — all except Suleiman, who sat cross-legged with his back against the wheel of a truck, wrapped in a blanket, and appeared to fall asleep in that position with his rifle still cradled in his arms. Douglas's last impressions, before he drifted off, were of the desert stars, brilliant and profuse, and of the cool breeze that played across his face.

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Douglas was awakened before dawn by the sounds of the cook getting breakfast. He clasped his hands behind his neck and, with face turned towards the east, watched the sun rise as quickly as it had set, in a glory of green and gold. This was the best part of the day on a desert patrol — the blissful five minutes with nothing to do before the cook's bellow of 'Come and get it' shook away the last vestiges of sleep and spurred everyone from their sleeping-bags.

After breakfast they cleaned their mugs and mess-tins with sand, dampened by the last few drops of tea, for water was far too precious to be wasted on washing up. They were soon on the move again, shedding their outer layers

of clothing as the sun rose higher. Douglas thought he detected an air of faint amusement on Suleiman's face as the Arab watched these contortions, and knew what he was thinking; to the desert nomads, it is far more sensible to keep the sun out and stay cool with the aid of loose robes than to subject one's skin to its rays.

They drove on all that day, stopping frequently to unstick vehicles and to allow the navigator to take sun shots — a tricky business as the sun climbed higher and its shadow grew correspondingly shorter. With the sun at its zenith they halted for a while longer and ate a sparse lunch, for no one was very hungry; drink was the principal topic of conversation, although Douglas knew that they would all have been a good deal thirstier at the height of summer. Nevertheless, he was grateful for Pargetter's earlier advice about the thermos; the water was still cool, and the addition of his lime juice ration made it very refreshing.

Later in the day the dunes became lower and more undulating, and as a result the going was easier. This flatter area lay between two distinct sections of the Sand Sea, and after a while the dunes gave way to a plain of black gravel. Douglas sensed the spirits of his companions on the uplift; darkness came but Moynahan decided to press on, using astro-navigation to set their course. The night was well advanced when they reached Big Cairn; the mound was only five feet high, but it was the only feature in that flat expanse of plain and was visible from miles away, even in the starlight.

On the following day, after resting for several hours, the group struck out north-westwards across the gravel plain for Howard's Cairn, where the vehicles were to replenish. They had been *en route* for an hour or so when the keen-eyed Suleiman pointed towards the south.

'Qibli,' was all he said.

Douglas peered into the distance, and quickly saw what the Arab meant.

Across the southern horizon, as though chasing the group, lay a sinister brown line. It grew even as he watched it.

‘Not often we run into one down here,’ Moynahan shouted above the noise of the engine. ‘Bit late for the time of year, too. Don’t worry — they’re never anything like as bad as the sandstorms up north.’

The sand reached them a few minutes later, flung across the surface of the desert by the Qibli, the hot wind from the south. Moynahan was right: the sandstorms of the north, familiar to Douglas, were often nightmarish walls of dust that rose to a height of hundreds of feet in an impenetrable mass, blotting out everything and bringing all movement to a standstill. By comparison, this one was mild and almost tolerable. The grains of sand, scurrying before a forty-mile-an-hour wind, stung the exposed parts of the body, but they did not rise more than twenty feet above the surface and they failed to obscure the sun. The five vehicles carried on, their pace virtually unchecked, and by the time they reached Howard’s Cairn the storm had blown itself out.

The men had a meal, and topped up the vehicles while Pargetter listened for any relevant signals from HQ. There were none; nothing that might indicate that the operation had been called off for any reason. Before them now, until they emerged from the northern edge of the Sand Sea, lay a straight run of a hundred miles. Compared with the distances they had already covered, and the terrain they had crossed, it seemed like a stroll down the road.

They made good time across the Serir, the flat gravel plain, although it was now necessary to make more frequent stops to check their position, for there were no landmarks in this featureless vista. The patrol were all fully on the alert now, for enemy reconnaissance aircraft frequently ventured into the area, but as they drove northwards, thankfully the sky remained empty.

Then suddenly they were in the Sand Sea once more, ploughing their way through a fifty-mile stretch of dunes, although the desert here was stonier,

and firmer than the deep sands to the south. There was visible life here, too: on several occasions, Douglas spotted little deer-like creatures the size of hares, bounding away in search of cover.

The soldiers pushed on through the night, for Moynahan planned to reach the northern edge of the Sand Sea before dawn and then lie up during the day before proceeding under cover of darkness. Eventually, with the approaching dawn glimmering in the eastern sky, they reached the spot near Garet Khod where the dunes ended abruptly in a line running from east to west, and there, overlooking the old caravan route from Jalo to Siwa, a track worn deeply into the gravel by the passage of countless camels, they made their camp in a slight dip in the ground, dispersing the vehicles to make the best use of the scant available cover and blending them into the background by stretching camouflage nets over them.

Their camouflage completed, they had breakfast and then settled down to try and get some sleep, though it proved a long and agonizing day, lying there with little to do but think of the torment of flies and thirst. In the end exhaustion triumphed and Douglas drowsed off, awaking several hours later to find the cook warming up their ration of bully stew, the sun already well down on the western horizon.

Over the meal, Moynahan got them all together and briefed them on the next phase of the operation, leading up to the actual attack on Barce.

‘As soon as we’ve cleared up here we’ll push on as far as the Tariq el-Abd.’ He named one of the principal desert routes that ran north-eastwards from Agedabia. ‘We’ll go via Landing Ground 125 because Intelligence wants us to have a look at it; air reconnaissance has shown nothing but a few wrecked aircraft, but you never know. If we do find anything worthwhile, we’ll beat it up on the way back.’

He paused for a mouthful of tea, then turned to Sergeant Jimmy Pickford, a

cheerful, rotund Liverpudlian who commanded truck number five.

‘When we get to the Tariq el-Abd, Jimmy, I want you to take Suleiman with you and push on as far as this wadi just south of Msus.’ He indicated the spot, a dried-up watercourse, on his map. ‘Drop Suleiman there to contact his men, make a recce of the area as far east as Bir el-Gerrari and then come back. Suleiman and his friends are going to create a few diversions for us; it’ll be your job to pick him up again on the way out.’ Pickford nodded but said nothing, and Moynahan smiled briefly at him. Jimmy Pickford was one of the veterans of the LRDG; he had passed this way before, more than once, and knew exactly what was expected of him.

‘All right, then,’ Moynahan continued. ‘It’ll be daylight by the time Jimmy rejoins us, so we lie low until dusk. Then we’ll head for Barce via Sidi Raui. We shouldn’t have much trouble with the garrison there, because Suleiman and his pals will be attacking them. Also, by this time David Stirling’s Parashots’ — he used the familiar name bestowed upon the SAS by the LRDG — ‘should be causing a bit of confusion at Benghazi.’

He turned to the commander of truck number four, a lean warrant officer from Rhodesia named Hillery. ‘Once we hit the southern outskirts of Barce you, Keith, together with Jimmy Pickford, will attack the barracks to prevent any interference with the main job, which is the attack on the airfield. That will be carried out by myself, together with Terry Fox and Jack Hardy.’ He named the NCOS who commanded trucks two and three, one of them, Fox, the taciturn Yorkshireman who had shared Douglas’s original journey to Kabrit.

‘As soon as you see our attack on the airfield going in,’ Moynahan told Hillery and Pickford, ‘drive into the town and see if there’s anything there worth shooting up, then get the hell out. The rendezvous is at Sidi Selim, and we’ll join you there. Don’t worry if we’re a bit late; I want to have a go at the

railway station after we've hit the airfield.'

He looked around at their faces, then asked if there were any questions. Hillery cleared his throat and spat into the sand.

'Who are we expecting to run into?' he wanted to know. 'Germans or Italians, or both?'

Moynahan grinned at him. 'It'll be just like your birthday and Christmas all rolled into one, Keith,' he said. 'There are only Eyeties at Barce — as far as we know.'

Later, as Douglas walked past him to help load the front truck, Moynahan dug him in the ribs and pointed to the 20-mm Breda.

'Think you'll be all right with that thing?' he asked, only half seriously. Douglas grinned at him in the gathering dusk.

'Ask me again tomorrow night,' he said, with an assurance that by no means came straight from the heart. The only feeling inside him at the moment was one of fear, although he knew that if you were afraid of everything, and treated every shadow as potentially hostile, you stayed alive that much longer.

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With the dunes behind them, the trucks made good progress over the flat plain that lay to the north of the Sand Sea. Vegetation began to appear in the form of little clumps of desert scrub, far apart at first, then becoming more prolific. The moon was up, giving the whole scene an eerie appearance. They had no difficulty in finding Landing Ground 125, which had been occupied by the RAF before being overrun a year earlier. They approached it cautiously in line abreast, weapons at the ready, but apart from the remains of some burnt-out Hurricanes and Blenheims, the airstrip was deserted. In fact, it looked as though it had never been occupied since the RAF's sudden departure.

The group reached the Tariq el-Abd inside three hours. Pickford went on ahead with Suleiman, and after some hard driving returned just before dawn to report that the Arab had made contact with his fellow tribesmen.

‘Didn’t see a soul after that,’ he told Moynahan. ‘As far as we can tell, the way ahead is clear.’

It was encouraging news, and their hopes for a successful operation were raised by the fact that yet again no aircraft were sighted in the course of the day. That in itself seemed to indicate that the enemy had received no intelligence of the impending assault.

It was only when Pargetter received the first coded signal from Faiyum, just before the group was due to start out on the final run to Barce, that they received an inkling of trouble. The New Zealander threw aside his headphones and hurried across to where Moynahan was making a final check of his Chevrolet’s weapons.

‘It looks as though the attack on Jalo has got bogged down,’ he said, ‘HQ didn’t say much — they probably don’t know a great deal themselves — but from what I can gather the Italians were wide awake and gave our blokes a hot reception. Anyway, HQ has ordered them back to Kufra.’

‘Damn!’ Moynahan swore, looking intense. The assault on Jalo by the Rosebud group had been timed to take place on the previous night. The idea was that, with the oasis secure, David Stirling’s SAS group — which had been flown to Kufra in Bristol Bombay transports of the RAF’s NO. 216 Squadron, and from there proceeded overland with the LRDG and units of the Sudan Defence Force — would push on to attack Benghazi at the same time as Moynahan’s Daisy group hit Barce. Stirling was then to have fallen back on Jalo, his mission accomplished.

‘Any news of Colonel Stirling?’ Moynahan wanted to know.

‘No, sir, not a thing. And there’s no recall for us, either.’

The Irishman mused for a moment, then looked at Douglas. ‘I’m going to assume that David has pressed on to Benghazi,’ he said. ‘Knowing him, that’s exactly what he will have done. It sounds as though he might be in need of a bigger diversion than we thought at first, though, so I’m bringing the time of our attack forward a couple of hours.’ He grinned. ‘We’ll see if we can draw a bit of their fire, boy. If we make as much noise as possible, it’s my bet that any Eyetie units in the area will be ordered up to Barce, or else swing across to try and cut off our withdrawal. With a bit of luck, that’ll give David time to slip through to Benghazi without too much trouble. Come on, let’s get cracking.’

Within minutes of Moynahan’s roar of ‘Mount up!’, the trucks were on the move again, scurrying across the desert in V formation. After some time they entered undulating countryside, dotted with larger clumps of brush, and so, with the moon high above them, came to the western foothills of the Jebel Akhdar, the mountains that shield the fertile coastal strip of Libya from the ferocious southern wind. On the other side of the hills, twenty miles away, lay Barce.

They skirted the western fringe of the hills, following the road that led to Sidi Raui, driving with dimmed headlights, in the manner of a convoy, stopping only to cut the telephone wires that ran along the Gerdes el Abid track.

‘They’ll know something’s up now,’ Moynahan told Douglas as the trucks got under way again. ‘That’s the main link between Benghazi and Barce.’

Douglas made no reply; he was looking at the road ahead. ‘I can see lights,’ he said quickly. ‘Looks like a small vehicle of some sort, heading towards us. It’s just come round a bend.’

Moynahan followed the direction of the lieutenant’s pointing finger.

‘You’re right. We’ll try and brazen this one out. If we can’t, finish him off.’

Douglas snuggled down behind the Breda and removed the safety-catch as the trucks moved slowly forward.

Ahead of them, the car pulled to the side of the road and stopped. It was an open Mercedes, with four uniformed figures inside. As the leading Chevrolet drew abreast, the man sitting next to the driver of the Mercedes called out something in Italian. Moynahan waved at him and laughed. There was a moment's silence, then a cry of 'Inglesi!' By this time the leading truck was past the stationary car, and Douglas swivelled the Breda to get a shot at it. Before he could do so, someone in the second truck yelled 'Duck!' and Douglas caught a glimpse of a round object sailing through the air to land amid the car's occupants. There was a vivid flash and a crack, followed by screams.

The trucks halted, and the men in the second one jumped down and ran to the enemy car, weapons at the ready. A couple of minutes later, Terry Fox appeared at Moynahan's side, holding out a handful of papers.

'They're all dead,' he told the Irishman. 'A captain, a sergeant-major and two privates. We found these on them — looks like personal stuff, but there might be something of use to the Intelligence people.'

Moynahan nodded and signalled the trucks to move on. As they approached Sidi Raui they extinguished their lights; the road was clearly visible in the moonlight, and they hoped to take the police post there by surprise. As they approached the building, however, an armed sentry jumped out into the road and challenged them. Moynahan felled him with a short burst of Tommy-gun fire and the trucks switched on their lights as they gathered speed. Moynahan hurled a couple of grenades through the open window of the post as his truck sped past; Douglas heard their muffled explosions and caught sight of two shadowy figures running away in panic from the back of the building. Moynahan had seen them too.

‘Let ’em go,’ he ordered. ‘We can’t waste time rounding them up.’

They encountered no opposition at Sidi Selim, a few miles up the road; the place was deserted. A few minutes later the trucks reached the main road leading westwards into Barce and turned on to it, winding their way up the escarpment that overlooked the town. At the top, they almost ran full tilt into an Italian scout car.

The Italians, confused and blinded by the Chevrolets’ headlights, were unsure if the vehicles approaching them were friend or foe and held their fire — and in doing so sealed their fate. Moynahan and McMurdoe crouched low in the front of the vehicle as Douglas’s Breda pounded over their heads; the Scot found himself yelling out loud as the 20-mm shells found their target, easily penetrating the enemy car’s light armour. There was the thud of an explosion and the armoured car’s turret hatch flew off, a cloud of smoke escaping. The Chevrolets skirted the wrecked vehicle where it sat in the middle of the road, gently smouldering. Moynahan fingered a grenade, wondering if it would be worthwhile throwing it through the hatch, then decided against it.

Their lights extinguished again, the trucks moved down the other side of the escarpment. To his amazement, Douglas saw that there were numerous lights in Barce; he had expected the town to be blacked out. It was well after midnight. Maybe it’s a trap, he thought with sudden apprehension. Maybe the Italians are fully on the alert and waiting for us.

If Moynahan felt the same apprehension, he showed no sign of it. He whistled tunelessly as the trucks rolled on, and the sound was strangely comforting.

Two miles outside Barce, at a crossroads, the group split up. Hillery and Pickford headed straight for the town, while the remaining three trucks left the road and moved across country, skirting the town until they hit the road

leading to Maddalena. The airstrip lay adjacent to it.

Like a country landowner about to inspect his estate, Moynahan drove up to the main gate, jumped down from the truck and swung aside the pole that barred the entrance. Then the trucks were through, the drivers' feet hard down on the accelerator pedals as they raced towards the buildings and the dark silhouettes of the aircraft parked nearby. Dark shapes appeared, running frantically between the buildings, and the machine-gunners on the Chevrolets opened fire, sending them tumbling.

Douglas turned the Breda on a dark shape that looked like a fuel bowser, and after a long burst was rewarded by a balloon of flame that burgeoned up, throwing the field into stark relief.

'That's put some light on the scene,' Moynahan yelled. 'Let's go for the aircraft!'

The trucks fell into line astern, the gunners raking the parked machines as they raced past. The twenty or so aircraft seemed to be a mixture of transports and bombers, although Douglas, by no means an expert on aircraft recognition, could not identify them. Shell cases clattered around his feet as he blazed away, and he had the satisfaction of seeing several of the aircraft burst into flames. Hardy's Chevrolet, bringing up the rear, detached itself and moved slowly among the machines, its occupants jumping down to run among them and plant Lewes bombs on those that survived the gun-fire.

Sporadic gun-fire was beginning to lance at the speeding trucks from the airfield buildings and a burst of tracer snickered over Moynahan's truck, so close to Douglas's head that he felt the wind of it. Enraged, he swung the Breda round and fired at what appeared to be its source.

'The buildings!' Moynahan shouted, slapping McMurdoe on the shoulder. The driver swung the wheel and headed flat out towards what looked like some sort of mess building; most of the enemy fire was coming from it and

Douglas pounded away with the Breda, his fire joined by that of the truck's two Vickers machine-gunners. The three trucks swung alongside the buildings, the gunners blazing away at point-blank range while those whose hands were free hurled grenades through any window they passed. Then, pursued by wildly inaccurate fire, they raced for the gate again, leaving the airfield well ablaze behind hem.

They could hear gun-fire now from the southern edge of the town, and see a dull red glow in the sky from the place where Hillery and Pickford were attacking the barracks. Moynahan told McMurdoe to put his foot down; the driver obeyed and the truck, followed by the other two, sped along the straight road that ran from the airfield through Barce to the railway station.

The moon and the flames from the burning airfield made the scene almost as clear as day, throwing the low white houses on either side of the road into sharp relief. They also revealed a squat shape that blocked the road a quarter of a mile ahead. Douglas identified the low profile at once; it was an Italian 75/18 Semovente self-propelled gun, much more dangerous than the M13 medium tank with which most Italian armoured divisions were still equipped.

Douglas had first come across the Semovente early in 1942, during a brief and costly skirmish with the Ariete Division. Later, he had been able to examine a captured example, and now his mind strove to recall the details of what it could do as the enemy's 75-mm gun flashed and a shell blasted over the top of the truck, the concussion of its passing almost bursting his eardrums. Swallowing hard, he leaned forward and yelled into Moynahan's ear.

'It can fire four rounds a minute. We've got fifteen seconds to get there!'

There was no possibility of turning round. The only alternative was to charge full tilt at the Semovente. Douglas gripped the Breda and unleashed a stream of shells in its direction, seeing them bounce uselessly off its thickly

armoured hide in a shower of glowing sparks. The Semovente now opened up with its 6.5-mm machine-gun. Tracer, blindingly bright, floated towards the speeding truck, then crackled viciously around it. There was a loud clang as a bullet struck the bonnet, and McMurdoe gave a sudden sharp cry. The truck lurched to one side, almost overturning as its left wing scraped along the side of a house causing a shower of plaster. Moynahan reached over to grab the wheel, but the driver pushed his hand away, shouting that he was all right, and regained control.

They were almost on top of the Semovente, skidding and slewing through a pile of garbage by the roadside, when the Italian's 75-mm gun fired again, its barrel at maximum depression. The shell missed the right-hand side of Moynahan's truck by inches — only a skid into the side of the road had saved it — and exploded in the one behind, killing Fox and the other occupants outright.

The nose of Moynahan's Chevrolet rammed into the narrow space between a house wall and the Semovente with a screech of rending metal and a crash that threw Douglas and Pargetter into a heap in the back. There was a further sound of tearing metal as the Semovente started to move, crushing the sandwiched truck against the wall.

Douglas scrambled groggily to his feet to find Moynahan bleeding from a gash on the forehead and yelling at him: 'Hand me that jerrycan, quick! And help Mac to get clear. Go on, get out of it, fast!'

Douglas swung the petrol-filled can over to the Irishman, then he and Pargetter dragged McMurdoe out of the driver's seat, into the back of the truck and over the tailboard. With the dark bulk of the Semovente grinding down on them, they threw themselves into the narrow gap between two houses and tried to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

Douglas dared to raise his head as the Semovente churned past the gap and

caught a glimpse of Moynahan standing astride the engine casing, balancing precariously with the jerrycan upended. Tossing the can aside in a rainbow spray of petrol, the Irishman clamped a thermite bomb in position and jumped clear.

Five seconds later there was a dull crack as the bomb exploded, followed almost immediately by a roar and a thud that lifted the three men in the alley a good foot into the air and flung them down again with a blow that knocked the wind from them. With a second mighty concussion the Semovente's ammunition went up, ripping the vehicle apart in a storm of jagged metal and demolishing an adjacent building, which, by good fortune, was an unoccupied storehouse.

Douglas and his companions cowered on the ground and waited for the din to subside. White-hot metal fragments and chunks of masonry hammered the area, and the whole town seemed to reverberate with the thunderclaps of the multiple explosions.

Douglas's first thought, once his head cleared, was to find out how badly McMurdoe was hurt. The New Zealander, it turned out, had been lucky; the ricocheting bullet had ripped a groove through the flesh of his upper arm, and although the wound was bleeding profusely it looked much worse than it really was.

They left the shelter of the alley and went out into the lurid night, almost colliding with Moynahan. The big Irishman reeked of petrol. Stopping only to retrieve their Tommy-guns and some grenades from the Chevrolet, which had escaped the full force of the blast but which was riddled with splinters, they ran past the blazing wreck of the Semovente towards what was left of Fox's truck. Hardy and his men were already there; Hardy shook his head, and a glance inside the mangled remains of Fox's Chevrolet told the full and horrific story.

Grim-faced, Moynahan gathered his men around him and issued his orders. ‘Mac, see if you can get our truck going. Douggie, you and the others salvage whatever you can out of that’ — he waved a hand at Fox’s shattered vehicle — ‘and load it onto Jack’s. Get moving — we haven’t much time.’

Extracting the weapons and provisions — those at any rate that had survived the blast of the 75-mm shell — from among the pulped and fragmented bodies in Fox’s truck was a far from pleasant task, and Douglas was thankful when it was over. Meanwhile, McMurdoe had managed to start his battered Chevrolet and pronounced it fit to move, although the engine was making unpleasant grinding sounds and the steering was wobbly. With luck, he said, it might get them out of the town, but that was all they could ask of it.

Moynahan, however, was still determined to carry out the second part of his plan, to beat up the railway station, and with Douglas and Pargetter once more on board he set off with that intention, closely followed by Hardy, whose driver had carefully inched his own truck past the burning Semovente.

A few moments later, they learned that Pickford and Hillery had beaten them to it. The crews of trucks four and five, having successfully pinned down the small Italian garrison and inflicted considerable casualties on it, had paid the railway station a visit and planted bombs all over the place. Their handiwork was now made manifest by a series of explosions coming from that direction, followed soon afterwards by the glow of fires.

The four trucks rendezvoused in the small central square, where Moynahan lobbed some grenades through the windows of a building that looked like some sort of headquarters. Simultaneously a number of Italians appeared on the edge of the square and opened fire with rifles, but were soon driven off by a few bursts from a Vickers gun and some well-aimed grenades. Then, with everyone’s ammunition running low, Moynahan gave the order to withdraw.

A mile outside Barce, Moynahan's truck finally gave up the ghost. McMurdoe announced that it could not be repaired with the equipment they carried, and so it was abandoned, its equipment distributed between the other three. Somehow, they found room in Pickford's truck for the Breda; the cannon would come in useful if the depleted group came under air attack, which was now very probable.

Dawn was breaking when the three vehicles passed through Sidi Selim. Douglas, Moynahan and Pargetter were sandwiched in the rear of Pickford's truck, where Douglas had managed to rig up a makeshift mounting for the Breda. Everyone was bone-weary, but there were a lot of miles to be covered before they could rest in comparative safety.

In view of their losses, Moynahan decided to change his plans.

'We'll by-pass Jalo and head south for Kufra,' he told Douglas. 'With the vehicles overloaded as they are, we'd have a hell of a job getting through the Sand Sea, and this way there's a good chance we'll meet up with David's Benghazi group. It'll give us extra firepower if the Italian Air Force comes looking for us.'

They were soon to discover that the Italian Air Force did not present the most immediate danger. South of Sidi Selim the road ran through a narrow defile. As they approached it, Pickford signalled a sudden halt; in the half-light, his keen eyes had picked out vehicle tracks ahead, and they had not been there a few hours earlier.

Moynahan inspected the defile through his binoculars. There was no sign of life, but he felt uneasy.

'I smell an ambush,' he muttered. 'Still, there's no way round — we've got to go through. Let's make it as fast as we can. Forget the Breda, Douggie, and grab a Tommy-gun. It'll be more useful.'

The trucks set off again, jolting over the uneven ground as the drivers

worked up to maximum speed. They ploughed through the first few hundred yards of the defile, and Douglas dared to think that they were getting away with it. He was soon disillusioned.

Half-way through the defile, a storm of fire burst upon the speeding trucks. Three men were hit in the initial burst, two in the legs and one in the shoulder. The others returned the fire as best they could, but the Italians were cleverly concealed and there were no visible targets. The fusillade lasted no more than a few seconds, and Douglas realized that the Italians had made the mistake of concentrating their ambush in one spot; if they had spread out their men along the defile they might have caused far more damage.

As soon as they were clear of the defile they stopped to tend to the wounded and to allow Hillery's crew to change a tyre, ripped by bullets. While this operation was in progress two tracked vehicles emerged from the defile, with little groups of infantry scurrying behind them. The vehicles were Italian CV3/35s, the equivalent of the British Bren-gun carrier, and as they approached they opened fire with their 8-mm machine-guns. Douglas, assisted by Pargetter, and ignoring Moynahan's earlier instruction, swung the Breda round to meet the new threat, seeing his shells churn up the desert in front of the leading CV3 and then creep up to hit the target at the base of its small turret. The 20-mm projectiles pierced the 14-mm armour and probably killed the CV3's driver, for the vehicle spun into a series of crazy gyrations that came to an abrupt end when it collided with some rocks. The other CV3 turned on its tracks and withdrew at high speed towards the defile, leaving the supporting infantry to fend for themselves. The LRDG's Vickers and Lewis guns made short work of them, and the survivors scurried back into cover.

An hour later, with the wounded made as comfortable as possible and the Chevrolets once more on the move, the first Italian aircraft appeared

overhead. The trucks halted immediately on Moynahan's orders, the drivers seeking some scant cover afforded by the shadows cast by some low mounds as the aircraft quartered the sky, methodically swinging to left and right. It was a low-wing, twin-engine machine with a fixed undercarriage.

'Caproni light bomber,' the knowledgeable Pargetter informed Douglas. 'The Eyeties call 'em *Ghiblis*.' The New Zealander suddenly realized that he was speaking in a whisper and looked slightly embarrassed.

'Do you think he'll see us?' Douglas queried, mentally working out how far ahead of the bomber he would have to aim to stand a chance of hitting it with the Breda.

Pargetter spat into the sand.

'The bastard'll see us all right,' he grunted. 'Just give him a minute or two. All he's got to do is pick up our tracks and follow them to where they leave off.'

Pargetter's prediction proved to be accurate. The Italian pilot curved round to the north, then suddenly steadied his machine and headed directly towards the trucks. There was no doubt that he had spotted them, for Douglas saw that his bomb-doors were open.

'Hold your fire!' Moynahan yelled. 'Wait 'til he's right on top of us!'

The Caproni swept towards them at five hundred feet, the roar of its engines swelling. Douglas, whose Breda had a longer range than the other weapons, was the first to open fire. His tracers seemed to surround the head-on silhouette of the Caproni but the bomber came on unchecked. The Vickers and Lewis gunners were now blazing away too, and Douglas was certain that some hits must be registering on the aircraft, but the Italian pilot had plenty of guts and he never swerved from his course.

A cluster of small bombs fell from the Caproni's belly and curved down towards the trucks as its dark shape flashed low overhead. The LRDG men

went on firing until the last possible moment, then threw themselves down among the scant cover available — among the provisions in the backs of the trucks, or on the sand underneath the vehicles.

Half a dozen explosions cracked out in rapid succession. Douglas had expected them to be louder, and felt relief. Pissy little bombs, he told himself. They're just pissy little bombs, thank God.

Cautiously, he raised his head. The trucks were veiled by a cloud of drifting dust, kicked up by the explosions. Through it he heard Moynahan's distinctive brogue, asking if anyone was hurt. There was a momentary silence, then a laconic New Zealand voice answered him.

'Yeah, my arse is sore. I just dropped the world's biggest turd.'

No one, it seemed, had been injured in the bombing attack; the bombs had embedded themselves in the sandy ground and this had effectively cushioned the blast. The coarse joke helped release the tension and someone giggled hysterically.

'All right,' Moynahan shouted, 'it's not over yet. Here he comes again.'

This time, the Italian pilot flew broadside on to the trucks, allowing his gunner to rake them with fire from the turret on top of the fuselage. This proved to be infinitely more dangerous than the bombing; the Caproni made three strafing runs and one of Hardy's men was hit in the stomach by a 7.7-mm bullet. The others stared at the bomber in hatred as it climbed away after its last run and headed towards the north-east, apparently unscathed.

By this time the sun was well up and there was no time to be lost if the trucks were to put a substantial distance between themselves and the open country south of the Jebel before more Italian aircraft came looking for them, as they certainly would. They by-passed Sidi Raui and then struck out south-south-east across the scrub country towards Msus, where Suleiman and several of his colleagues were waiting for them at the prearranged

rendezvous. The Arabs had spent a busy night cutting telephone wires, and the throats of any enemy guards who had been foolish enough to try and prevent them.

Suleiman also brought intelligence of the planned SAS attack on Benghazi. It had ended in failure; on the way in, Stirling's force had run into minefields and had encountered heavy enemy opposition during the approach to the target from the south-east. The SAS men had managed to fight their way out, but the element of surprise had been completely lost and the operation had been abandoned. Stirling and his men were heading back to Kufra and, according to Suleiman, were now somewhere south-east of Soluch.

Moynahan pondered this information and consulted his map. He had a good idea of the route the SAS and their LRDG escort would be following, and it took him only seconds to make up his mind.

'We'll head south-south-west,' he announced, 'and aim to hit the Tariq el-Abd where the north-south track crosses it east of Bir el-Fenscia. That's the direct route to Jalo. Even if we fail to make contact with David there, Suleiman might be able to find out where he is. We'll see to the wounded, and then get going. That Eyetie will probably be back with his friends before long.'

For the wounded, the bumpy passage of the trucks over the rough ground was a jolting nightmare of agony. The man with the bullet in his stomach screamed almost incessantly until the moment he died, an hour or so into the journey. They halted and scooped out a shallow grave, covering it with a cairn of stones to keep away scavengers and making a careful note of its exact location.

They had scarcely finished the grim task when two Italian fighters came roaring down on them from the north. The Italian pilots seemed to know exactly where the LRDG trucks were, and the men just had time to scatter for

cover in the brush before the Fiats began their strafing run. This time there were no human casualties, but a burst of bullets found its mark among some jerrycans aboard Hillery's truck and the vehicle went up in a balloon of flame. There was no question of saving any of the precious supplies it carried.

Moynahan's force was now reduced to fourteen men — fifteen, including Suleiman — and three of them were wounded.

Fortunately, the latter were all able to sit up, and it was just possible for the remainder to squeeze into the two surviving vehicles. As they resumed their journey, Douglas looked back: the smoke from the burning truck was rising vertically in the still air, a sure beacon for any more enemy aircraft.

Ironically, it was the Italian Air Force which, two hours later, brought them to David Stirling's SAS group. From the top of a rise a few miles north of the Tariq el-Abd they clearly saw the plumes of bomb-bursts away to the south-west, and half a minute later, the rumble of the explosions reached them. Shortly afterwards Moynahan, scanning the sky through his binoculars, picked out the silvery shapes of the enemy bombers, turning away to the north.

The time lapse between the sight of the flowering bomb-bursts and the noise of the explosions told them that the Italians' target was only five or six miles distant. They took a careful bearing on the spot and set out towards it, the drifting smoke and dust kicked up by the bombs making a good marker. Thirty minutes later, nosing cautiously along a track that led through tall scrub towards the Tariq el-Abd, they came upon what was left of the SAS group.

Douglas quickly picked out a tall figure that stood head and shoulders above the rest; David Stirling had come through the night's operations unscathed. Jumping down from his truck, the Scot made his way over to

report to him.

Stirling, begrimed with dust and smoke, looked worn out. Nevertheless, he grinned broadly as Douglas came up and saluted.

‘Well, Douglas, I suppose you can consider yourself fully trained now,’ he said. Douglas’s face twisted in a wry smile.

‘If that was a training run, I’m not sure I’m looking forward to the real thing,’ he answered. ‘We got knocked about quite a bit.’

He gave a brief résumé of their activities in Barce.

‘It appears,’ Stirling told him, ‘that you are the only group to have achieved any tangible result. The enemy is still holding on to Jalo, and the Tobruk operation seems to have gone badly wrong. The best we can hope for is that we have diverted at least some of the enemy’s attention away from the offensive.’

‘Offensive?’ Douglas looked at the SAS commander questioningly, then added: ‘Our wireless equipment was destroyed. We haven’t been able to receive any messages from HQ for some time.’

‘Then you won’t have heard the important one,’ Stirling said. ‘In the early hours of this morning, Eighth Army launched an attack all along the front at El Alamein. It’s too early to say — but with any luck, we’ll have Rommel on the run at last.’

Chapter Four

There was nothing strange about the aircraft that cruised high over the waters of the eastern Mediterranean. The drone of its Wright Cyclone engines proclaimed that it was a B-17 Flying Fortress, even though the aircraft itself was hidden in the darkness.

Nothing strange — except that in November 1942 a Flying Fortress had no business over this part of the Mediterranean. The only Fortresses in the European Theatre were based in England, where they had joined the RAF in a growing strategic offensive against enemy targets on the Continent.

The Fortress droned on through the soft moonlight, sliding between scattered tufts of cloud. Shortly after midnight, it crossed the coast of Palestine near Haifa. A few minutes later, with the Sea of Galilee glinting in the moonlight away to the left, it turned southward and followed the line of the River Jordan. The pilot throttled back the engines and the Fortress descended gradually until it was flying only three thousand feet above the desert. Another stretch of water — the Dead Sea — now loomed up ahead. With the help of the moon, every landmark was easy to identify; there was the ancient city of Jericho, just a couple of miles to starboard.

Suddenly, dark shapes tumbled from the belly of the Fortress as it skimmed over the desert. Seconds later, parachutes blossomed out and drifted slowly down. As they did so, the engines of the B-17 roared at full power again as the pilot climbed away steeply, turning back the way he had come. And now the moonlight revealed the markings stamped on the American bomber’s black fuselage and tail: not the stars of the USAAF, but the crosses and swastika of the Luftwaffe.

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‘I suppose he was unlucky, that’s all.’

The young flying officer looked at Douglas and shrugged slightly. He was a Beaufighter pilot, a member of a night-fighter squadron recently pulled out of the Canal Zone and based for the time being at Ramat David, in Palestine.

‘We had a spot of engine trouble and were a few minutes late setting out on patrol, or we’d have missed him altogether,’ he went on. ‘Anyway, we were a few miles out to sea off Acre, at eighteen thousand, when my observer picked up a contact lower down and vectored me onto it. We didn’t suspect anything at first — the contact was heading north-west, towards Cyprus, but we thought we’d take a look anyway. We had no trouble spotting the aircraft — he was flying over cloud, silhouetted by the moon. I saw at once, as I closed, that it was a Fortress.’ The young pilot frowned. ‘It was then I realized there was something odd about it. I’m not long out from England, and I’ve seen plenty of Fortresses. The thing is, they’re camouflaged in olive green. This one wasn’t; it was black all over. I closed right in, and then I saw the white outlines of crosses on his wings. A second later his rear gunner opened fire, and that removed any doubts I may have had. I clobbered him good and hard. He didn’t burn, but I followed him down and saw him go into the drink. I think I saw one parachute. And that’s the whole of the story.’

‘Thank you, Anderson.’ The RAF Intelligence wing commander sitting next to Douglas smiled at the pilot. ‘That will be all for now. I’ve arranged a car to take you back to your unit.’

The flying officer rose, put on his cap, saluted the wing commander and departed with a friendly nod at Douglas. The latter turned enquiringly to the Intelligence officer, with a curious glance at a third person in the room, a mild-mannered, pipe-smoking man with a clipped moustache and a body tight and powerful as a coiled spring, who, Douglas later learned, was a top

CID investigator in the Palestine Police force.

‘Is that really the whole of the story, sir?’ he asked.

If it is, he thought, then why the hell was I suddenly whipped out here with a section of ten men. As yet, he had no clue as to the nature of his mission. All he knew was that, in the middle of a few days’ respite after the Barce operation, he and his section had been flown to Tel Aviv almost literally at a moment’s notice. He could not understand why he, and not a more experienced SAS officer, had been picked for whatever task was in hand, unless his knowledge of Arabic had something to do with it.

The wing commander shook his head. ‘By no means, Lieutenant. We are beginning to build up quite an interesting picture. Take the Flying Fortress, for a start. The air-sea rescue people have picked up some wreckage, and from a serial number we’ve learned that the aircraft belonged to a USAAF bomber group that arrived in England last June. It went missing on its second operation, just a few days later. Obviously, it made a forced landing, was collected by the Germans and repaired. We’ve known for some time that the enemy has been using captured aircraft on clandestine operations — you know, dropping agents, and that sort of thing.’

Douglas’s interest was awakened, but he made no comment. The wing commander looked at him with the air of a man about to play a trump card.

‘What’s more,’ he added, ‘we’ve got a survivor. Anderson was right: a crew member did manage to bail out. He’s the rear gunner. Quite a nasty piece of work — not at all disposed to talk until we threatened to turn him over to some of our Jewish friends in the Haganah.’ He named the Jewish ‘underground army’ in Palestine which, although dedicated to achieving an independent Jewish state, had agreed to support the British for the duration of hostilities. ‘Then he decided to talk.’

‘Can’t say I blame him.’

‘The Fortress was apparently being operated by a secret Luftwaffe group called KG 200,’ the wing commander explained. ‘It took off from an airfield near Bucharest and, according to the gunner, dropped four agents by parachute. He doesn’t know the location of the dropping zone, but he’s told us the approximate heading of the aircraft and the times at which it crossed the coast. Knowing the Fortress’s cruising speed, we can estimate that it dropped the agents somewhere in this circle.’

He got up and crossed to a wall map, and his index finger described an arc around an area centred on the northern tip of the Dead Sea, east of Jerusalem.

‘One other thing the gunner did say,’ the wing commander mused, ‘was that he saw the agents kitting themselves out in their flying clothing. He said that three of them were definitely Germans, but the fourth was an Arab. Now I’m going to let Inspector Trevillion take up the rest of the story.’

The Palestine Police Force inspector spoke softly with the west country accent his name implied, for the first time.

‘We think we know who the Arab is,’ he told Douglas. ‘If we are right, his name is Kifel Abdul Latif. He caused us no end of trouble in the thirties, and then he suddenly disappeared from the scene. Shortly after the outbreak of war, we had a report that he was in Berlin, trying to drum up Hitler’s support for his Arab liberation movement. Hitler seems to have ignored him until now, and he’s been kicking his heels in Germany for the past couple of years. It looks as though the Germans have been keeping him on ice, so to speak, in case he ever came in useful. Now, with things going against them in North Africa, it appears that Latif’s moment has come.’

The inspector touched a match to his pipe and exhaled a mouthful of acrid smoke that made Douglas’s nostrils tingle.

‘It’s clear what the Germans are up to,’ he continued. ‘Using Latif, they’re setting out to create an underground army of extremist Arab groups in

Palestine and Transjordan. Once this army is organized, it will be trained by German commandos and equipped with German weapons. When the time is ripe, there will be a sudden armed uprising, and we'll suddenly find ourselves with a full-scale war on our hands and precious few resources with which to deal with it.' The inspector gave an unexpected grin. 'Fortunately for us, the Germans hadn't reckoned on a couple of wandering Bedouin.'

He paused and inspected the tobacco in the glowing bowl of his pipe. Douglas felt irritated.

'I'm sorry, Inspector,' he said bluntly, 'but I don't quite follow you.'

Trevillion smiled tolerantly.

'Patience, laddie. I like to take my time over these things. If you tell a story too quickly, your audience is bound to miss something important. Anyway, here's what happened.

'A couple of days ago, we received reports that an unusually large number of gold coins were circulating in Jericho. It took us only a matter of hours to find out that they were being brought into the city by Bedouin tribesmen. We pulled in two of them for questioning yesterday, and they revealed that they had found the coins in a bag, together with a large number of British banknotes, in a dried-up river-bed three miles outside Jericho. They told us that the bag was one of several that had been dropped from a low-flying aircraft.'

'There was no mention of the agents?' Douglas asked.

Trevillion shook his head. 'No, we've only got the German gunner's word that they were dropped. But they must be around somewhere, because when our chaps searched the dried watercourse they found a radio transmitter, several boxes of iron rations, a bag containing two hundred gold pieces, some Schmeisser machine-pistols and several hundred rounds of ammunition, a first-aid pack and two German-Hebrew dictionaries. And ten of these, too.'

He reached out and carefully opened a small box that lay on the table. Douglas peered at it, and saw that it contained a white powder.

‘What is it?’ he queried, reaching out to poke it with an exploratory finger.

‘Careful!’ Trevillion’s warning was sharp. ‘Don’t touch it. Our forensic people have been up all night analysing it. It’s a deadly poison, something the Jerry chemists have come up with. It’s got an unpronounceable name, but I’m reliably informed that if that little lot were to be dumped into a reservoir, it would be enough to kill twenty-five thousand people.’

‘Good God!’ Douglas stared at the powder, aghast. ‘Is that what they were planning to do — murder countless innocent people?’

‘By all accounts they’re murdering thousands of innocent Jews in occupied Europe already,’ Trevillion pointed out quietly, ‘so I don’t suppose they’d have many qualms about slaughtering a quarter of a million more. It would kill two birds with one stone — cause untold disruption and chaos in Palestine, and give a boost to their filthy extermination programme.’

‘Where do we come in?’ Douglas wanted to know. ‘All this sounds like a police matter to me — and you seem to be getting things pretty well sewn up.’

Trevillion nodded. ‘I’ll admit we’ve done a fair amount of spadework, but it’s been thanks mainly to good luck that we’ve got as far as we have. There are still quite a number of things we don’t know, like, for instance, where the agents are, or how many there are, or if there are other arms caches. For all we know, the enemy could have been building up this operation for weeks. I’ve got about five hundred troops and police scouring the countryside for them, but my personal feeling is that they’ll be making far too much noise to produce much result. So I’m going to pull them out, and send you in instead. I want you and your chaps to flush these buggers out.’

Douglas’s face was expressionless when he asked, ‘D’you want them alive

or dead?'

Trevillion shrugged. 'We'd like them alive, of course, if that's at all possible. But don't take any undue risks. These fellows are likely to be pretty tough.'

Douglas pondered for a moment, then said: 'The sooner we get cracking the better. We'll move after dark. First of all, though, I'd like to do a recce of the area marked on your map. Is there any chance of laying on an aircraft?'

The question was directed at the wing commander, who nodded and reached for his telephone.

'Hello, is that Lydda? Get me the CO, please.' There was a moment's pause, and then: 'Charles, is that you? John Marshall here. Look, old chap, I'm wondering if you can help with a bit of a special job we're organizing. We need a Lysander, as soon as possible. Oh, for two or three hours at the outside, I'd guess. You can? Splendid! We'll be right over. Thank you, Charles.'

He looked at Douglas and beamed. 'Well, that's fixed. You can nip over to Lydda right away and get on with the job.'

'I'll get one of my chaps to go along with you,' Inspector Trevillion said, 'somebody who knows the country inside out. I'd go myself, but flying isn't exactly my cup of tea.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' Douglas grimaced, recalling his parachute training at Kabrit.

Nevertheless, the Lysander came as a pleasant surprise. With its strutted wing and big, squat undercarriage it looked reassuringly solid and robust, and Douglas's anticipated qualms did not materialize as he strapped himself in behind the pilot. Douglas had been told that the aircraft's long glasshouse cockpit could comfortably hold three passengers, so in addition to the police officer detailed by Trevillion — a powerful man with a square jaw and a nose

squashed in some violent encounter — he had brought along his second in command, Sergeant Brough. The NCO was several years Douglas's senior. The two had not met before this operation, but Brough was friendly in a crisp and efficient sort of way and appeared to be well liked by his men. Douglas felt that they were going to get on fine.

The young Lysander pilot sported a huge toothbrush moustache that curled around the cheeks of his flying helmet. There was no intercom, so he had to shout to make himself heard above the roar of the Bristol Mercury radial engine, Douglas leaning forward to catch his words. The pilot allowed the aircraft to fly itself as they climbed gently away from Lydda, half turning in his seat to indicate the course he had pencilled in on his map. He had been briefed by the policeman, and knew exactly what was required of him.

A few minutes' flying brought the Lysander within sight of the Jordan Valley. The pilot passed to the north of Jerusalem, heading for Jericho, the starting-point for their reconnaissance. Douglas peered excitedly over the pilot's shoulder, watching the old city — the most ancient in the world, according to some — rise out of the parched desert ahead, set amid the green cluster of its oasis. As they flew on, Douglas's policeman companion pointed out salient features along the line of the Jordan. The river seemed flat and metallic in the late afternoon sun.

'There's the Allenby Bridge,' the policeman said. 'It's the only way across the river in these parts, and whichever route the enemy took, they didn't go in that direction. Incidentally, if you look down to your right, at about two o'clock, you'll see a kind of reddish scar on the ground; that's where we found the bits and pieces the agents had abandoned.'

'What's your guess?' Douglas shouted in the man's ear. 'If you were looking for somewhere to hole up, where would you go?' The policeman pointed towards the Dead Sea, over on the aircraft's starboard wing. 'South,'

he said firmly. ‘Towards Qumran. The hills and canyons there are riddled with natural caves, and there’s spring water too, despite what a lot of people may think. If these chaps are being helped by Arabs, they could hide there for weeks and an army would never find them.’

‘Let’s take a look,’ Douglas ordered, tapping the pilot on the shoulder. The Lysander swung around in a wide turn and its occupants were soon gazing down on the barren landscape that bordered the Dead Sea. Douglas saw that the policeman’s remarks had been in no sense an understatement: part of the area looked inaccessible, though there were plenty of tracks. Douglas questioned their origin and was told that they were made by sheep. Shepherds were the only humans that moved freely in this part of Palestine.

Douglas had seen enough, and told the pilot to fly back to Lydda. Working out a plan of action based on available information was not going to be easy; the whole operation promised to be hit-or-miss, with lots of attendant luck needed if it was going to succeed.

By the time the Lysander touched down at Lydda, Douglas had decided on his tactics. He would split his small force into two-man cells, each assigned to a specific sector of the Qumran area in order to keep a watch on principal tracks, particularly those that led to a water source. Each man would carry provisions for two days. The cells would not be more than a mile apart and each would know the exact position of the others; communication would be by runner, and if anything suspicious was seen the whole SAS detachment could be assembled quickly to investigate. Douglas asked for and obtained a truck and a driver; his men would be dropped a few miles short of the target area and then split up, making a rapid approach march to their positions under cover of darkness. Stealth, initially, was the keyword; after that it would be a matter of watching and waiting.

Douglas and his team moved fast. Shortly after midnight, the truck dropped

them just short of the point where the route from Jerusalem to the Jordan joined the road leading north to Jericho. On Douglas's instructions the driver did not stop, but slowed briefly to walking pace, allowing the men to bale out from the rear. A moving vehicle, Douglas reasoned, was less likely to attract attention if observed from a distance than one that stopped suddenly for no apparent reason.

The two-man cells melted away into the darkness. There was no need for any final word; every man knew exactly what he had to do.

Douglas was accompanied by Trooper Brian Olds, a burly and cheerful young man who had been a farm labourer in Norfolk before discovering what he now believed to be his true niche in life. The two made good progress over the rocky, arid ground, Douglas stopping frequently to take compass bearings, and then started a long climb up a defile that led to the selected vantage point. The pair moved like shadows, breathing easily despite the loads they carried.

Once they reached the defile the rest was comparatively easy from the navigational point of view, although the climb was long and hard, requiring a great deal of physical exertion. The position Douglas had picked out from his careful study of a large-scale map of the area was a rocky outcrop that stood on high ground to the right of the defile; it was visible now even in the darkness, rising above the rest of the terrain.

They slipped off their packs and crouched in its lee, feeling the sweat drying on their bodies in the chill night air.

Douglas took stock of their surroundings. Below them, the defile up which they had climbed was a dark gash cutting through the rocks; on either side the ground undulated away into the shadows. A hundred yards away to the left, Douglas knew, was a winding sheep-track. The track itself was invisible, but they were close enough to detect any movement along it, even in the

darkness. There was a light breeze from that direction, and the smallest sound would carry well to them in their elevated position.

The two men lay huddled under their greatcoats, motionless. Above them the stars were out, casting a faint light over the lunar landscape. Everything was still, although from time to time Douglas imagined that he could hear a faint trickle of water. That was strange; the map had not shown any water source in their immediate area.

The hours of darkness crawled by; nothing disturbed the silence. It was the longest night Douglas had ever spent, stretching the nerves even more endlessly than that other night, long ago, when pranksters had locked him in the subterranean boiler-room of his prep school. They had expected him to cry out for help; he had heard them sniggering beyond the door, waiting for him to voice his fear of the dark and the unknown, but he had not done so. Tight-lipped, he had crouched close to the fading warmth of the ancient wood-fired boiler, and had shiveringly tried to pretend that the rustlings of the night creatures around him did not exist. The old man who stoked the boiler had found him there, wan and drawn but dry-eyed, before dawn, and had respected the boy's plea not to 'peach' on the culprits.

That evening, before calling-over, Douglas had fought his tormentors one by one on the well-trodden and battled-over patch of earth behind the school cricket pavilion and had received an awful pasting for his audacity; but they had left him alone after that. And the years that followed had never seen Douglas participating in the traditional school custom of locking other small newcomers in that frightful dungeon.

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Douglas thought. There was nothing else to do but think, lying there cramped and cold on a barren hilltop amid an even more barren waste known, through his divinity teacher at school, as the Holy Land. His mind was

wandering, and he did not care. The wandering in no way impaired his ability to watch and listen. He took his memories one by one and examined them carefully in a time-passing ritual, building up a mental chain of events. A lifetime, in one night, of Lieutenant Callum Douglas, born in a Scottish manor house, a minor stately home, overlooking the River Tay in the frosty small hours of the last day of December, 1919.

Stately the house might have appeared, but home it had never been, not in any sense save that of providing shelter. He knew little of his mother, except for the fragments he had pieced together over the years. She was a Scandal. No one spoke of her, least of all his father. She had gone off when he was small; packed her bags and done a flit, as Trooper Olds would doubtless have described the act. They said she had gone to America, run away with a wealthy rancher, a man who had come to Scotland for the salmon fishing. She had never attempted to make contact with her son, as far as Douglas knew, unless her letters had been intercepted and destroyed. He had long since ceased to worry; the conditioning had been thorough. He did not even possess a photograph of her, nor had he been able to find any in the house. His father had seen to that.

Nevertheless, there had been times when he had cried in the night as a child, because he had no mother. Not at home — never at home, as far as he could remember. There, the lonely traumas of his childhood had been softened by Morag, his father's cook and housekeeper — and probably mistress too, in later years — who had told him comforting tales in the bedtime twilight and fed him illicit pastries. No, the tears had come at school, in the harsh and thoughtless cruelty of a young male environment, where one's secrets were mercilessly ferreted out. ('Douglas's mother ran away. Snigger. 'Cause she found someone with a bigger cock than his father's. Snigger. That's true, Douglas, isn't it? Try to fight me, would you, you little

swine? Take that!') Age and stature, mainly on the sports field, had stopped the taunts after a time, but Douglas had never forgotten them. They had bred in him a deep and lasting hatred of the bully.

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He shifted position slightly and his glance fell on the dark shape that was Trooper Olds, huddled in his greatcoat. Douglas felt suddenly embarrassed, as though Olds had been reading his thoughts all the while. What thoughts, he wondered, were passing through Olds's head? Thoughts of the Fen Country, and the breezes off the North Sea, or of the breasts and thighs of some homely farm girl?

Douglas felt a sudden twitch and thought, Christ, what a place to get the beginnings of an erection! Lying under a rock on a hill in Palestine. What he wouldn't have given, now, for a woman. Even Morag. No, that thought was almost indecent; he shied away from it. But the first woman he'd had, at the age of eighteen, had been ten years older than himself, and Morag could not have been more than thirty when she had cuddled him as a child. A startling thought came to him, for the first time: that there were two sides to his family's tale, and that perhaps Morag had been the cause of his mother's sudden departure to seek solace with another man. He would probably never know, for his father was unlikely to tell him the truth unless he asked for it straight out, and that he had no intention of doing. But Morag was still there, cooking and cleaning for his father in the house overlooking the Tay. Morag in her early fifties, Father a few years older. Separated, perhaps, by some unknown and dreadful emotional gulf. The Cloister and the Hearth, almost.

It was Morag who had taken him on his first early walks by the Tay. He felt a sudden fondness, not for her, but for the swift river, one of the best Atlantic salmon waters in the world. In the years to come it had become the refuge of a solitary youth; he had found friendship in it, and had learned the ways of its

creatures. One of his fiercest ambitions — and that, doubtless, of several thousand other fishermen — was to better the record set up by a woman who had pulled a sixty-four-pound monster from the river's swirling spate at Caputh; so far, none of them had achieved it. The spring salmon run at Ballinluig, where the Tay joins the River Tummel rolling down from the Loch beyond Pitlochry, had become Douglas's annual Mecca, a ritualistic, almost sacred rendezvous uninterrupted by anything until Hitler went on the march. His tackle had travelled with him into the army and he had since tested many waters, but there was nothing to compare with the Tay in full spate, its waters glistening with the freshness of the melted winter snows and the flash of leaping fish. The musical tinkle of water; he could hear it now.

But the sound that had interrupted his reverie was not water, and Olds was tapping his leg in an urgent signal.

On the track below them, clearly visible against the dark background of the slope beyond, there was a white blob of movement. The movement was accompanied by a faint metallic noise, like cans clinking against one another. Someone, probably wearing Arab dress and carrying a heavy burden, was making slow progress up the track towards the point where it disappeared around a shoulder of rock.

'Let's go, Olds,' Douglas whispered. 'We must see where he goes. Not a sound, mind.'

The two men shouldered their packs, picked up their Tommy-guns and set off in pursuit of the indistinct figure, placing their feet carefully to avoid dislodging loose stones and keeping to the shelter of tumbled rocks as they descended towards the track from the outcrop. Ahead of them, their target plodded on steadily, unaware that he was being followed.

After a few minutes the man abruptly turned aside from the track and seemed to vanish into a rock face. Douglas and Olds crept forward and

crouched behind some boulders close to the spot where the man had disappeared. It was clear, now, that he had entered a cave, one of several fissures that split the rocky wall.

They heard the muted sound of voices, too indistinct for them to make out any words. The voices gave no clue as to how many men might be in the cavern. In a little while the man they had tailed re-emerged and trotted rapidly away down the track the way he had come. He passed within a few yards of where Douglas and Olds lay concealed and they saw that he was indeed an Arab, little more than a boy. Douglas allowed him to get well clear and put his mouth close to his companion's ear. His whisper was barely audible.

'Time to get the others. I'll stay put here. Be as stealthy as you can on the way back, and watch out for that Arab as you go. He's probably got a mule down the track somewhere. I'll pin these chaps down if they show their faces. If you hear any firing, move fast.'

Olds tapped Douglas's arm, signifying that he had understood. Then he was gone, as soundlessly as a wraith. Douglas had no doubt that he would locate the other SAS positions quickly and without any trouble.

He settled down to wait, wriggling forward a little so that he lay between two boulders. With infinite care he built a little wall of stones in front of his face, leaving a chink through which he had a clear view of the cave's entrance. He was confident that even when daylight came, no one would see him unless they practically fell over him.

His eyes began to smart from the strain of watching as the hours went by, and it came as a relief when the characteristic pre-dawn greyness touched the eastern sky, followed by the swiftly-spreading red of the rising sun.

Suddenly, without warning, a man appeared in the cave's entrance. He was obviously a European, tall with closely-cropped hair, and he wore a sand-

coloured overall. He looked around him cautiously, then, as Douglas watched, hardly daring to breathe, he relieved himself against a rock. There was a prolonged splashing sound, a grunt of satisfaction, and the man disappeared into the cave again.

Douglas heard a comment, a sound of muffled laughter, and then two more men emerged on the same errand. They, too, were wearing identical sand-coloured overalls; the difference was that one carried what looked like a Schmeisser slung over his left shoulder. He seemed more guarded than the others, his eyes darting up and down the track. Once, his gaze became fixed on the little pile of stones that concealed Douglas and the latter tensed, but then the man turned aside to water the rocks before following the others back into their hiding-place.

Douglas relaxed, but only a little, then immediately stiffened again as he caught a flicker of movement among the rocks on the other side of the track, a few yards down the slope from his position. The sun had not yet risen above the high ground to the east, the crest beyond which the land sloped down towards the Dead Sea, and much of the track was still in shadow, but there was enough light to make out the dark shape that flitted across it. Another followed it, and another.

A couple of minutes later Olds crawled up to lie flat beside Douglas, taking care to keep his head well down.

‘Brought Conolly and Marsh with me, sir,’ he whispered. ‘Sergeant Brough and the others will be here any minute.’

‘Good stuff, Olds,’ Douglas whispered back, his voice failing to betray the relief he felt. ‘Listen, now. There are at least three men in the cave, probably more, and they’re armed. Leave Conolly and Marsh here, nip back to the other side and tell Sergeant Brough the situation. Tell him to position two men beside the track above the cave and two below it. I want two more

among those rocks up there — see?'

'Sir. Got all that.' Olds's voice was matter-of-fact.

'Right, then. Tell Sergeant Brough I'm going to call on those Johnnies to give themselves up. If they won't, we're going in shooting. Conolly's the German speaker, isn't he?'

'Sir.'

'Then get him up here with me. Off you go, and give me a wave when everybody's in place.'

Olds slipped away, to be replaced almost immediately by Conolly. Douglas had made it his business to learn something about the men in his detachment, and knew that Conolly, a rather scruffy-looking young man, was a graduate of Dublin University. He had been on vacation in Germany when Hitler invaded Poland and had just managed to get out on one of the last westbound trains before the border was closed.

'What d'you want me to do, sir?' he asked softly.

'When I give the okay, tell those fellows in the cave that this is the British Army and that they're surrounded. Tell them they've no chance of getting away and that if they surrender immediately they'll be well treated. Let them know they've got one minute, no more, to make up their minds.'

Shortly afterwards, on the other side of the track, Douglas saw the wave of Sergeant Brough's arm, indicating that his men were in position. He tapped Conolly on the shoulder, and the young Irishman shouted his message.

There was silence. Douglas told Conolly to try again.

An instant after he had finished speaking, a dark object came arcing out of the cave mouth. Douglas recognized it in midflight: it was a Type 24 grenade, the standard 'potato-masher' used by the German Army. He barely had time to yell 'heads down' before the grenade bounced off a rock, skittered a few feet down the track and exploded with a sharp crack, sending metal fragments

whining through the air.

‘The bastards want to do it the hard way,’ Douglas snapped. Fishing in his pack, he took out two Mills bombs, which he clipped to his webbing. He picked up his Tommy-gun and rolled over to face Conolly, who had a similar weapon.

‘I’m going over there,’ he said. ‘As soon as I move, give the cave mouth all you’ve got. Make sure your shots go inside, though; I don’t want to collect a ricochet.’

Douglas took a deep breath and jumped to his feet, scattering his makeshift wall of stones as he hurled himself across the track towards the rock wall beside the cave. His limbs were cramped from the long hours of lying almost motionless in his hiding-place; he stumbled and nearly fell as the pain seized his calf muscles, but righted himself just in time and sprawled against the rock, his heart thudding. The air was split by the bark of gun-fire as Conolly’s Tommy-gun spat its heavy bullets into the cave mouth in short bursts.

Douglas edged closer to the cleft, flattening himself against the rock face. Cradling his gun in his left arm, he glanced across to Conolly’s position, raised his hand to attract the man’s attention, pointed to one of his grenades and held up three fingers. He knew that Conolly would have understood the signal; it meant that Douglas would toss the grenade into the cave after a three-second delay, long enough to prevent anyone inside from picking it up and throwing it out again.

Douglas took a grenade and yanked out the pin, counting even as he moved across the last few feet towards the cave mouth. On the count of three the grenade left his hand. He heard it clink metallically as it struck something inside the cave, and almost immediately afterwards came the crack of its detonation, the noise magnified in the confined space. Dust and smoke

billowed from the cave's entrance.

A high-pitched scream came from the cave, followed by a wailing cry: '*Nicht schiessen*! *Um Gottes Willen, nicht schiessen!*'

A man staggered into the light through the drifting dust, his face and front streaked with blood, his hands wavering in the air. There was a single shot and the man pitched forward, dropping face-down across the track. Douglas knew at once that the shot had come from inside the cave.

He signalled now to Conolly to hold his fire and then carefully inched forward on his belly until his head was almost level with the edge of the cave mouth. He was remembering his training: if you have to go through a doorway into a defended room, do it low down. No one ever expects you to come in low down, so in theory the first burst of enemy fire will be over your head. He hoped the rule applied to defended caves, too.

Douglas unclipped his second and last grenade, pulled the pin, counted to three again and threw it inside, hurriedly pulling back his throwing arm before the explosion. This time, the crack almost deafened him. Dazed, it took all his will to force himself to move quickly, sliding like a snake around the edge of the cave mouth under cover of the swirling dust. He winced as something sliced across his forehead; hot metal was still pinging around the cavern's interior.

He lay prone against the rock wall, conscious that the growing light was behind him, clutching his Tommy-gun, his eyes narrowed against the dust particles. The dust began to settle slowly, but it was still almost impossible to see through it into the cave's shadowy depths. His one comforting thought at this moment was the knowledge that the other SAS men would be moving in to back him up.

Suddenly, a shaft of reddish sunlight pierced the gloom ahead of him. There must, he thought, be a crack in the cave roof; by a freak of coincidence, the

rays of the rising sun had pierced it at that very instant. The ray was weak, but it was enough to illuminate, for the merest fraction of a second, the outline of a man blundering towards Douglas through the dust.

Douglas resisted a wild impulse to open fire. Instead he drew his knees under him and hurled himself forward like a leopard. There was a thud as his shoulder made violent contact with the man's midriff, the stink of unwashed body and clothing as his arms went round the man's thighs and slid down his legs, locking them together in a classic Rugby tackle. The man's momentum carried him over Douglas's shoulder and he hit the cave floor with a thump and a gasp as the wind had been knocked out of him. Douglas hit him once, hard behind the left ear, then rolled back towards the cave wall and retrieved his Tommy-gun.

He was just in time to avoid a splash of bullets that came from the other end of the cave, striking the floor beyond the man Douglas had felled to whine away through the entrance. Douglas had his prisoner now, and was taking no chances. Keeping low, he sprayed the far end of the cave with Tommy-gun fire, pressing his face to the ground as ricochets screeched around the walls. In the echoing silence that followed, he heard a sound like someone choking, followed by a slithering noise, then a soft thud.

With infinite care, he crawled forward. Smoke from the explosion of the grenade and the gun-fire caught at his throat, making him gasp, but the dust was beginning to settle and he was able to make out his surroundings in the diffused light that filtered through the crack in the roof.

The man he had shot lay slumped against the far wall, his chest a mass of blood. A Schmeisser had dropped from one outflung hand. He was dead. Douglas saw that he was middle-aged, with greying hair. There was no one else in the cave, and no equipment apart from a couple of haversacks.

Douglas straightened up slowly, feeling drained. He walked back to the

other man, the one he had tackled, who still lay unconscious on the floor. Then, turning towards the cave entrance, he shouted for Sergeant Brough, who appeared like lightning, his gun at the ready, his eyes narrowed as they took in the scene inside the cave. Douglas nudged the prone man with his boot.

'This one's out cold, Sergeant,' he said. 'Let's get him outside and take a look at him.'

Together, they hauled the man out into the daylight and turned him on his back. A groan indicated that he was beginning to come round. Sergeant Brough signalled to the other SAS men to come out from their positions. On Douglas's instructions, two of them tied up the enemy agent and propped him against a boulder.

Douglas scratched himself; sand fleas had got inside his clothing and were irritating him horribly. Strangely, they had never bothered him much in the desert. He looked at the trussed man.

'He won't be in any fit state to tell us anything for a while,' he told Brough. 'We'll have breakfast, and then see if Conolly can get anything out of him. I doubt it, though; he looks a tough customer.'

They ate some bully and biscuit, washed down with water from a clear spring one of the men found nearby; Douglas's ears had not deceived him in the night, after all. Brough searched the bound man and found nothing on him, but that was to be expected; the haversacks, however, contained three German tropical uniforms, although they bore no insignia other than the eagle of the Third Reich, stitched on the right breast. Douglas surveyed them with interest.

'Well, well,' he commented to no one in particular, 'I wonder what they were planning to do — parade through Jerusalem as conquering heroes?' He looked at the prisoner, who was now wide awake and glaring at him with

undisguised malevolence. ‘Time you went to work, Conolly,’ he said quietly.

Within a few minutes, it was apparent that the prisoner was not going to utter a word; Douglas had never believed he would.

‘All right, Conolly,’ he said presently, ‘forget it. We’ll let the experts take care of him. Let’s get down to the road. We’ll commandeer some transport and get this joker back to HQ. Take the bodies into the cave; somebody else can do the clearing up.’

They collected their packs and weapons and set off down the track, the prisoner stumbling along in their midst with his hands lashed securely behind his back.

Not many hours later the prisoner was dead; the cyanide capsule concealed in one of his teeth had done its work. But by then, his specialist interrogators had learned a great deal about him, and the organization to which he belonged.

Chapter Five

Hauptmann Helmut Winter was tired and damp all over. The stink of Russia was still in his uniform and he smelt like a wet dog. There were only two bright spots in his life at the moment: first, that the murderous hell of Stalingrad was behind him, and second, that he was able to draw on the luxury of a packet of Players, part of some British supplies captured a few weeks earlier and jealously hoarded by the Panzer Grenadier colonel who now sat opposite him.

Outside, beyond the dirty window of the office that until recently had been occupied by a Vichy French officer, the rain of early December lashed down on El Aouina airfield, turning its surface into a quagmire of thick yellowish-grey mud that was sufficiently glutinous to bring a halt to all movement.

Winter's thoughts were haunted by the countless thousands trapped in Stalingrad by the encircling Russians, with little food and no fuel in the crippling cold, eating rats to survive, knowing in their hearts that there was no escape. He shuddered. He had escaped, he and his hundred men, brought out through the fast-closing jaws of the trap just in time on the order of higher authority. It was a miracle, and he could not understand why it had happened to him, why he had been the chosen one. He did not believe in God, yet many who fervently did were doomed to die horribly in the shattered town on the banks of the Volga.

He had seen the hatred in the eyes of other soldiers as he and his men had marched westwards to safety, had read the naked message plainly on their faces. You are Brandenburgers, it said; you are the élite, the fighting arm of the Abwehr, Admiral Canaris's secret army, the spearhead of the system that

brought this misery upon us. We hate and despise you.

It had hurt to see that look, for the Brandenburg Division had done its share, and more. Its task was to carry out missions of extreme danger, missions that no other unit would touch, often operating deep behind the enemy lines. Admiral Canaris, the head of German Military Intelligence, was its master and it was answerable only to him and the Führer, although Winter suspected that the Führer was kept in ignorance of many of its activities.

Winter had been a Brandenburger right from the beginning, since October 1939, when the German Company for Special Missions had first been formed at Brandenburg-on-the-Havel. Its recruits in those days had come from the Sudeten SA, from the Free Corps and from the Prussian Young Alliance, of which Winter had been a member.

By the beginning of 1940, the unit had reached battalion strength, and on a big, wooded estate near Brandenburg the young volunteers had learned the tricks of their trade. They had learned how to parachute and how to make explosive devices; they had learned to survive for lengthy periods in hostile territory, living off the land. Each man had become fluent in one or more foreign languages.

Their unofficial motto was *Siegen oder Sterben* — Win or Die. In three years of war they had done both, on every front except North Africa; now they were here, too.

Helmut Winter had risen through the ranks. As a corporal, with a group of other Brandenburgers, he had entered Norway three days before the German invasion of 9 April 1940, crossing the border from neutral Sweden. When the attack came, he and his comrades had destroyed vital communications links between Oslo and key military installations. A month later, already a sergeant, he had been part of a team that had been dropped into Belgium by Fieseler Storch light aircraft. Wearing Belgian uniforms, the Germans had

seized crossing points on the River Maas and had held them until the arrival of the armoured spearheads of General von Bock's Army Group B.

Winter had been commissioned in the field for an action south of the River Somme in June 1940 that had resulted in the capture of a French general and his entire staff. Yet in one sense that mission had been a failure: its real aim had been to kill or capture the troublesome and spirited commander of the French 4th Armoured Division, one of the few Frenchmen that were determined to fight to the bitter end. But Charles de Gaulle had eluded his would-be killers and had found sanctuary in England.

In August 1940, with the Germans masters of most of western Europe, the Brandenburg Battalion had been expanded to the status of a regiment; and in June 1941 it was further expanded to divisional strength in time to take part in Operation Barbarossa — the German invasion of Russia — and the drive eastwards towards the rich oilfields of the Caucasus. The drive had ended at Stalingrad.

Winter shivered again, took a pull at his cigarette and stared out of the window at the teeming rain. He hoped his men were comfortably billeted; they deserved it. They had followed him through thick and thin, and he had earned their respect the hard way. No Roman centurion, he thought, had ever commanded a finer century.

Across the table, the Panzer Grenadier colonel surveyed Winter with some irritation. Why, the man was practically ignoring him. Yet the colonel felt oddly nervous in Winter's presence. It was stupid and irrational, but he couldn't help it. The Hauptmann's tough, weathered face, the double scar above the left eye, the self-assured, almost arrogant set of the mouth — those, and the ribbon of the Knight's Cross, all added up to a man who was not to be trifled with. But the colonel had been assigned to brief Winter fully and he intended to do just that, even if the new arrival seemed to be in a state of

terminal boredom.

In fact Winter's mien had been misread. He was glad to be there, even though a little sunshine would have been welcome on his arrival; it seemed as though he had not been warm for months. The two Junkers 52 transports that had brought his company to Tunisia had crept in with the dawn, making the crossing from Italy under cover of darkness; the crew of his aircraft had been nervous, and he had not been reassured to learn that two more Ju 52s had been shot down a few nights earlier by night-fighters from Malta. But they had survived the passage to disgorge their airsick cargoes into the cloying Tunisian mud.

The colonel cleared his throat. 'As I was saying, Winter, I was instructed to be frank with you.'

His tone was rather petulant. The man he addressed sighed inwardly and did his best to look interested. Much of what the colonel was saying he already knew, anyway.

'The situation at the moment,' the colonel said, 'is far from favourable.'

Winter permitted himself a transient smile. That, he thought, must surely be the understatement of 1942.

Winter half listened to what the colonel was telling him. It was a month since Anglo-American forces had landed in Algeria and started the race for Tunisia, aiming to cut off Rommel's Panzer Armee Afrika in the desert as it abandoned its hold on Cyrenaica under the hammer-blows of the British Eighth Army. The Italian divisions under Rommel's command had virtually ceased to exist; the German units were to be gradually withdrawn, having slowed the Eighth Army's advance for as long as possible, to strengthen General Jurgen von Arnim's 5th Panzer Army in Tunisia.

'Nevertheless,' the colonel went on hastily, as though to compensate for his previous remark, 'the Führer was quick to realize our needs. The flow of

reinforcements has been almost continuous; our armour, artillery and transport are well up to strength, the Luftwaffe has brought in a wing each of fighters and bombers and nearly 20,000 men have been airlifted in during the past three weeks. Our battle groups are holding the enemy advance and soon the whole of Tunisia will be a fortress from which, before long, a reborn Panzer Armee Afrika will sweep forth to achieve decisive victory!'

Winter looked at the colonel in amazement. The man's face was flushed, his chin out-thrust. My God, Winter thought, he'd look good on a rostrum in the Berlin Sports Stadium. He cleared his throat politely and leaned forward, smiling disarmingly.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said. 'Forgive me for interrupting, but am I correct in thinking that you are Austrian?'

The colonel looked at him as though he had just received a slap in the face.

'Austrian? Why, yes, I am as a matter of fact — but what has that got to do with anything?'

'Just curiosity, sir,' Winter murmured. 'I thought I detected something of an Austrian accent. The Führer has one, you know.'

The colonel glared at him. 'Are you trying to be funny, Winter?'

The Brandenburger raised his eyebrows and looked horrified. 'Certainly not, sir. Please accept my apology.'

Winter did not like Austrians. They were too intelligent for their own good, and soft — soft as shit.

His words had produced the desired effect of bringing the colonel down to earth. The man looked ruffled, and made a pretence of scanning some documents before continuing.

'I'll get to the point, Winter,' he said. 'To put it bluntly, we have had a great deal of trouble in recent months from British commandos. They harassed our lines constantly in Libya, attacking out of the Sand Sea and

usually disappearing before we could get to grips with them. Sometimes they come from the sea, sometimes by parachute. In the course of this year alone they have destroyed over a hundred of our aircraft on bases far behind our lines. The English seem to have a flair for this kind of work, Winter. We have found these infernal nuisance raids virtually impossible to counter with conventional means. That's why the C-in-C requested a company of the Brandenburg Division to be sent over here. We understand that you are well-versed in underhand tactics.'

Winter ignored the deliberate slight. Thank God for the C-in-C, he thought. He wished that he could get the hell of Stalingrad out of his mind. He wondered, too, about the sudden change of policy; the original intention had been to drop his unit into Palestine, where they were to have caused the maximum amount of havoc in an attempt to tie down forces the British needed for their desert offensive. A small group of agents had already been dropped there to pave the way, that much he knew, but nothing had been heard from them. Something must have gone seriously wrong.

'The primary task of your company,' the colonel continued, 'will be to strike at key points in the British rear areas. Your targets will be selected by the C-in-C and you will be briefed accordingly.'

'Excuse me, sir.' Winter's tone was extremely polite. 'May I be permitted to ask a question?'

The colonel nodded.

Still politely, Winter said: 'It's just that my unit comes under the direct orders of the Abwehr, sir. No doubt the C-in-C will be advised on the choice of targets by a senior officer of Military Intelligence, who will issue the necessary authority for each operation?'

The colonel's face reddened slightly. 'No doubt, Winter, no doubt. I assure you that everything will be done through the proper channels.'

‘Then, sir, if I may be permitted another question — why is this present briefing being carried out by yourself, and not by an Abwehr officer?’ Winter threw caution aside. ‘I would have thought that any clandestine operations undertaken by my unit would involve the handling of certain sensitive information of the kind that is usually dealt with only by officers of Military Intelligence.’

Winter was digging in the knife right to the hilt, but he felt no qualms about the colonel’s discomfort. His contact with the man so far had convinced him that the colonel was the type who was likely to open his mouth in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had no intention of risking the lives of his men through a casual word dropped here and there and picked up by an Arab who might turn out to be a British agent.

The colonel, in fact, having been wounded in a British strafing attack some months earlier, had been seconded to Military Intelligence; it was a job he did not relish, but it was infinitely preferable to being transferred to the Russian Front, which would be a ninety per cent certainty if he were sent home. He had every right to swat down this cocky young officer like a fly, but he was oddly afraid to do so. Admiral Canaris’s organization had many tentacles, stretching into every branch of the Wehrmacht; there might be serious consequences for any outsider who rocked the boat. He contented himself with giving Winter a dressing down for impertinence, then reached for a telephone and made arrangements for the newcomer to be passed on to someone else.

A few hours later Winter, bathed, changed and feeling much refreshed, was in Tunis, drinking coffee with an Abwehr major called Szarnewski. The two discovered that they already knew one another, having met at the Brandenburg training school earlier in the year. Szarnewski was greatly amused by the Panzer Grenadier colonel’s discomfort.

‘You were quite right, Winter,’ he said. ‘We can’t afford to take chances. It sounds as though this fellow isn’t exactly suited to the position he’s in. I’ll have to do something about that.’ He made a note on a piece of paper, then looked at Winter and grinned. ‘Whatever bullshit the colonel told you about future offensives — forget it. The only offensives we’re going to see are going to come from the Allies, and sooner or later they’re going to boot us arse first out of Africa. The best we can hope for is to hold on here as long as possible, to make life as difficult as we can for the enemy, and to keep our own forces intact until the High Command sees sense and orders an evacuation.’

‘Well, we’ll do our bit,’ Winter told him. ‘What’s our intelligence like, though? I mean, things look a bit shaky here. What’s the machinery for getting accurate information?’

Szarnewski shrugged. ‘Nowadays, we have to rely mainly on our V-men — the ones the English haven’t rounded up.’

‘V-men?’

Szarnewski smiled. ‘That’s a new term somebody dreamed up a while ago. V for Vertrauen — trusted men. In this part of the world it’s a misnomer, if ever there was one. Our agents — let’s use the old term — change sides like nobody’s business in Cairo and Alexandria. However, we’ve still got a few we can really trust, and they’re worth their weight in gold. The risks they run grow bigger every day, though, and it’s vital that we act on their information quickly, before it becomes unreliable.’ Winter frowned. ‘Something’s just struck me,’ he said. ‘In Russia, we used all sorts of aircraft to get us to our destinations behind enemy lines. For long-range work we used the Ju 90, for example, which could carry forty paras, and for shorter-range activities we had the Tatzelwurm, the Arado 232. It could land just about anywhere. But all I’ve seen here is the old Ju 52, and I don’t fancy cruising around in one

over Alexandria or somewhere like that, looking for a dropping zone. The Tommy night-fighters would make mincemeat out of us.'

Szarnewski tossed a cigarette to him. 'Don't worry,' he remarked, 'we've got it all organized. You'll be dropped from Junkers 88s.'

'Ju 88s?' Winter's face was a picture of perplexity. 'But they're bombers — they can only carry one passenger in addition to their crew. What's the joke, sir?'

'There's no joke,' Szarnewski reassured him. 'Come on — it's time we took a little trip.'

He summoned a staff car and they drove to an airfield a few miles outside Tunis. Mercifully it had stopped raining, but the ground was still sodden and, as they reached the field, Winter could see ground crews toiling to dig out aircraft whose wheels had sunk into the mud. On Szarnewski's orders the driver halted the car in front of a small canvas hangar; Szarnewski and Winter got out and went inside, squelching through the mire at the entrance.

There was nothing in the hangar but a pile of crates and half a dozen odd-looking cylindrical objects, about two metres long and a metre and a half in diameter. Szarnewski led Winter over to them and waved a hand.

'There you are, old man. Your passport to enemy-held parts.'

Winter was no wiser. He looked at the objects curiously. He saw that the things were apparently made of plywood, with an aluminium cap at either end.

'What the hell are they for?' he asked.

Szarnewski tapped one; it made a hollow sound. 'They're PAGS — Personen Abwurf Gerät. The Luftwaffe workshops here knocked a few together for us. Simplicity itself. Look, let me show you.'

He unclipped some fasteners and the plywood section of the device split in two. Winter noted that the plywood was double-walled for extra strength.

Inside the cavity, two sets of strong webbing harness were stretched tightly from end to end. There were more harnesses, presumably to hold the occupants securely in place.

‘Room for three people,’ Szarnewski said cheerfully. ‘Two on the top, one on the bottom. The thing on the top, with the strengthened metal round it, is an attachment lug; it’s designed to fit on to a Ju 88’s underwing bomb racks.’

He closed the plywood section and secured it, then up-ended the container and balanced it against the hangar wall.

‘Look, it’s as light as a feather. Mind you, it won’t be when it’s fully loaded.’ He tapped the dome-shaped aluminium cover at the upper end of the PAG. ‘This part contains three parachutes — or it will, when they’re fitted. See this hole here? The static line, a steel cable, passes through it. When the PAG is released from the aircraft the line pulls off the metal cover and deploys the ‘chutes.’

Winter said nothing. He had the feeling that he would have found speech difficult, in any case. The whole thing was amazing, not to say ludicrous. Did they really expect his men to be dropped from the sky in these contraptions?

‘At the lower end,’ Szarnewski continued with enthusiasm, ‘is a compartment for equipment, weapons and so on. The aluminium cap at this end is filled with foam rubber padding to reduce the impact on landing. Absolutely ingenious, isn’t it?’

‘Whose idea was it?’ Winter asked finally in a strangled voice, thinking that he’d like to lay his hands on him.

‘As a matter of fact it was a lieutenant of mine,’ Szarnewski told him. ‘Unfortunately you won’t be able to meet him, because he’s been posted to Italy.’

He looked at Winter’s expression and frowned, realizing for the first time that the other by no means shared his enthusiasm.

‘Surely you can see that the use of the PAG is going to be a great asset to our operations? You yourself know how easily injuries can occur in parachute drops, especially at night. The use of the container will eliminate such accidents …’

If the parachutes work, Winter thought cynically. If they don’t, the thing will bury itself like a tent-peg, along with whoever is inside it.

‘… Moreover,’ Szarnewski was saying, ‘the use of the container will mean that agents will be landed in the same place. No time will be wasted in searching for one another, or for weapons and equipment that have gone astray. The only real snag, as I see it, is that it will not be easy to dispose of the container. But I’m sure we can overcome that problem.’

We? thought Winter. He didn’t believe for a moment that Szarnewski would personally be taking part in this crazy scheme. He had only one question.

‘Has this — this PAG been satisfactorily tested, sir?’ Szarnewski regarded him with a rather embarrassed expression.

‘Actually, no. It hasn’t. We were rather hoping that you fellows would do that.’

Helmut Winter swallowed hard. Then he thought again of Russia, and suddenly the prospect didn’t seem so bad after all. At least the end, if it came, would be quick and clean.

Chapter Six

Callum Douglas awoke groggily, his swollen tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth. Groaning, he reached out blindly for the glass of water that stood on the bedside locker. It felt light. He opened one eye and focused on his outstretched hand. The glass it held was empty. He set it down, groaned again and turned over on his back. Sunlight, piercing his eyeballs like arrows, was filtering through the curtains of his room.

Why was he awake? his befuddled mind asked itself. He had no right to be awake; he felt like death. The sunlight had not awakened him; it was the singing.

The singing. It penetrated his consciousness relentlessly, and there was a background to it; the background of marching feet. It grew steadily louder, making waves somewhere in the back of his head, the part that hurt most.

He had to see. He eased his legs over the side of the bed, moving in easy stages to stop his head swimming, then stood up slowly and padded across to the chink of sunlight that showed at the window. Closing his eyes in expectation of the full flood of light, he seized the curtains and pulled them apart in a let’s-get-it-over-quickly gesture. Opening his eyes cautiously, he peered down into the street below, scarcely comprehending what he saw and heard.

Marching down the street, with perfect precision, came a long column of soldiers. They marched four deep, their heads up, in a style that would have done credit to the Brigade of Guards. But their uniforms, nondescript and tattered in some cases, bore the flash of the crack German 90th Light Division, whose anti-tank guns had wrought such havoc among the British

armour in the summer battles of 1942.

Douglas could not help feeling respect as he watched them swing by, proud even in defeat, *en route* to some prison cage outside Cairo. The few British soldiers that guarded them seemed casual, almost scruffy by comparison, like tradesmen who had suddenly been tossed ill-fitting uniforms and told to get on with the job of soldiering. How appearances could deceive, for they were marching Hitler's élite into captivity.

The prisoners, with their escort, moved away down the street, their song fading. It was not a tune that Douglas recognized; not 'Lili Marlene', or one of the other traditional songs of the desert war, but something harsher, more defiant; something more Nazi. He was glad when the sound had died away.

Douglas thought about going back to bed, but decided against it. He was wide awake now, and his head pained him a little less. Only the tension in his neck was a constant source of annoyance. He took the empty glass and went into the bathroom, where he had a drink of soda water followed by a gargle with Dettol. Then he stood under a tepid shower for five minutes, cleaned his teeth and enjoyed a slow and careful shave. He was almost feeling ready to face the day, although the thought of food turned his stomach. His appetite, he thought, might have quickened by lunchtime.

He still could not believe what had happened to him. Apart from minor colds, he had never had a day's illness in his life.

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On his return from Palestine, Douglas, still in command of his ten-man patrol, became caught up straight away in the harrying of the Afrika Korps during its retreat through Cyrenaica. The British Intelligence Branch at HQ Middle East had received early indications that Rommel would try and hold a defensive line at El Agheila, where he would be in relatively easy reach of supply bases in Tripolitania, so the Special Air Service and the Long Range

Desert Group were briefed to cause as much havoc as possible among the enemy lines of communication.

By that time, early in November 1942, the SAS had changed out of all recognition from the organization it had been even six months earlier. The 1st SAS Regiment — the old L Detachment — had now received official status and comprised forty officers and three hundred and fifty other ranks. Its numbers would soon be swollen by the addition of personnel from Middle East Commando, which had just been handed over to David Stirling. A French and a Greek squadron were in the process of training to operational standard; the plan was that they would eventually form the nucleus of their own national SAS regiments, which would be able to render invaluable service when the Allies invaded France and the Balkans. Finally there was the Special Boat Section, only sixty strong but expert at hitting targets on stretches of enemy-held coastline.

The SAS no longer relied on the LRDG for their transport and supply. They had their own heavily-armed jeeps and three-ton trucks, their own navigators and signallers. Effectively, in the days after Alamein, the LRDG and the SAS divided the desert between them. While the LRDG carried on their primary task of reconnaissance, keeping a constant watch on enemy movements along the coast road, the SAS split up their forces along the most important sectors from Tripoli to El Agheila and kept the enemy continually on the hop with lightning raids. Sixteen patrols were involved during this period, each one sallying forth two or three times a week from forward bases. In practice, this meant that the enemy were subjected to three or four nightly raids somewhere along their lines of communication.

Douglas and his men joined the main SAS base at Bir Zelten at the end of the first week of December, arriving there after a week’s journey over the old LRDG route through the Sand Sea via Howard’s Cairn. Bir Zelten lay some

one hundred and twenty miles south of Agheila and there were good tracks running towards the coast.

Douglas had never been that far west in the desert before, and it was with some excitement that he received orders to lead a ten-man patrol — composed of the same ten men who had been with him in Palestine — to carry out a road watch east of Marble Arch and then beat up enemy transport on the road to Agheila before withdrawing.

Marble Arch — or Arco Philaenorum, to give it its proper title — was one of the focal points of the desert war. It stood astride the Via Balbia in all its white splendour, and troops of a dozen nationalities had marched beneath its span and gazed at it in curiosity. An altar used to stand there, on the boundary between the lands of Carthage and Cyrene, in memory of two brothers called Philaeni, who allowed themselves to be buried alive on the spot in order to mark the limit of Carthage's territorial claim. The Arch itself was Mussolini's creation and a monument to his ego; it was heavily inscribed with reliefs of himself and quotations from his speeches, and he had intended to ride through it at the head of his conquering army *en route* for Cairo. General Sir Archibald Wavell had put paid to that idea, back at the beginning of 1941, and when the Italians eventually came back to Cyrenaica with Rommel's help, Il Duce no longer had much of a say in the conduct of matters in North Africa.

Douglas's patrol, in two jeeps, made good time across the undulating gravel desert. After that, progress became more laborious as the jeeps bumped across the sandy hummocks of the Wadi Scemmer and up to the Dor Lanuf, the flattish gravel-strewn plateau, about a mile wide, from where the sea and the Marble Arch could be seen. The plateau was split by numerous wadis, and the patrol passed through one of these under cover of darkness until it reached the edge of the plain, some five miles from the coast road. While it

was still dark, the men carefully camouflaged the jeeps with netting and scrub; a person could pass within a few yards of them and never see them.

Douglas's instructions were to maintain the road watch in this sector for six days, at the end of which time they were to be relieved by an LRDG patrol and proceed with the second part of their mission. Douglas divided his group into sections of two, each of which would take turns to maintain the watch.

The routine for the road watch was well established. Each morning, before dawn, the designated men would leave the camp and find themselves a hiding-place a few hundred yards from the road. In addition to their weapons — they carried .303 rifles, rather than the short-range Tommy-guns — they had with them notebooks, binoculars and a recognition book containing photographs and silhouettes of enemy transport and armoured vehicles.

Once in concealment, usually behind a convenient patch of scrub, there could be no movement that might attract attention from the road. The men had to lie still throughout the long hours of daylight, meticulously logging whatever they saw passing along the route. It was a tedious duty, for there were often gaps of several hours between vehicles, and one, Douglas thought, that must have been fearsome in the summer, with its blistering heat and blowing dust. It was no picnic in the winter, for the wind that swept up the coastal strip was bitterly cold and the men's bodies ached with it.

Douglas and Olds took the first day's watch, which yielded a mixed bag of tanks, armoured cars and soft-skinned vehicles. They were surprised by the small numbers of tanks they saw, and so were subsequent watchers. They were not to know that the strength of the Afrika Korps stood at no more than fifty-four Panzers and eighteen armoured cars; but British Intelligence would know it soon enough, thanks to the road watch. Rommel had been ordered to hold El Agheila, but he had precious little to hold it with.

It was Douglas and Olds who also undertook to keep watch on the last day,

enabling the others to get some sleep before the patrol moved off after dark — assuming, that was, that the LRDG patrol that was to relieve them arrived in time. It was a foul, miserable day, with pouring rain that often reduced visibility to no more than a few hundred yards. The downpour ceased shortly before dusk, when Douglas and his companion, sodden through and frozen, made up their minds to crawl a little closer to the road. The watchers had been in the habit of doing this each day, observing the road for a few extra hours after dark and checking out any passing vehicles by sound and silhouette.

Douglas got to his knees — and promptly collapsed sideways on the muddy ground. He tried again, with the same result. Nausea overwhelmed him and his head reeled; sky and earth were going round in circles. Panic seized him. He had no idea what was wrong.

‘Olds,’ he gasped. ‘Olds — give me a hand, will you? I can’t — can’t get up!’

It was no use. Even with Olds steadying him, his legs refused to support him. There was a strange, deep roaring in his ears, and he had never felt sicker in his life. He slumped to the ground and lay flat — and immediately felt much better.

‘Olds, I haven’t a clue what’s happened to me,’ he said. ‘I just can’t stand up, damn it!’

Olds looked him up and down, as though surveying a bullock, and made up his mind.

‘Don’t you worry, sir,’ he said in his slow Norfolk accent. ‘I’ll get you back. Strong as an ox, I am. Don’t you worry.’

And get Douglas back he did, lifting the young officer bodily while the latter clutched their precious notes and binoculars and heaving him over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift. Somehow, Olds also managed to carry the two

rifles. He stumbled through the gathering darkness and in due course reached the wadi where the jeeps were hidden, lowering Douglas gently to the ground.

Sergeant Brough sensed that something was badly amiss with Douglas, although he had no notion what it might be, and decided to abandon the second part of the operation, despite the officer's protests.

'Look, sir,' he said firmly, 'it might be something serious — something that'll affect us all. Even if it isn't, we don't know how long you're going to be like this. As long as you are, you're just so much dead weight, if you'll forgive me for saying so. No-as soon as our relief arrives we're going back to base camp, where we can get you properly looked at.'

Douglas knew that it was the right decision to make, but nevertheless could not help feeling a deep sense of personal failure. It refused to leave him even when the MO, back at Bir Zelten, fully supported what Sergeant Brough had done. It did not take the doctor long to discover what was wrong with Douglas.

'You've got acute labyrinthitis, old boy,' he told the recumbent officer, who looked aghast.

'Christ! What's that?'

The MO grinned down at him. 'Not to worry — it's not lethal. It's an infection of the inner ear and it knocks out your sense of balance completely, so that you're falling around as though you're pissed all the time. It'll clear up in its own good time, but I'm afraid you'll be flat on your back for a couple of weeks. Might as well send you back to Cairo on the next supply truck-there's one due tomorrow. Even when you can stand up again, it'll be a while before you've got over the effects.'

So, feeling utterly useless and depressed, Douglas found himself occupying a bed in a convalescent camp just outside Cairo. Lying there among the

wounded, he felt only slightly less inferior than the infantry officer at the other end of his ward, who had a bad case of piles.

The one bright spot was Allene, although she had caused some jealousy, as well as a good deal of ribald comment, among Douglas's fellow inmates. Sister Allene Morris, much to his early embarrassment and later satisfaction, took an undisguised fancy to him. Plump and pretty, with dark hair curled into a bun and wide-set blue eyes, she was in her mid-thirties and, she confided to Douglas later, had been briefly married to an airman who had been killed in a flying accident. When Douglas was able to sit up, on the way to full recovery, she told him quietly that she had a flat in Cairo and that he could have the use of it for a few days before he was discharged fit to return to his unit. Douglas, sensing a blessed escape from almost continual bridge with the pile-bedevilled infantry officer, accepted the offer eagerly.

The first night in her flat was educational, to say the least. Just off duty, Allene arrived home late. Douglas was drifting off to sleep when the sound of the running shower wakened him. A few minutes later, with a robe draped loosely around her, Allene came into the room and sat on the edge of his bed for a while, looking down at him without speaking. Then she said crisply: 'Now then, me lad, don't get this wrong. I don't do this with everyone who comes here.'

And with that, she cheerfully proceeded to make love to him, taking complete command of the situation, throwing back the sheet and straddling him. He reached an explosive climax in a matter of seconds, and she, sensing his shame at the speed of it all, lay beside him and took his head between her breasts, caressing him gently until he was ready to come into her again. This time it was he who had taken control, and she became a wild clawing thing, out of herself for a time.

It by no means provided a set pattern for the few nights he stayed at the flat.

It was Christmas, and Allene volunteered for duty throughout the period to release another sister whose boyfriend was on leave in Cairo. After that first night she took Douglas as she wanted him; he seemed to have little say in the matter. Not that he was complaining about it. After all, he might easily have been condemned to wander Cairo womanless, as he had done so often in the past; the thought of a wog tart, all kohl eyes and pallid, overripe flesh, had never appealed to him.

The thing that really hurt him was that Allene refused to be seen in public with him.

'Got my reputation to think about,' was all she would say in explanation. 'Too many tongues ready to wag. I don't want people to think you're living with me so the less we're seen together, the better.'

So, in her few off-duty hours during the day, they had gone their separate ways, she to 'visit friends' and he to the Club, to take his meals there and also far more alcohol than was good for him.

The Club, with its oak panelling hung with pictures of hunting scenes and bewigged generals in scarlet uniforms, its leather armchairs and polished bars, might have been lifted out of the heart of London. The difference, however, was apparent in the tennis courts, the palms, the swimming pool and the swarthy faces of the white-coated waiters.

Despite these facilities, it was not much to Douglas's liking, filled as it was with staff wallahs and the constant braying of their affected, nasal voices, but it suited his purpose to the extent that he did not have to talk to anyone if he did not wish to do so. So he spent his time eating, drinking, listening to the news or dropping in from time to time at District HQ to find out if anybody wanted him for anything. It was somewhat disconcerting to learn that they did not. Perhaps they had forgotten all about him.

With the swinging march of the German prisoners still uppermost in his

mind, Douglas went to the Club for a few drinks and then lunch. Seizing the latest copy of the *Illustrated London News* a split second before a staff major, who turned a look of outrage on him, he ordered a large Pimms and settled down in an armchair to read.

It proved to be virtually impossible to concentrate. The braying voices from an adjacent clutch of chairs jarred his nerves; his neck began to pain him again. He sighed resignedly and closed his eyes; the voices droned on.

'So, then. Indulging in a spot of malingering, young Douglas?'

Douglas's head came up with a jerk as a burly figure dropped into the armchair opposite with a squeak of leather. Paddy Moynahan's face was creased by a broad grin, although there were lines of pain on it. Douglas saw that his right arm was strapped across his chest.

'Paddy!' he exclaimed. 'You don't know how good it is to see you! I've been going out of my bloody brain sitting here day after day. What happened?'

Moynahan made a face. 'Confounded jeep overturned,' he told the younger man. 'Smashed my shoulder. Damn' thing won't heal properly. The quacks have been into it three times already; I think they're using me to practise on. And you?'

Douglas gave a brief explanation of his own misfortunes, at the same time beckoning a waiter. Moynahan laughed. 'What a thing! Acting as though you're plastered, and not a drop of booze in you!'

'Well,' Douglas said ruefully, 'I've made up for that in the last few days. What'll you have?'

The Egyptian waiter was at Douglas's elbow, bowing. Moynahan ordered a scotch and soda. The waiter brought it and then hovered, making a great pretence of polishing a nearby table with his cloth. Moynahan looked at him.

'All right,' he said curtly. 'That will be all.'

‘Sah.’

The waiter looked pained, but went away. The big Irishman’s gaze followed him.

‘Bloody fellows. Shouldn’t be at all surprised if half of ’em are German spies. Have you noticed something? They were getting pretty cocky a few months ago, when Rommel had us on the run. Now they aren’t cocky anymore. When are you going to be fit for another crack at the beastly boche?’ he asked, changing the subject abruptly.

Douglas shrugged. ‘Well, I’ve got to see the MO tomorrow. I hope he’ll give me a clean bill. I’ve heard the boys have been taking a bit of a beating during the last week or two.’

Moynahan nodded soberly. It was true; since the middle of December both the SAS and LRDG had suffered casualties on an unprecedented scale. Patrols had begun to run into ambushes in places where no ambush would ordinarily have been anticipated, and a number of men had gone into the bag.

‘My patrol had a narrow escape just before I did this,’ Moynahan said, indicating his injured shoulder. ‘We were on the road watch west of Agheila when Rommel started to pull his forces out on 13 December, and suddenly there were Huns everywhere. We’d camped a good dozen miles south of the road, which meant a long walk for the watchers; even so, it wasn’t far enough. We woke up one morning to find ourselves surrounded by what seemed to be half a Panzer division. Our last pair of watchers had fortunately just come in and we were due to move out at dawn; instead, we had to lie low all day and get away after dark. It was pretty hairy, I can tell you.’ He grinned. ‘Still, we managed to get a good count of the tanks on our way through.’

The bar was beginning to fill up. Douglas nodded at one or two of the newcomers, men with whom he had made a passing acquaintance over the

past few days, and looked with mild curiosity at those that were unfamiliar. Everyone appeared extraordinarily well pressed and polished, with the exception of two flying types — Australians, by the sound of things — who gathered an armful of bottles and ensconced themselves at a table in the corner, where they proceeded to get drunk with great speed. They looked worn out.

'How long d'you think it'll take?' Douglas asked suddenly.

Moynahan looked at him questioningly.

'To finish things here in Africa,' Douglas elaborated. 'What would you do, if you were Rommel?'

'I'm pleased I'm not,' he grinned. 'The poor sod must be taking an awful lot of stick from Adolf just now. Seriously, though, I don't think there'll be a kind of German Dunkirk. If Hitler runs true to form he'll order his army in Africa to fight to the last, just like he ordered his army in Stalingrad, if what we hear on the news is right. There's a long way to go yet, you mark my words.'

Douglas thought that the Irishman was right. All the indications were that the Germans and what remained of their Italian allies were preparing to make a last stand in Tunisia; Rommel had pulled back from El Agheila and had formed a fresh defensive line at Buerat, astride the road to Tripoli, and it seemed that the intention was to hold up the Eighth Army's westward advance for as long as possible, thus preventing a junction with the Anglo-American forces advancing from the opposite direction.

There were rumours that things were not going well for the Allies in the assault on Tunisia. In several encounters so far, American troops and armour — as yet untried in battle — had been beaten off with heavy losses, and the British had suffered too; in one battle, at Tebourba early in December, they had lost fifty-five tanks and over a thousand men, mostly taken prisoner.

Intelligence reports confirmed that the Germans were continuing to pour reinforcements into Tunisia. To Douglas, as a former tank man, one of the most disturbing of these was that a new enemy battle tank had made its appearance. It was said to be a 50-ton monster with an 88-mm gun, and was called the Tiger. Everything indicated that some of the bitterest fighting of the North African campaign was yet to come.

Moynahan stirred in his seat and drained his glass. ‘Another drink?’ he asked.

Douglas shook his head. ‘No, thanks. I think I’d like to go in and eat now, before the rush starts. Are you joining me?’

‘Might as well. I don’t fancy sitting here on my own.’

They rose and went into the dining-room. As yet, the tables were mostly empty and they took a seat by the window. Lunch was good; soup, followed by spiced chicken done in some sort of wine sauce and washed down with Chianti. It was typical of the kind of meal Douglas had enjoyed during the past few days, and as usual he felt guilty about eating it. Up the Blue, his comrades would be lunching on bully and biscuit. And his own privilege was earned not by a wound, a mark of courage, but by some blasted bug in his ear that had robbed him of the ability to stand upright. He felt he would have to start all over again when he got back, winning the confidence of his men.

Their lunch over, the two men sat for a while at the table, drinking sweet, strong, black coffee and sipping a Cointreau. Neither man smoked, so there was no compunction to withdraw to the ante-room, though by the time they had finished their coffee the dining-room was packed, mostly with base-wallahs.

‘I don’t know about you, but I’m beginning to feel bloody uncomfortable. D’you feel up to a stroll?’ Douglas said, looking round the room.

Moynahan drained the last of his Cointreau and nodded. ‘Why not? It’s

getting a bit claustrophobic in here. Let's find ourselves a bar downtown somewhere and get topped up.'

They went downstairs, retrieved their caps from the cloakroom and passed through the entrance, following a driveway that ran past the tennis courts and merged with the road. The thoroughfare was thronged with traffic of all kinds, both military and civilian, and uniforms mingled with dapper suits and dirty galabiehs, the all-encompassing robes of Arabs. The street was filled with smells and sounds; alleys were shadowed with furtive figures selling anything from dirty postcards to their younger sisters.

Douglas and Moynahan crossed the road to avoid head-on contact with a group of Australian soldiers, swaying in their drunkenness and shouting out a ribald song about King Farouk. Sooner or later, they would smash up a bar somewhere and be picked up by MPS; there would be a pitched battle and the Aussies would come off worse, waking up in some military cooler with cuts and bruises and splitting headaches.

Suddenly, time stopped. Everything — the street noises, the hubbub of people, the Australians' song, the roar of traffic — seemed to freeze in the wake of the thunderous explosion that boomed out, stunning in its intensity.

There was a moment of almost total silence. Then someone screamed in fear, and the frozen tableau shattered into splinters. A car ran up on the pavement, narrowly missing Douglas and Moynahan, and knocked over a street trader's cart, spilling its load of fruit. People began to run aimlessly, like ants spilling from a nest dosed with poison. An Egyptian policeman blew his whistle frantically, shouting 'Air-raid!' between blasts.

'Christ!' Moynahan gasped. 'Look — it's the Club!'

Douglas swung round. The building they had so recently vacated was shrouded in grey, billowing smoke that was shot with flames. They heard the rumble of falling masonry, mingling with the lingering echoes of the

explosion.

They began to run back the way they had come, towards the expanding pall of dust and smoke and cascading debris, forcing their way through the jostle of the crowd. Disjointed noises registered in Douglas's brain: the shrilling of the policeman's whistle and his continued cries of 'Air-raid!'; the agitated yelling of the street vendor, who was desperately trying to retrieve his wares from under the wheels of the traffic; a medley of panic-ridden shouts and screams.

'God, just look at that!'

They halted aghast on the fringe of the swirling cloud, particles of dust stinging their noses and eyes. A scene of utter devastation confronted them. The whole front of the Club appeared to have collapsed in a tangle of shattered masonry and beams and splintered furniture. The façade of the dining-room so recently vacated by Douglas and Moynahan was a yawning gap through which smoke was pouring. A khaki-clad figure hung half out of the hole, face down, arms dangling. Other bodies, some stirring feebly, lay among the rubble.

Douglas and Moynahan waded into the debris and began to pull out the injured as fast as they could, Moynahan labouring under the handicap of his injured shoulder, the two conscious all the while that more masonry might come crashing down on their heads. Afterwards, because of the confusion and his single-mindedness, Douglas never had a clear recollection of how long they toiled, or of who else came to take part in the rescue work; his memory was filled with the screams and cries of the injured, and of the horrific wounds some of them had sustained. He spent ten minutes trying to free one man, a Royal Artillery captain, whose legs were trapped under a beam; he finally succeeded in lifting the beam clear, only to find that the captain's legs had been severed below the knee by other fallen masonry. He

had remained conscious throughout, not realizing the extent of his injuries, and grasped Douglas's hand in gratitude before some RAMC men carted him away on a stretcher.

By this time a number of ambulances and fire engines had arrived, and rescue workers were swarming over the bomb-site. A medical orderly seized Douglas by the arm.

'All right, get out of the way. We'll handle this.' Then he saw Douglas's pips underneath the layers of dust and grime and added; 'Sorry, sir. Are you all right?'

Douglas nodded wearily and moved away, slumping down on a low stone wall that flanked one of the tennis courts. He was joined there a few moments later by Moynahan. The Irishman's uniform was streaked with dirt and blood, some of which had come from lacerations on his good arm.

'You look bloody awful,' Douglas said.

Moynahan stared at him with red-rimmed eyes and smiled weakly.

'You don't look so hot yourself. Christ, what a business!'

'Lord,' said Douglas, as the realization of how close their own escape had been suddenly dawned on him. 'If we'd stayed in the bar for just one more drink …'

They were both silent for a moment.

'That chap in the street,' Moynahan said. 'The one who kept on shouting about an air-raid. Did you see any planes?' Douglas shook his head. 'That was no air-raid. Somebody planted a bomb, I'll stake my life on it.'

A shadow suddenly fell across them, and they looked up to see a Military Police captain surveying them. Without any preliminaries, he said curtly:

'Will you gentlemen come with me, please?'

Moynahan looked the MP up and down, taking in the gleaming boots, the knife-edge creases in the trousers and the dazzlingly blancoed belt, outshone

only by the sparkle of its buckle. Equally as curtly, he snapped:

‘Piss off! Where were you when you were needed?’

The MP reddened, but kept his temper. ‘I’m sorry,’ he told them, ‘but I must insist. The Officers’ Club receptionist, who fortunately escaped unhurt, has pointed you out as the two officers who left the building very shortly before the explosion. You may be able to help us.’

‘You’re not suggesting we blew the bloody place up, are you?’ Moynahan questioned truculently, rising to his feet.

‘Of course not, but you may have seen something … I must — I would appreciate it if you would accompany me to HQ.’

His tone, Douglas noticed, had altered appreciably. He had just caught sight of the ribbon of the Military Cross on Moynahan’s battledress.

‘Oh, come on, Paddy,’ Douglas said tiredly, standing up also. ‘He’s right. You never know — if we jog our memories it might help to throw some light on the business. I hope you’ve got some tea on the go at your place, though,’ he added, glancing at the MP and spitting out a mouthful of grit.

The MP officer relaxed and smiled thinly.

‘We’ll see what we can do,’ he said. ‘My jeep’s over there, by the gate.’

Twenty minutes later, conscious of the curious stares their bedraggled appearance was attracting, they were ushered through the corridors of District HQ and into a room where a Royal Military Police lieutenant-colonel was seated behind a desk. They saluted him, and Douglas noticed that the room had a second occupant, reclining in an armchair. It was the RAF Intelligence wing commander who had briefed him before the operation in Palestine. He turned towards the lieutenant-colonel and said: ‘George, this is the officer I was telling you about. The one who did the Palestine job for us, and did it very well indeed, if I may say so.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ Douglas replied, sensing that there was more to this RAF

officer than met the eye. ‘May I introduce Captain Moynahan of the LRDG?’

Moynahan exchanged courtesies with the two senior officers, then looked sideways at Douglas as though the latter were some kind of conspirator, and the MP officer behind the desk-his name was Baxter — grinned at the Irishman’s obvious perplexity.

‘Sit down, gentlemen,’ he ordered. ‘I’ll have my few words with you, and then I suspect the wing commander wants to talk to you, Douglas.’

On the colonel’s summons a clerk came in with a tray of tea, then sat down to take notes. For the next half hour, at the colonel’s prompting, Douglas and Moynahan strove to recall every detail of what they had seen and heard in the Club — the faces, the uniforms, the snatches of conversation. None of it seemed to mean very much, although the colonel appeared satisfied with what little information they had been able to give him.

Afterwards, the colonel took Moynahan away and left Douglas alone with the wing commander, who looked at the SAS officer thoughtfully for a few moments before speaking.

‘Douglas,’ he said finally, ‘you never learned the outcome of that business in Palestine, did you?’

‘No, sir. You asked us to do a job and we did it, that’s all.’

‘Well, we were very impressed by the way you handled it. There’s more work of the same kind to be done, and we want you to be involved in it. I have already spoken to Colonel Stirling and he agrees, although, of course, you will remain under his command. The operations we have in mind will be very much the province of the Special Air Service.’

The wing commander got up suddenly, crossed to the door, opened it and peered out into the corridor. Then he closed the door again and turned a key in the lock before sitting down in Baxter’s place, behind the desk.

‘Can’t be too careful, even here,’ he said. ‘Now, I know you’re dying to be

off and clean yourself up, but I must put you in the picture without delay. Have you heard of the Brandenburg Division?'

The unexpected question caught Douglas momentarily off his guard, and he paused for a few seconds before answering, his brow furrowed while he tried to recall if he had indeed heard the name. In the end he concluded that he had not, and said as much to the wing commander.

'Broadly, they're the equivalent of the SAS,' the latter informed him. 'They were formed before the outbreak of war under the orders of Admiral Canaris, who is the head of German Military Intelligence.' He went on to give a brief résumé of the Brandenburg Division's activities, as far as they were known to British Intelligence.

'We've been expecting them to turn up in the Middle East for some time,' the wing commander concluded, 'so we had a good idea that the agents who dropped into Palestine might be connected. That suspicion was confirmed when we interrogated the prisoner you brought in. Thanks to you and your chaps, we were able to clean up that little nest quite nicely — but now something much more serious appears to be happening.'

Douglas looked at the Intelligence officer questioningly. 'The explosion just now has something to do with it?' he asked. The wing commander nodded. 'We think so. You see, it wasn't the only one. There were two other incidents this morning; a bomb went off at Naval HQ in Alexandria, and a staff car that is normally used by General Alexander was machine-gunned near Ismailia. Fortunately the general wasn't in it and the driver escaped with minor hurts, but the car is in a fair old mess, I understand. The thing is, we've had reports that a company of the Brandenburg Division arrived in Tunisia some weeks ago. Given the talent these chaps have for operating a long way inside hostile territory, we think it's pretty certain that they are responsible for the incidents I've just mentioned.'

Douglas thought for a moment, then said: ‘But these — these German commandos, for want of a better word, have only been in North Africa for a few weeks. How would they have had time to set up subversive operations? How would they get to Cairo and Alex, and how would they carry out their missions once they arrived? They must have had some sort of help.’

The wing commander opened a folder that lay on the desk top and extracted a photograph, which he tossed to Douglas.

‘Take a look at that,’ he said. ‘One of our patrols came across it purely by chance, not far from Deir Makarius.’

The photo depicted two cylindrical metal objects, lying in a patch of scrub, with a burnt area between them. He could make neither head nor tail of it.

‘What is it?’ he wanted to know.

‘Our technical people have been over it,’ the wing commander told him, ‘and they’ve come up with some interesting observations. One of those metal canisters you see in the photo once housed a parachute; the other, as far as we can gather, was used to store equipment. It’s the bit in the middle, however, which is the most interesting — the burnt part, I mean. Someone obviously set fire to it to try and conceal its true purpose, but we believe it’s a personnel container, built to carry two, maybe three people.’

‘Ingenious!’ Douglas interjected, visibly impressed. ‘Parachutists and stores dropped in exactly the same spot, with no danger of scattering. But we’ve only found one of these, so far?’

‘Yes, but there are undoubtedly more, and we’re carrying out a search. For the moment, we have no idea how many people we are dealing with.’

‘They’re a good deal more efficient than in Palestine,’ commented Douglas. ‘And present far more problems from our point of view. These people could be anywhere. It would be impossible to mount the kind of operation that we did before — so where does the SAS come in?’

‘As you quite rightly point out, these people could be anywhere. As you also said, they must have help. Now, there are plenty of enemy agents in Egypt, and we know who most of them are. Some we have rounded up, others we have left at liberty for the simple reason that we’ve been feeding them with false information. They are under constant surveillance, and sooner or later they’ll give us a lead as to the whereabouts of the Germans. In the meantime, the best we can do is tighten our security around key installations and personnel. That’s a job for the local security forces. The Special Air Service will have quite a different role in this matter.’

‘Sir?’

‘You are going into Tunisia, Douglas, you and your men. You are going to winkle out these German commandos from their lair and destroy them, before they can mount further subversive operations against us.’

The wing commander’s tone was completely matter-of-fact. The way he said it, it sounded simple.

Chapter Seven

A cold, thin drizzle drifted across the Mediterranean, driven by a wind that swept over the funnel of sea between Sicily and the north-east tip of Tunisia. Through occasional breaks in the ragged layer of cloud the moon shone fitfully for a few seconds at a time, only to have its light cut off abruptly as though someone had dropped the shutter over a lantern.

The momentary appearance of the moon's rays threw into sharp silhouette the rakish lines of the five craft that nosed ahead through the wind-lifted swell. They were MTBS — motor torpedo-boats — small craft with a sting, armed with six machine-guns and a pair of 21-inch torpedoes.

Four of the MTBS were based with the flotilla on Malta, the bomb-torn island that had held out for so long in the face of savage enemy attacks. Malta had survived, and now its long defence had turned to offence; the island-based naval craft and bombers sallied forth daily to harry the Axis convoys seeking to supply the garrison in Tunisia.

The fifth MTB carried no torpedoes. The long tubes on either side of the deck had been removed to permit the storage of various items of equipment, including canoes and rubber boats. The craft had come from Alexandria and had crept into Malta's Grand Harbour on the previous night, there to refuel and join the MTBS of the Malta flotilla for tonight's operation. The vessel's hull was scarred by the effects of weather and water, for she was a veteran of many missions from Crete to Tobruk, and here and there she bore patches where bullet and splinter holes had been repaired.

Three men stood on her bridge, peering ahead through the intermittent drizzle as the craft's twin Packard aero-engines thrust her forty-seven tons

through the water at a steady fifteen knots; opened up to full power, they could increase that threefold and more. The MTB's skipper, a Royal Navy lieutenant, who seemed incredibly young, had taken over the wheel and was humming softly to himself, his legs braced apart on the vibrating deck boards; from time to time he glanced around, checking on the position of the other boats with which he was keeping station.

One of the other men on the bridge was a Norwegian, a slender fair-haired individual who wore a perpetually dreamy expression on his face and who clenched an unlit pipe between his teeth. His expression belied his capabilities, for he was probably the most experienced Commando officer in the British Army. Arne Larsen had fought the Germans in the mountains of Norway for weeks after the surrender in 1940 and had reached the Shetlands in a fishing boat with nothing but the clothes he stood up in and a grim determination to carry on the fight in British uniform.

The army had not been slow to recognize his potential. He was a crack shot, as well as an expert in survival and camouflage techniques. He was also an accomplished sailor. Within weeks of his arrival in Britain he had been sent to train as a commando at a special school in Scotland, where he displayed great qualities of leadership and initiative. He was commissioned soon afterwards, and in March 1941 took part in the successful commando raid on the Lofoten Islands, when fish-oil refineries and other installations important to the German war effort were destroyed.

A few weeks later, Larsen was transferred to the Middle East and the Special Air Service, where he eventually became one of the founder members of the Special Boat Squadron — a unit originally formed to carry out raids from the sea on targets in enemy-occupied Greece and Crete. In the autumn of 1942, the Squadron had undertaken numerous operations along the coast of North Africa as part of the build-up to the offensive at El Alamein. It had

been dangerous work, and casualties had been high.

The third man on the MTB's bridge — Douglas — had struck up a strong friendship with Larsen over the past few weeks, while his men and Larsen's had lived and trained together. All in all, the training and general preparations for the coming operation had gone off smoothly; as usual, it was the administrative arrangements that had taken up the time.

And time, Douglas knew, was vital. It was now the last week in January, and ever since he had returned to his unit at the end of December, with instructions to begin immediate training for the Tunisian operation, there had been reports of frequent encounters between LRDG and SAS patrols and a special German commando unit which, it seemed, had become expert at fighting the British raiders with their own tactics. Several patrols had been ambushed by skilled enemy troops and had suffered severe casualties.

In the coming weeks, Douglas knew, the British special forces would have an increasingly vital role to play. The Germans were continuing to consolidate their position in Tunisia, where they had fought the Allies to a standstill and had established a bridgehead of such depth that it could not be destroyed by a surprise offensive; a firm link had now been forged between the forces of 5th Panzer Army in southern Tunisia and Rommel's Afrika Korps, which had withdrawn west of Tripoli, and for the time being at least, the Germans seemed to hold most of the cards.

One of the most alarming factors was that, for the first time in months, the enemy enjoyed air superiority. The German-held airfields at Tunis and Bizerta — which could be used in all weathers, whereas the advanced Allied strips could not — were crammed with fighters and bombers of the latest types, and over the past weeks they had wrought havoc on the Allied spearheads. Carefully planned operations by the SAS and other Allied special forces, working behind the enemy lines and carrying out swift attacks on

airfields and other key points, could do a lot to redress the situation — but the reverse was equally true. The threat of German commandos, operating in the Allied rear areas, first of all had to be eliminated.

British Intelligence had succeeded in building up a reasonably accurate picture of what the Brandenburg unit in Tunisia was doing. Its activities were divided. Some of its personnel — perhaps no more than a handful — had been dropped into Egypt to wage a clandestine war against the nerve centres from which the North African war was being conducted; others were operating in the desert, guarding the flanks of the Afrika Korps and patrolling the well-worn routes of the LRDG; and still others were in Tunisia itself, their task to guard the vital airfields against surprise attack by their British counterparts.

The secret was to sever the snake's head, to strike hard at the Brandenburg unit's HQ in Tunisia and kill as many of its leaders as possible. That, broadly, was Douglas's brief.

To do it, he had just ten men — and Suleiman Seif en Nasr, who was probably worth ten more.

Suleiman, the hawk of the desert, the warrior of his tribe, had been a miserable man ever since the MTB had sailed from Alexandria; the sea was not his element. Douglas had pretended not to notice, for to have done so would have offended the proud Senussi deeply. For his own part, despite the threat of unknown dangers to come, he had enjoyed the trip immensely. Malta had been an education to him; it was his first visit to the island, having originally arrived in Africa by the route around the Cape, and until then he had had no real conception of how the place had suffered. No one, no matter what his experiences had been, could help but be uplifted by the tremendous spirit of pride and defiance that hung like a mantle over Malta in those early days of 1943.

Douglas and his team had spent forty-eight hours on Malta, awaiting the event that was vital to the unfolding of their plan. It had come at last when a Maryland reconnaissance aircraft had touched down at Luqa with the word that a large enemy convoy, clearly bound for Tunisia, was approaching the north-west tip of Sicily. The German plan, as usual, was to cross the dangerous waters of the Strait of Sicily under cover of darkness, the convoy's path swept by Italian destroyer escorts.

Malta's submarine flotilla had already put to sea; its crews would be on station in their reeking metal coffins, making their perilous approach to the convoy and anticipating the nerve-shattering electronic ping of an escort vessel bearing down on them. The four Malta MTBs would hit the convoy as it came closer to the Tunisian coast — a dangerous business, for they would also be in range of the enemy shore batteries on Cape Bon, but a necessary one. They would provide the diversion that would be vital if the MTB carrying Douglas and his men was to make its landfall unseen.

The landfall had been chosen with meticulous care on a barren stretch of coast a few miles north of Sousse, in a bay sheltered by steep hillsides and camouflaged by ranks of olive trees. The long S-shaped curve of coastline running southwards from Hammamet was known simply as the Sahel, or shore; it was a narrow strip no more than twelve miles wide, with the bleak, windswept expanse of the Bled — the outback of Tunisia — beyond it. Once safely through the coastal strip, with its scattering of olive orchards and farms, the SAS patrol could literally vanish in the profusion of dry, eroded gullies that scored the Bled, taking shelter amid the clumps of sagebrush and wormwood that dotted the area or in the ruins of some old Berber village, of which there were plenty.

The shadow of the newly-promoted Sergeant-Major Brough appeared on the MTB's bridge beside Douglas. The skipper saw him out of the corner of

his eye and half turned his head.

‘It’s getting a bit crowded in here,’ he remarked mildly.

‘Sorry, sir,’ Brough apologized. ‘I just came forward to ask how much longer it’ll be.’

‘Not long now,’ the naval officer told him. ‘Less than an hour. We’re south-west of Pantelleria. Our friends will be leaving us shortly.’

The MTBs had been following a dog-leg course, taking them between Pantelleria and the more southerly islands of Linosa and Lampedusa. Cape Bon lay to the right, some twenty miles away.

The drizzle had ceased and clouds still hid the moon so that the sea stretched away darkly. Suddenly, a long, long way off to the right, a reddish glow lit the sky, flaring and then dying down to a steady flicker.

‘Tanker,’ the naval officer said to no one in particular. ‘The subs must have started their attack. Whoops — there they go.’

He referred to their escorting MTBs, who now curved away in the direction of the faint glow on the horizon, increasing speed as they went. Within a few moments they had vanished into the night. They would hit the enemy convoy as it approached Cape Bon, making a single swift torpedo run before dodging away to the east, back towards Malta. Mentally, Douglas wished them luck.

The naval officer peered at the faint glow of the chronometer on the panel in front of him and increased speed; landfall had to be made as close as possible in time to the MTB’s attack, otherwise the whole diversionary measure would be a waste of time. There was silence on the bridge now as the MTB creamed through the sea; for the next fifty minutes or so there was little to do except wait, make last-minute checks of weapons and equipment, and pray that they would not be spotted by an enemy patrol craft. Quietly, without being asked, Brough brought the SAS men to action stations, ready to assist the naval crew if they ran into trouble.

Douglas was conscious of the tension mounting steadily as the MTB thrummed its way through the water, heading west-south-west into the darkness. The naval officer seemed to know exactly where he was, and Douglas suspected that he had passed this way before, probably on more than one occasion.

‘We’re abeam Kuriate Island, four miles off our port side,’ the skipper announced with confidence. ‘Monastir is behind that headland you can just see at ten o’clock. We’re right on target; won’t be more than a few minutes now.’

Douglas peered through the spray-spattered windscreen and, at first, failed to see anything. Then the diffused light of the moon, shining wanly through a thinner patch of cloud, revealed a dark expanse of coastline, just visible ahead and to the left.

The minutes ticked by. A dark mass slid into view on the right and the skipper throttled back, allowing the MTB to drift into the lee of what Douglas now saw was a cluster of low rocks, the water lapping at their base.

‘Daren’t go any closer in than this,’ the naval officer said. ‘It’s up to you now, Arne.’

The Norwegian tapped Douglas on the arm. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘let’s be off.’

Douglas shook hands with the MTB’s skipper, who wished him good luck, and followed Larsen from the enclosed cockpit to the open deck, swept by spray and a chill offshore breeze.

Larsen and the three men of his Special Boat Squadron detachment unshipped their canoes — Folboats, they called them — and slipped into them with a skill born of long practice, their automatic weapons slung round their shoulders, while the SAS men inflated the dinghies and dropped them over the side. They climbed aboard with the aid of a scrambling net, the

rubber craft still attached by lines to the MTB's side, and the boat's crew carefully passed down their precious equipment. When all was ready they cast off and began to paddle for the shore, which was perhaps a hundred yards away, following the SBS canoes, which they could just make out in the darkness.

They made landfall on a sandbar without mishap and dragged the dinghies clear of the water, quickly unloading their equipment. In addition to their arms, ammunition and rations, they had brought with them a radio transceiver, packed into a container the size of a small suitcase; they also carried a good supply of detonators and igniters. For their arms, Douglas had obtained for each man a German MP-40 machine-pistol and a considerable supply of ammunition from stocks of captured enemy weapons; the MP-40, quite apart from being lighter and more accurate than the Tommy-gun, used a 7.9-mm round which was the standard German small-arms calibre, so the SAS men should be able to replenish their stocks from enemy sources if they had to.

The idea, as far as food was concerned, was to conserve their iron rations and live off the land as much as possible; in this, Douglas hoped Suleiman's help would be invaluable.

Feeling wet and uncomfortable, Douglas and his men crouched in the shadow of some rocks for several minutes while their SBS colleagues scouted out the land ahead. After a while, a shadow appeared out of nowhere and dropped into the sand behind Douglas.

'It's okay,' Larsen whispered. 'There's no sign of anybody. There's a village on the other side of the grove but it seems deserted. If you get a move on, you should make the Bled well before first light.'

'Thanks, Arne,' Douglas said. 'Do you want a hand with the dinghies? We haven't deflated them — thought you might want to tow them back to the

MTB.’

‘No, that’s all right. We’ll deflate them and lash them to the Folboats. Don’t worry about us — just get moving!’

The Norwegian grasped Douglas’s hand briefly and then melted away into the darkness without another word. The sooner he and his men could board the MTB, the sooner the boat could be away from these perilous waters.

Douglas gathered his men around him; they had already shouldered their arms and equipment. Ahead of them, until they reached the relative safety of the anonymous Bled, lay a twelve-mile forced march over unknown ground, followed by a sixty-mile trek northwards to Tunis, where the German HQ was situated. That was as far as Douglas was prepared to look ahead, just at the moment.

With Suleiman leading at Douglas’s request, and mightily thankful to be on dry land again, they moved off in single file at a brisk pace through olive groves. The wind was in their faces and bitterly cold, and as they marched, a dismal, monotonous rain began to slant down at them from the thickening overcast. Douglas was glad of the weather, despite the discomfort it brought; few of the natives would be out of their huts on a night such as this.

They marched steadily, without pause, following Suleiman’s sure pace. The Senussi moved noiselessly, like a cat, his robes a grey blur in the night a few feet ahead of Douglas.

After two or three hours the olive groves began to peter out, giving way to a flat expanse of cultivated fields. Beyond it was a wilderness of cactus, a tangle of wild vegetation through which Suleiman somehow managed to pick out a track. At one point they crossed a road, followed a mile or so later by a railway line, both of them running north-south; Douglas, who had committed a map of the area to memory, knew that they were passing a little way to the north of the village of Kalaa Kebira, on track for their first objective.

They reached the village shortly before a windswept dawn. The plan was to lie up here, at the northern tip of Sebkra Kelbia, a large salt lake, until nightfall, when they would resume their march northward. The men spread out, attacking the cactus with their knives to construct a series of two-man shelters. After they had finished they delved into their rations for their first meal since landing on Tunisian soil; later, Suleiman, inconspicuous in his Arab dress and wily as a fox, would forage for food.

Their position had an added advantage, for it lay close to the main road that ran south from Tunis to Kairouan. During their approach march they had heard clearly the rumble of heavy transport; now, with the coming of daylight, they were able to observe unseen the steady flow of military traffic that was heading south towards the battle area. The Germans seemed to be short of nothing, Douglas thought as he made a careful record of the trucks and armoured vehicles that rolled past, immune as yet from Allied air attack.

On two occasions in the course of the morning a squadron of Stukas flew overhead, returning an hour or so later and presumably making for the airfields in the Tunis area. The dive-bombers were low, flying just under the cloud base; Douglas counted them both on the way out and the way back, and noted that they had sustained no losses. He hoped that it would be a different story when the Spitfire and Tomahawk squadrons arrived within operating distance of the battlefront.

Suleiman disappeared in the middle of the morning, to forage and to scout out the land up ahead, with the promise that he would return before dark. Soon after midday, Douglas was alerted by a low whistle from Brough, in hiding a few yards away, who drew his attention to a figure picking its way through the scrub towards their position. It was an Arab, goading his donkey along by poking it in the testicles with a pointed stick.

The SAS men burrowed deeper into the scrub and waited for the Arab to

pass by. As he came abreast of them, he halted suddenly, lifted his ragged galabieh and urinated against the unfortunate donkey's hind leg. Then he moved on again — but not before he had unlashed a canvas bag from the animal's back and dropped it casually into the undergrowth.

They waited until the Arab was out of sight. Then Brough raised his head and looked questioningly at Douglas, who nodded to him. Without a word, the sergeant-major crept forward and retrieved the bag, bringing it across to Douglas. The latter opened it and gave an exclamation of surprise: the bag was crammed with German rations.

'It looks as though German quartermasters have the same trouble with the Arabs as ours do,' Brough grinned. 'Our friend Suleiman must have put his time to good use.'

'He's certainly moved quickly,' Douglas agreed. 'I wonder what else he's turned up?'

They divided the rations between them and settled down again to their wait. The clouds had lifted, taking with them the miserable chill of the preceding hours, and a warm breeze was coming from the sea. Under different circumstances it would have been pleasant to lie there in the sunshine, gathering strength for whatever lay ahead, but Douglas chafed with impatience. Inactivity was anathema to him.

Suleiman returned as he had promised before nightfall, appearing out of nowhere to squat down beside Douglas, with one hand resting as always on his rifle. His eye fell on the empty canvas bag and he nodded in satisfaction. Douglas knew that Suleiman would expect no thanks, and offered none.

'There is one who will help,' the Senussi announced a moment later, munching a piece of cheese. He vouchsafed no further information, and Douglas felt more than mildly irritated. This was no time for conversational games.

‘Who is the one who will help?’ he asked. ‘Is he of the Bedouin?’

Suleiman regarded him with a somewhat contemptuous expression. ‘You know full well that the Bedu follow their camels south in the winter,’ he admonished, ‘and, like their mangy beasts, are the accursed of God. Your words wound my pride, but since you are young, and to be forgiven, I will tell you.’

He made Douglas wait for a few more obligatory seconds, then said: ‘He who will help is of the Imazighen.’ He used an ancient word, meaning ‘Noble Ones’, for the original people of Tunisia — the people unjustly called Barbari, ‘the Uncouth’, by the Romans twenty centuries earlier. Douglas made a mental note to use the name Imazighen, and not Berber, when referring to Tunisia’s indigenous tribes in future.

Suleiman lifted an arm and pointed to the horizon, where the mountains of Tunisia’s north rose above the plateau of the Bled. ‘This one of whom I speak has a farm there, in that direction, about half a day’s march. It is a small and poor place, but he will help. It is well that we brought gold with us. He says that he will show us a safe road through the hills, one that will cut much time from our journey.’

‘Can we reach the farm before the dawn?’

The Senussi turned what seemed to be a look of faint amusement on Douglas.

‘I have been there and back in less than a day’s march,’ he said simply, ‘and the hours of the night are long.’

They set out as soon as it was safe to do so after dark, crossing the Kairouan road and striking out across country on a northwesterly bearing with the eagle-eyed Suleiman in the lead. The going was tough, but the farm proved to be closer than Douglas had feared and they reached it after a four-hour non-stop march. Suleiman’s stature increased yet again in Douglas’s

eyes, for this was the third time the Senussi had covered the distance since the previous morning. The man, he thought, must have incredible reserves of stamina — unless he had been able to find himself a horse somewhere along the route, which was quite possible.

The march left Douglas with a strange sense of unreality. The scene that stretched before his eyes as he plodded mechanically on was weird. The sky was clear and the moon was westering, its light bathing the flat, treeless steppe that was the Bled; an endless vista of sagebrush that whipped their legs as they marched. Ahead of the marching men the horizon was broken by the dark hummocks of the hills, but to either side there was nothing. The whole impression was illusory, and Douglas found himself seeing things that were not there — mirages in the middle of the night. Had he been alone, he was certain that the Bled would have inspired ancient, timeless terrors in him.

They came upon the small farm unexpectedly. The buildings — there were two of them — were white blurs in the moonlight, set near an incongruous olive grove that looked as though it had been plucked from the coastal strip and dropped there carelessly.

Suleiman gave a hiss of caution and the rest of them melted into the ground, lying motionless with weapons at the ready while the Senussi went forward, gliding silently towards the buildings. A little while later the pinpoint light of an oil-lamp glowed in the darkness, to be extinguished again almost at once as a door was closed on it.

Within minutes Suleiman was back, dropping down to crouch beside Douglas. ‘It is safe,’ he announced curtly. ‘Come.’

Douglas rose and followed him, the others spread out in single file behind. From the buildings a smell of cooking, something like roast mutton, wafted through the night air. Douglas’s stomach fluttered in anticipation of a hot meal; he had long ago learned the lesson that a man could face just about

anything, if his belly was full.

The owner of the farm turned out to be a small, wizened man who wore old-fashioned European clothing-possibly donned in honour of this visit — who said that his father had been French. Apart from a young and shifty-looking Arab servant, he was alone; he looked after his olive grove with the help of casual labour, but there had been a drought for the past two years and his trees, although clinging tenuously to life, bore no fruit. But now that the rains had come, *El-hamduu lilaa* — Praise be to God — they would flourish once more. In the meantime, a few sheep and goats kept him and his servant alive.

The servant had prepared a couscous, a mess of semolina grain with vegetables and mutton in it, and the farmer invited Douglas and his men to be seated with much ceremony. Douglas had decided that his first act would be to place two men on guard; but a couple of minutes' relaxation of vigilance would do no harm, and so he instructed the two men so detailed to eat before they went out on sentry duty.

As he spooned up a mouthful of the couscous with his fingers, Douglas suddenly noticed that Suleiman was missing. Then, just as suddenly, the Senussi was back in the room. Douglas caught sight of the expression on his face, knew that something was seriously wrong, and quietly reached for his MP-40, licking his fingers clean at the same time.

What happened next was snake-like in its coiled intensity of movement, a fluid blur that foxed the eye. One moment the farmer's servant was hovering in the shadows behind the couscous bowl; the next he was falling forward, emitting a bubbling whistle, his hands scrabbling at the blood that fountained from his gashed throat.

The man hit the floor with a thud, upsetting the couscous bowl, whose contents mingled with the spreading pool of blood. In an almost thoughtful

manner Suleiman bent down and wiped his knife on the quivering body's robe.

'This one has betrayed us,' he said softly as he straightened himself. 'The house is surrounded by Germans.'

Chapter Eight

Hauptmann Helmut Winter laid aside his night glasses and smiled in satisfaction. He had watched the British patrol enter the farm buildings, and a few moments later had observed the agreed signal from his informant inside — three rapid flashes of a lantern.

Winter was certain now that this was the Special Air Service patrol he had been briefed to locate and capture. Intelligence in Cairo had indicated that a small-strength SAS group would be infiltrated into Tunisia to undertake some kind of special mission; Intelligence, however, had not been able to ascertain the nature of the mission, nor had there been any indication of how the enemy would arrive — by parachute, overland or by sea.

His own intuition had told him that they would come by sea, and he had been right. He had suspected, too, that they would come ashore somewhere in the Gulf of Hammamet. Years of experience had given him an uncanny ability to put himself in the place of an enemy commander, to work out his opponent's way of thinking and to anticipate his moves. So far, this unknown SAS commander was running true to form.

Winter had guessed that the SAS would not send one of their combat groups on what virtually amounted to a suicide mission deep inside enemy territory just to blow up a few aircraft or supply dumps. They must be after much bigger game, and everything pointed to an attack on the German HQ in Tunis — perhaps with the object of killing General von Arnim. After all, the British had tried much the same thing before: in 1941 their commandos had attacked Rommel's HQ at Beda Littoria in Cyrenaica, and had missed killing the Afrika Korps commander by just a few hours.

Together with his second-in-command, Leutnant Franz Warsitz, Winter had carefully assessed all the possible options open to the SAS group. The first certainty was that after landing, the British commandos would disappear into the Bled; the second was that they would avoid a direct approach to Tunis over the open country north of Kairouan. That left an approach through the mountain range, the eastern Dorsale, beyond which the front line in Tunisia had now stabilized. The front now ran northwards from the impassable Chott el-Jerid salt marshes on the edge of the Sahara, through the mountains of the eastern Dorsale and ended at the coast thirty miles west of Bizerta. East of the salt marshes, Rommel's Afrika Korps had dug in at Mareth and were preventing the British Eighth Army from forging a link with the Allied forces in the west. The situation, for the moment, was stalemate while both sides licked their wounds after the fierce battles of December. But Winter knew that great plans had been set in motion, and if they succeeded, the Anglo-American armies would be thrown into chaotic retreat through Algeria, back the way they had come. All that was needed were reinforcements, and the Führer had promised seven divisions — but that had been before the debacle at Stalingrad …

Winter was certain, having seen the size of the SAS patrol, that the Englishmen intended to trek northwards through the mountains towards Tunis. It would not be difficult for them to conceal themselves. The hunch had persuaded him to concentrate his own patrols and his informants in this area, and it had paid off. He smiled wryly to himself; German gold was every bit as good as English gold when it came to bribing the Arabs.

The tricky part began now. He was under orders to capture the Englishmen, and particularly any officers, alive. High Command wanted them for interrogation. The forthcoming offensive operations in Tunisia depended on complete surprise; Intelligence desperately needed to know whether the

English had any inkling of what was soon going to happen. Winter doubted grimly whether even a hardened SAS officer could stand up for long to certain methods of interrogation involving the use of new drugs.

Winter's main weapon, too, was surprise. His thirty-odd men and the three Kfz-251 half-track personnel carriers that had brought them to this spot were carefully hidden in the olive grove. He would give the Englishmen a couple of minutes to settle down — the Arab servant had said that they would be offered a meal — and then storm the house through every entrance, giving the enemy no time to react. One or two might get killed, but that was too bad. This was the kind of warfare in which Helmut Winter excelled.

He nudged Warsitz, who issued whispered orders. Silently, the waiting men split up into small groups and advanced from the olive grove. The assault would take place in exactly five minutes.

Inside the farmhouse, things were moving swiftly. Under different and less hopeless circumstances Douglas might have felt a brief moment of panic; instead, his brain was icy cool. As yet he had no idea what was out there, facing him, but if he and his men had to go out now they would give a good account of themselves first.

He ordered three men onto the farmhouse's flat roof by way of a ladder that led up to a trapdoor. The rest, under Brough's command, he stationed by the doors and windows while the farmer cowered nervously in a corner.

'I'm going up to the roof,' he told the sergeant-major. 'Leave the lamps lit for the moment — we want the Huns to think they've caught us napping. As soon as you hear us open fire, put out the lights and give the bastards all you've got.'

Motioning to Suleiman to follow him, he went up the ladder and through the open trapdoor, inching across the roof on his belly to lie behind a low parapet. The other men had taken up positions around the rooftop, covering

all angles.

Douglas cocked his MP-4.0 and peered out into the night. The moon had gone down and it took his eyes a few moments to become accustomed to the darkness; it was Suleiman, creeping across to lie next to him, who first spotted movement. A moment later Douglas saw it too: a small group of dark figures, five or six in number, advancing towards the farmhouse in short dashes.

He rested the muzzle of the MP-40 on the parapet, aiming low, and waited for a few seconds more to make certain of his target before squeezing the trigger. The muzzle-flash split the darkness and the sub-machine-gun bucked in his hands as he sprayed bullets towards the group of running men. He saw two of them bowled over like shot rabbits and the others went to ground. Beside him, Suleiman — who had scorned the use of an MP-40 — levelled his rifle. A shot cracked out, and one of the prone figures came abruptly up to a kneeling position and gave a sharp cry before subsiding. The rifle cracked again and another figure jerked briefly; too late, Douglas saw two more enemy soldiers crawling away out of harm's reach.

The other men on the roof were firing now, and so were the occupants of the farmhouse. Return fire came out of the darkness and bullets crackled across the walls. Then, all at once, there was silence and the echoes of the shooting died away.

'Keep your eyes peeled,' Douglas cautioned. 'Don't let them get within throwing range.'

A grenade attack was something he feared more than anything else.

They waited. Out on the Bled, nothing moved. From the west, beyond the hills, came a sudden rumble of artillery fire, lasting for perhaps thirty seconds. Douglas prayed for daylight; he fancied that the sky in the east was already showing a glimmer of dawn.

Suleiman touched his arm and pointed. Douglas could see nothing, but the keen-sighted Senussi had caught a glimpse of a dark shape, a mere hummock on the ground, moving forward inch by inch. Again, he sighted his rifle with the utmost care, muttering a prayer in Arabic as he pressed the trigger, caressing the metal gently. The shot sounded unnaturally loud.

A hundred yards away, perhaps less, there was a burst of vivid orange flame. In the midst of the balloon of fire Douglas, horrified, saw the figure of a man, pirouetting in agony, clawing vainly at the straps that held the fuel tank of a flame-thrower strapped to his back. Hideous shrieks, unlike anything they had heard before, reached the ears of the men on the roof. Still wrapped in flame, the man collapsed and lay like a charred log, the light of his cremation illuminating the area around him. Douglas swallowed hard, sickened by what he had seen.

Suleiman spat over the edge of the parapet, reached into the folds of his burnous and extracted a plug of tobacco, into which he bit deeply.

‘A lucky shot,’ he murmured modestly.

Lucky indeed, Douglas thought. He did not like to think about what might have happened if the unfortunate German had got close enough to spray the building with blazing petrol.

The sky in the east was growing paler, the light intensifying with every passing minute. He crawled over to the trapdoor and stuck his head through.

‘Everyone all right down there?’ he asked. Brough’s voice answered him in the affirmative. The Tunisian farmer was crouched in a corner behind an overturned table, trembling visibly with fear, the body of his late servant at his feet. Glancing round to make sure that all was indeed well, Douglas slid over to the parapet again, wondering what the enemy would do next. Whatever they do, he thought, at least we’ll be able to see them. There was something eerie and unnerving about night attacks; he had always hated night

actions, particularly as a tank commander. The fear of the dark, maybe; the small and frightened boy, locked in a boiler room.

A few hundred yards away, Helmut Winter tried hard to stifle his fury — fury directed mainly at his own unaccustomed incompetence, which had already cost him a third of his small force in dead and wounded. He should have assumed that the English would be on the alert. Now he was left with only two alternatives, each as unpalatable as the other. Either he could risk another direct assault, probably with the help of the half-tracks, or he could radio for reinforcements and blast the Englishmen out of their refuge, in which case it was unlikely that any of them would be left alive for interrogation. The prospect of failure — and the nightmare of Russia — loomed large in his mind's eye.

Warsitz was looking at him questioningly, and suddenly Winter made up his mind.

'Franz,' he said, 'tell the men to take up position singly around the farm buildings and keep up a sniper fire at the windows — but only at intervals. There's no need to waste ammunition. I just want the Tommies to know that we're still here, and that it would be useless to try and break out. Oh — and tell the men to have something to eat and drink first. It's going to be a long day.'

'And then, sir?'

'And then, Franz, you and I are going to take a half-track apiece, together with half a dozen men carrying nothing but grenades. As soon as it's dark, we will drive full tilt for the farmhouse, heading for the weak points — the main door and that large shuttered window. We'll jump clear just before the vehicles hit. At fifty kilometres per hour they should punch sizeable holes in the place — big enough for us to lob grenades through, anyway. That's the general idea; all we have to do now is work out the finer details — such as

how to justify the loss of two half-tracks in what should have been a simple operation!’

In the farmhouse, Douglas was also trying to work out a plan, so far without much success. Any action he took very much depended on what the enemy were planning to do, and for the time being it looked as though the enemy’s intention was to keep them pinned down in their present position. From time to time, bullets spattered against the walls of the building, and occasionally one smashed through the shutters or the wooden door to gouge holes in the interior walls. He had ordered most of the men on to the roof, from which position they had a good field of fire against any attackers. The parapet was high enough to provide shelter, and draining-holes built into it at regular intervals provided them with good lookout points without making it necessary for them to expose their heads. The only blind spot was the area behind the adjacent barn, and that was a considerable distance away; it would take a strong arm to hurl a grenade across the gap.

Douglas knew that it was only a question of time before the enemy called up reinforcements. Somehow, he had to get his men out of this perilous situation. If only they could succeed in breaking out and reaching the mountains, which looked invitingly close … But he realized that this was deceptive: several miles of open ground lay between their refuge and the farm.

Suddenly, something caught his attention. He frowned and reached into his pocket, pulling out a small telescope, which he had brought with him in preference to binoculars; not only was it easier to carry, but in the past he had found it useful when it came to concentrating on a small, defined area, particularly one that might conceal camouflaged objects.

Again he saw a sudden flash of red in the distant olive grove. It persisted and he focused his telescope on it, resting the instrument in the groove of one

of the drainage holes. After a few moments of uncertainty he realized what the glowing red patch was: the light of the rising sun, reflecting from a windscreen.

So the enemy had a vehicle, perhaps more than one, concealed there. All at once Douglas felt his spirits rise. If he could just get his hands on one of them … But the grove was a quarter of a mile away, with German soldiers covering the open ground between. There must be a way, Douglas thought. There *has* to be a way.

'It would take just one man,' he confided to Brough a few minutes later, 'just one man to get up into the grove, immobilize every vehicle except one, then drive down here hell for leather. We could be in and away before the Huns had time to know what was happening. Getting outside the building without being spotted is the big problem.'

'There is a way.'

Douglas turned his head; it was Suleiman who had spoken. The Senussi, who had accompanied Douglas to the roof to observe the lie of the land after dawn, had now descended the ladder and was squatting in a corner.

They ducked as a burst of light machine-gun-fire sent powdered stone flying from the outside of the building just beside the nearest window.

'What do you mean, Suleiman?'

The Senussi indicated the Tunisian farmer, who was still hiding miserably behind his table near the body of the servant. The body was already beginning to stink.

'That one showed it to me. It will not serve us all, but for one man, it might be a way out. Come, and I will show you.'

Followed by Douglas and Brough, Suleiman crossed the room quickly and stripped aside a curtain that hung over the entrance to a smaller room, little bigger than an alcove. Douglas had inspected it earlier, and had dismissed it

as a primitive kitchen, empty apart from a few shelves and an old iron stove with a chimney that pushed its way up through the roof. A tiny, round window, set high up in the wall, admitted a wan light.

Near the stove, a square piece of wood rested against the wall. Suleiman reached down and moved it, and Douglas saw that it had concealed a rough hole, about three feet across, which had been hacked through the base of the wall.

Douglas bent down to peer into the gap and saw that a tunnel sloped down to the exterior of the building. He gagged as the stench of dirty water and unnamed refuse hit his throat. It was clear that the deceased Arab servant had used the hole to dispose of his kitchen slops. Holding his breath, Douglas looked closer. He could see daylight on the other side, and a tangle of coarse grass.

‘There is a gully,’ Suleiman explained. ‘The drain runs into it and it extends for some distance beyond the house, running down the slope to a cesspool. One can just make it out from the rooftop. It is completely covered by long grasses; a man could crawl along it without being seen — if he has a strong stomach.’

The Senussi wrinkled his nose in disgust.

‘Once clear of the house, I might be able to crawl through the enemy cordon without being spotted and get under cover in the olive grove,’ said Douglas, who had taken it for granted that he would be the one to do the job. ‘I don’t think it very likely that the Huns will have placed a guard on their vehicles — and if they have, it won’t be more than one man. It should be easy enough to grab one,’ he added optimistically.

A smile briefly creased Suleiman’s hawk-like features. ‘The task is not for you, my friend,’ he said. ‘Your movements are as silent as a rutting camel in search of a mate. I will go.’

Douglas knew Suleiman was right: if anyone could get through, it would be him.

‘But,’ he objected, ‘you don’t know what kind of vehicles are hidden up there. How do you know you’ll be able to drive one?’

Suleiman looked offended. ‘I will drive it,’ he said curtly. ‘I may be some time — wait, watch and be ready at the main door to give covering fire when you see me come. If I do not come, then may Allah protect you and give you guidance.’

Douglas found these words far from reassuring.

A few minutes later, Suleiman — armed with several grenades as well as his rifle — crept like a snake through the reeking hole. There was the slightest shiver of grass as he slithered into the gully beyond.

‘Right,’ Douglas ordered, ‘back on the roof. We might have a long wait. No shooting unless it’s absolutely necessary.’

On the roof, the men reported that the enemy troops were constantly changing their positions, but that they did not seem to be trying to get in closer. The occasional burst of fire directed at the building had so far caused no casualties.

‘Doesn’t look as though they’ve got any mortars with them,’ Douglas remarked to Brough, ‘or they’d have had us cold by now. I wonder just what it is they’re up to.’

‘Radioed for help, probably,’ Brough grunted, ‘either more troops or the Luftwaffe.’

‘I’m not so sure about the Luftwaffe. They could have had a plane over here by now without much effort. I think their notion is to take us alive, or at least some of us. That poor devil with the flame-thrower last night — I think his job was to set the building alight and force us out into the open.’

‘Well, I wish they’d do something,’ Brough said. ‘This bloody waiting is

getting on my nerves. Let's hope Suleiman pulls something out of the hat before too long. He must have got clear; I haven't noticed any disturbance out there.'

Douglas hoped that the warrant officer was right. But as time went by, he began to have doubts. The sun climbed higher towards its zenith, then clouds gathered and a thin rain began to fall. The SAS men lay in their positions on the roof and wiped the drizzle from their eyes as they strove for a sight of the elusive enemy, but they saw nothing: only the crack of a shot from time to time told them that the Germans were still out there, waiting. Douglas was grateful for the low cloud and the rain; at least they would be safe from air attack for the time being.

A few hundred yards away Helmut Winter, sharing the discomfort of his men, crouched in a fold of the ground and wished that the hands of his watch would move faster towards nightfall, when the planned assault on the farmhouse could take place. He did not take kindly to these long hours of enforced inactivity, and he knew that his men must be chafing too — eager to avenge the deaths of their comrades whose bodies now lay stiffening back there in the olive grove. Winter had given orders that only the enemy officers and senior NCOs were to be taken prisoner, if possible; the rest were to be shot, even if they tried to surrender. He would only be obeying the Führer's directive. Adolf Hitler had issued personal orders, for the eyes of officers only, that no mercy was to be shown towards enemy commandos.

'Herr Hauptmann!'

The cry, from a man over on his right, startled Winter. 'What is it?' he demanded sharply.

'I beg to report that something is moving out there, Herr Hauptmann,' the soldier told him. 'Twenty degrees to the right of the farm buildings, distance five hundred metres. It appears to be a man, with some kind of animal.'

Winter looked, and spotted what had caught the soldier's attention immediately. Through the curtain of drizzle he saw the blurred outline of what appeared to be an Arab, driving a donkey, trudging across the Bled in their direction. Hardly worth a second glance, he thought.

'It is only a nomad,' he called, 'but you were correct in reporting what you saw. Pass the word to let him go by.'

The Arab and his reluctant donkey came on slowly, passing beyond the cordon of German soldiers. As he came abreast of their positions he goaded the animal to move more quickly, as though the sudden sight of the armed men had terrified him.

The Germans heard him give a wailing cry, repeated over and over: 'Wahoa, Mohammed! Wahoa, Mohammed!'

'He's calling on the Prophet for protection,' Winter grinned. 'Poor devils. God knows what they make of this war.'

Beside him, Franz Warsitz grunted, 'A great deal of money, probably. There's enough scrap metal lying around North Africa to make most of them rich beyond their wildest dreams.' Casually, they watched as the Arab spurred his donkey up the slope towards the olive grove, still wailing his strange cry. Then they turned their attention back to the farmhouse. Winter had no fears that the Arab would steal anything from the concealed half-tracks; he had left a man on guard over them.

The soldier guarding the vehicles was, in fact, dozing, sheltering from the rain in the back of one of the half-tracks. He had no fear of being caught half asleep at his post; he was an experienced man, and he knew that the slightest sound would bring him instantly alert.

He came alert now, conscious of the figure that was pushing its way through the stunted trees towards him. He saw at once that it was only a mangy wandering Arab, driving an equally mangy donkey. Lifting his

machine-pistol, he jumped down from the half-track and waved his gun menacingly.

‘Raus, raus!’ He yelled. ‘Imshi, you filthy pig. Getaway from here!’

The Arab came towards him, smiling broadly, murmuring something in Arabic. His arms were outstretched, palms upturned in a sign that betokened friendship.

‘Get away, you filthy beggar!’ the German roared. ‘There’s nothing here for you. Go on, or it will be the worse for you!’

He took a couple of swift strides towards the stranger, swinging his machine-pistol round and raising it, reversed, over his left shoulder with the intention of bringing the butt cruelly down into the Arab’s face. In that same instant, the German’s own face adopted a blank look of total disbelief. The gun fell from his grasp and his hands fluttered ineffectually towards the handle of the long knife whose blade had just transfixed his throat, the point driving up under his chin to lodge at the point where the spinal column joined the base of the skull.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

Suleiman bent down and retrieved the knife, plunging the blade into the earth to clean it before replacing it in the sheath he wore strapped to his arm beneath the sleeve of his burnous. He also recovered the dead man’s machine-pistol, checked the magazine and laid the weapon on the front seat of the nearest half-track.

The Senussi went back to the donkey, which had stood and watched the drama with patient unconcern, and lifted a small satchel from its back. Next, he unstrapped his rifle, which had been concealed against the animal’s flank beneath a dirty blanket. Finally, he gave the donkey a resounding smack on the rump that made it bray in protest and scurry away into the sanctuary of the trees, further from the farmhouse. Eventually, Suleiman knew that it

would find its way back to its rightful owner, a Tunisian pedlar who was even now squatting patiently beside a road a safe distance away. Suleiman had paid him well for his services, enough for a dozen donkeys.

Working quickly, the Senussi took two grenades from the satchel, together with two lengths of wire. Tying the ends of the wire strands securely to the firing pins of each grenade, he crawled under the rear end of one of the half-tracks and wedged a grenade between a cross-member of the chassis and the body, adjacent to the fuel tank. Passing the wire over the top of the cross-member, he looped the other end round the track. He gave the wire an experimental tug and surveyed his handiwork with satisfaction before crawling out from beneath the vehicle. When the track began to move, the wire would pull out the pin. There was no fear of the grenade falling from its place: he had positioned it so that the initial tug would wedge it even more firmly into its niche.

He repeated the process with the second half-track. When he had finished, he removed two cases of 7.9-mm ammunition from the back of this vehicle and transferred them to the one he intended to use.

Sporadic bursts of firing coming from the open ground below the olive grove told him that the situation at the farmhouse was unchanged. Climbing into the driver’s seat, he made sure that the dead German’s machine-pistol was cocked and handy, checked the fuel contents — the tank was just under half full — and pressed the starter button.

The engine burst into throaty life immediately. Suleiman engaged gear and the vehicle trundled forward, its tracks clanking and squealing. A few seconds later it burst out of the fringe of stunted olive trees and headed down the slope, gathering speed as it went. The Senussi held the machine-pistol ready and steered with his left hand, feeling a fierce exultation as the half-track swayed over the uneven ground.

On the roof of the farmhouse, Douglas and his men had watched the progress of the Arab and his donkey and had suspected that things were about to start happening. Now, as the half-track came roaring out of the trees, Douglas ordered the men to lay down covering fire on places where they could see puffs of smoke; the Germans, overcoming their initial surprise, had begun to shoot at the lurching vehicle. Flashes from the half-track's cab told Douglas that Suleiman was firing back.

The vehicle came on without pause, Suleiman still steering with one hand, operating his machine-pistol with the other, raking the ground ahead wherever an enemy soldier half-rose to take a shot at him. Bullets screeched and clattered against the half-track's armoured sides as it burst through the cordon of troops at top speed, heading straight for the front door of the farmhouse. A soldier rose up in front of it and Suleiman ducked as a 'potato-masher' grenade arced towards the cab, but the bomb exploded behind the speeding vehicle and the Senussi felled the thrower with a short burst of gun-fire.

Douglas, meanwhile, was sending his men down from the roof in pairs to wait by the front door for the half-track's arrival, while those left up top kept up a steady fire on the enemy's positions. Douglas, who was the last to leave, slid down the ladder just as Suleiman halted outside and the others piled out into the vehicle. He caught sight of the farmer, still crouching in his makeshift shelter.

'Come with us!' the SAS officer shouted in French.

The Tunisian shook his head. 'I was born here,' he told Douglas calmly, 'and I will die here if I have to. Go now, quickly!'

'Come on, sir!' Brough's urgent voice echoed the farmer's command. Douglas threw the farmer a quick salute and ran outside, the others hauling him into the half-track, which had already begun to move.

Bullets crackled around their heads as the Germans came towards them at a run, spraying fire indiscriminately. Sergeant-Major Brough gave an involuntary cry of pain as a piece of lead laid open his upper arm just below the left shoulder, but the flesh wound was painful rather than serious and one of the other men quickly applied a dressing to it as the half-track roared away across the Bled. Gradually, the firing slackened as the vehicle drew out of range, then died away altogether. Douglas saw that the Germans were running back towards the olive grove, intent on giving pursuit in their other vehicles.

Douglas clapped Suleiman on the shoulder. ‘Well done!’ he cried above the roar of the engine. ‘Step on it — we haven’t got much of a start!’

Suleiman laughed and swung the wheel, turning the half-track towards the mountains.

‘I think we have all the start we need, my friend,’ he said. ‘Keep looking behind, and you will see.’

Douglas turned his head and kept his eyes on the olive grove. He didn’t hear the explosions above the noise of the engine, but he clearly saw two columns of dark smoke, rising lazily above the distant trees and merging into a single cloud.

*

The rain had stopped now but the clouds were still low, so there was little to fear from air attack. Ahead of them they could see their immediate objective, the road that led north-west through the mountains towards Pont du Fahs and, ultimately, Tunis, but columns of enemy transport were moving along it and they were forced to shelter in a wadi until nightfall, when the enemy traffic died down. Douglas had ordered the German-speaking Conolly to take Suleiman’s place at the wheel and all of his men to remove their distinctive berets. He hoped that, in the darkness, they would be indistinguishable from

German troops.

Douglas, sitting beside Conolly, consulted his map by the light of a small pencil torch.

‘There’s a track that branches off to the left about a mile and a half ahead,’ he told the driver. ‘According to the map, it winds through the hills and rejoins the main road on the other side of Pont du Fahs. We’ll be safer that way; it might be harder going, but it’s not likely that we’ll run into any Huns.’

They found the track without difficulty and Conolly turned the vehicle on to it, dropping gear to claw up a steep ascent. At the top of the climb the road disappeared round a hairpin bend. Dirt and stones spewed from the vehicle’s tracks as Conolly negotiated the curve — and stood abruptly on the brakes.

Blocking the road ahead, its great bulk silhouetted in the glow of a small fire, was the biggest tank Douglas had ever seen. And its gun was pointing directly at him.

Chapter Nine

Douglas's heart leaped into his throat as he took in the scene in front of him with a single sweep of vision; the huge bulk of the tank, the dark shapes of five men clustered round a small cooking-fire by the side of the track. They rose to their feet and faced the half-track.

Conolly was the first to act.

'*Was ist hier los*?' he demanded authoritatively poking his head round the edge of the windscreen.

There was silence apart from an almost inaudible snicking sound as the men in the half-track eased off the safety catches of their MP-40S.

'*Der Hauptmann will wissen, was hier passiert ist!*' Conolly continued in a sharp voice. One of the unknown tankmen came forward a little hesitantly, muttering something. It was clear that they had been caught in an embarrassing position, having pulled off the main road onto the track to take a little unscheduled relaxation.

Suddenly, one of the men near the fire made a dive for the tank, yelling '*Engländer!*'

Douglas's MP-40 chattered and the man fell forward, his body rebounding from the side of the metal monster. The gun's arc of fire swept on to cut down the other four Germans. One stumbled to his feet again and tried to make a run for it; he was shot by somebody else.

Douglas, Brough and Conolly got down from the half-track and came forward cautiously to check the bodies. Three of the Germans were dead, and the two others nearly so. Douglas felt sick as they moaned out their lives at his feet; the kindest thing would have been to shoot them, but he could not

bring himself to do it. He felt a great sense of relief, as much for his own sake as for theirs, when they died at last.

The Germans, he noticed, wore camouflaged smocks similar to those of the SAS men, together with the distinctive black beret of the Panzer troops. Douglas picked up the berets, then ordered his men to heave the bodies down the slope that dropped away from the track. He heard them rolling and crashing through the undergrowth like sacks of potatoes; Brough had already been through their pockets, collecting papers and personal mementos. Conolly examined some of the documents by torchlight.

'They don't give much away, sir,' he told Douglas. 'Some of it could be useful, though. There's a movement order here authorizing Feldwebel Heinrich Rossler — he was presumably the tank commander — of the 5th Battalion, 10th Panzer Regiment, to proceed from Tunis to Kairouan for training purposes. Oh, and there's another one here, authorizing him to make the same trip in the opposite direction. Now that could be *really* useful, if I'm reading your thoughts correctly.'

'Hm,' Douglas murmured. 'There are possibilities. Definite possibilities. Anyway, let's take a look at this beastie.'

Followed by Conolly, he climbed on to the tank's casing. There was an open escape hatch in the side of the turret and he wriggled through, feet first, to inspect the interior by the light of his small torch. One of the first details he picked out was a small metal plate, screwed to the floor. It identified the tank as a Panzerkampfwagen VI. Underneath were some factory code markings that were unintelligible to him.

'So this is the Tiger,' Douglas mused, looking around in admiration. 'Give Faber a shout, will you,' he told Conolly, 'and let's see if we can make this thing tick between us.'

Trooper Max Faber came forward, clambered on to the forward hull and

opened the driver's hatch, dropping through into the seat beneath. Faber's parents, Austrian by birth, were now naturalized Britons and ran a clock and watch repair business in Ealing. Their only son was a great disappointment to them; instead of specializing in the intricacies of jewelled movements he had joined the Armoured Corps and now, in the SAS, probably knew more about enemy tanks than anybody outside the German Army. He whistled softly.

'Just look at this! Eight forward gears and four reverse! Wait a minute, there are some engine details here.' He was silent for a while, then said: 'Maybach HL210 twenty-one litre, 642 brake horse power at 3,000 r.p.m. This thing's unstoppable — I'll bet it can do a good twenty-five miles per hour on a good surface!'

'Can you get some light on the scene?' Douglas wanted to know. Faber fiddled around with the switches, there was a sudden whirr of electrics and a dull red light came on in the turret. 'That's better,' Douglas said. 'Now we can see what we've got ourselves into.'

Stuffed into a map pocket behind the tank commander's seat he found an operator's manual which, with Conolly's help in translating, eliminated much of the guesswork surrounding their unexpected prize. The Tiger, they discovered, weighed 56 tons fully laden and had a top speed of 23 m.p.h. on roads, 13 m.p.h. across country. Average road range was 73 miles, crosscountry range 42 miles. Its armament consisted of one 88-mm gun and two 7.92-mm machine-guns; one of the latter was linked to the 88-mm weapon so that its fall of tracer could be used for ranging, the other was mounted on the forward hull on the opposite side to the driver. It fired through a slit and the gunner was also the radio operator.

Douglas found to his delight that the Tiger's 88-mm shell bin was half full, containing forty rounds, and the stowage lockers for the MG ammunition also contained plentiful supplies. One of the tank's impressive features was its

armour, which varied in thickness between 100 and 80 mm at the Tiger's most vulnerable points. Most British anti-tank shells would simply bounce off.

Within a few minutes, Faber had mastered the complexities of the Tiger's controls — not that there were many.

'Think you can drive her all right?' Douglas asked him.

Faber laughed, like a child with a new toy. 'Piece of cake, sir, as they say in the air force. Everything's just where it ought to be. I take it we're going for a little joy-ride?'

'Something of the sort.' Douglas pulled himself through the escape hatch, leaving Conolly to make an inventory of the tank's equipment, and dropped to the ground to confer with Brough.

'Quite a little windfall, Stan,' he said to the sergeant-major. 'Calls for a change of plan, I think. I was rather worried about steaming across country in the half-track; the Huns are bound to have raised the alarm by now. But nobody's going to take a lot of notice if we travel in company with the Tiger. Let's see — if we follow this road we'll be out of the hills in about four miles; the range is narrow in depth at this point. Then it's another forty miles to Tunis, via Pont du Fahs. Conolly tells me we have enough fuel, with a bit to spare. We'll cover as much ground as we can before daybreak, lie up somewhere south of Tunis as soon as it starts to get light, and then hit the German Military HQ tomorrow night.'

Brough regarded him impassively. 'The HQ's on the other side of Tunis, sir, isn't it? On El Aouina airfield?'

Douglas nodded. 'Yes. It will mean driving through Tunis to get there. We'll bluff — or shoot — our way through. After all, we have plenty of firepower now. With luck, we'll be able to do a great deal of damage. It's the German special forces troops we're after, remember, but I don't think Middle

East Command will object if we bag the odd general or two.'

'And then?'

'And then, Sergeant-Major, we get out as fast as we can, split up and make for Porto-Farina Lake, twenty miles to the north, where we get off a signal to Malta. After that, we lie low and wait for Lieutenant Larsen and his boys. We may have to wait quite some time, depending on their commitments,' he added thoughtfully.

'What do you reckon are our chances of getting away with it, sir?' Brough asked quietly, so the others could not hear.

Douglas thought carefully for a moment or two, then answered: 'About sixty-forty against. I don't want anyone thinking this is a suicide mission, though. We are by no means expendable. Once we've done our job, you may be sure that our friends on Malta will spare no effort to get us away safely.'

Douglas changed the subject abruptly. 'Right,' he said crisply, 'we'd better get on the move. I want four men in the tank with me — Faber to drive, Olds as gunner and Conolly as loader. That way, I can easily swap places with Conolly in the commander's seat if there's any German speaking to be done.' He named a fourth man, Lance-Corporal Bill Finch, who was the SAS patrol's signalman. Finch would occupy the hull machine-gunner's seat and also keep the radio tuned to the German frequencies so that Conolly could listen for any transmissions that might have something to do with themselves.

Under Faber's capable touch the Tiger's Maybach engine burst into life with a throaty roar. The intercom functioned perfectly, and Faber had no trouble in following Douglas's instructions as the Scot guided him in reverse until he came to a patch of level ground beside the track that was large enough to enable him to swing the 56-ton monster round until it was pointing in the right direction.

Closely followed by the half-track, with Sergeant-Major Brough in

command, Faber picked his way along the undulating track by the beams of the tank's dimmed headlights. Olds and Conolly familiarized themselves with the workings of the 88-mm gun and, as a precaution in case they ran into trouble, loaded a round.

After a few miles the ground began to slope away to the west. Hills rose steeply on either side of the track, then all at once the ground levelled and the two vehicles were grinding across a flat plain towards the confluence of roads at Pont du Fahs. Douglas warned his crew to be on the alert for danger; he had no idea what enemy forces, if any, might be at Pont du Fahs, but since it lay on one of the principal routes to the front line it was likely that they would encounter some — although from what he had observed already it seemed that the main concentrations of enemy armour and troops were assembling in the south, beyond Kairouan.

From his vantage point, with head and shoulders protruding from the open commander's cupola, Douglas had a good view of the terrain ahead as the vehicles approached the straggling roadside settlement that was Pont du Fahs. He was the first to see the caterpillar line of dim lights, crawling through the spot from north-east to south-west, and alerted his men accordingly over the intercom.

'Lights ahead, looks like a convoy, crossing from right to left. Keep going, driver — they'll have seen our lights too. Conolly, stand by to change places if we look like getting stopped. Gunners, stand by in case we have to shoot our way out.'

The tension inside the Tiger's armoured hull was almost unbearable. Douglas glanced behind, and saw that the half-track had dropped back somewhat, adopting the station that would be regulation for two vehicles in convoy. Brough was clearly aware of his officer's intentions; he was like an extension of Douglas's right arm.

The enemy convoy was a long one. In his cupola, Douglas frowned; he wondered why the convoy was heading west, when all the other enemy transport and armour he had seen so far were heading south.

Suddenly, the enemy's strategy became crystal clear. The Germans were planning a diversionary attack in the north, aimed at keeping the British 5th Corps busy while the weight of the enemy offensive fell on the American 2nd Corps and the 19th Free French Corps in the south. He had seen the Intelligence data, and knew that the Americans and French had been having a hard time — particularly the Americans, almost totally lacking in battle experience.

What might happen if a strong German armoured thrust succeeded in cutting the Allied armies in two, and driving through to the Algerian coast, did not bear contemplation. Douglas felt a terrible sense of frustration. He was observing the enemy's plans in the making, and could do nothing to forestall them.

He pulled himself together with an effort. A small red light was waving in an arc in front of him, a signal to stop.

'All right, Conolly,' he said quietly over the intercom. 'Up you come. Driver, halt at the light ahead.'

Faber acknowledged and Douglas slid down into the turret, handing over his headphones to Conolly. The latter stuck his head and shoulders through the cupola hatch, glad of the clean night air after the sweaty confines of the tank. Faber brought the Tiger to a stop and Conolly, as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, made out a figure peering up at him. The light of a hand-held torch reflected from a crescent-shaped gorget at the man's throat, the insignia of the German military police.

The tension in the hull reached fearsome proportions. Finch's hands caressed the MG-34 machine-gun; Faber sat poised to send the Tiger leaping

forward. Olds's cheek was pressed against the 88-mm's sight, the cross-hairs lined up on the lights of the convoy moving slowly across the tank's bow. Douglas cradled his MP-40 and held his breath.

There was an exchange of German between the military policeman and Conolly. Suddenly, the Irishman laughed. Cheerily, into the microphone, he called '*Weiterfahren!*'

Faber needed no second bidding. The big tank started to move forward; as the noise of the engine swelled, Conolly said:

'It's all right. They're holding up the convoy to let us through. I told him that we were heading back to Tunis for urgent repairs — ajammed turret.' He chuckled. 'I said that the men in the half-track had been detailed for a special operation — to search for English saboteurs. He said he's had word that some were in the area, but not to worry — the military police would soon round them up!'

'Christ, Conolly, you were pushing everyone's luck!' Douglas gasped. 'Stay where you are until we're clear — your talents might be needed again!'

They passed through the centre of the convoy without incident. It was, Conolly reported, composed of trucks only, with no accompanying armour. He could hear the German troops singing.

'We could make mincemeat out of them,' he remarked wistfully.

'And have half the German Army down on our necks in no time,' Douglas told him. 'Just keep your eyes peeled, and leave the thinking to me. Faber, are you okay?'

'Yes, sir. The road ahead is clear now. We're coming up to a bridge; it looks solid enough. If it isn't, we've got a problem.'

'Keep going,' Douglas ordered. 'Conolly, is the half-track still with us?' The Irishman confirmed that it was. 'Right,' Douglas said, 'come back down here. I want to take a look outside.'

The bridge, fortunately, was a wide and solid stone-built structure, a testimony to the skill of the French engineers who had constructed it. It shuddered slightly as the huge Tiger rumbled across, and some loose stonework on the parapet crumbled into the water; but it held, and Douglas breathed again as the tank reached the road on the other side.

All was quiet; the houses by the road, growing fewer in number now, were dark and silent, and the enemy convoy was a long way behind. There was nothing to indicate that only a fortnight earlier General von Arnim's Panzers had stormed through Pont du Fahs, hurling back troops of the 19th French Corps which until then had been advancing steadily in the centre of the Allied line. The front line was now only a few miles away to the west, but the hills were dark and silent, brooding over the thousands of Allied and Axis troops entrenched on their slopes.

They put several more miles behind their tracks before Douglas ordered his driver to turn aside from the road and follow a dried-up wadi. Its course wound and twisted and it was deep enough to conceal the Tiger's turret from the sight of anyone passing along the main route. Both tank and half-track carried camouflage nets as standard equipment, so with the aid of this and plentiful layers of coarse, heather-like scrub they were adequately hidden well before the coming of daylight. The ground here was stony, so it was unlikely that the vehicles' track marks would show up in much detail, even from the air.

They ate as the sun came up, washing down their food with water they had found in some jerricans lashed to the tank. It tasted of chemicals, but they suffered no ill-effects.

They were just finishing their meal when the horizon to the south-west erupted in a thunder of artillery fire. A few minutes later, waves of aircraft streaked overhead, flying low. They were fast, twin-engined machines of a

type Douglas had not seen before; Conolly said that he thought they were Henschel 129s, which carried a heavy armament for use against tanks.

Douglas peered at his map in the dawn light and drew a line across it with his finger, following the direction of the aircraft and trying to pinpoint the rumble of gun-fire.

‘It’s a long way off,’ he said. ‘Somewhere west of Kairouan, I’d say at a guess. I wonder what’s happening?’

What was happening, although Douglas had no way of knowing it, was that von Arnim’s forces were once again launching a sharp offensive against the French-held sector of the Allied front, their target the capture of the strategic passes at Pichon and Faid. It was only the preliminary to something much bigger, as Douglas and his men were soon to discover.

As they lay in hiding, Douglas briefed his men thoroughly for the coming night’s work. He had at first considered making a detour around Tunis to approach El Aouina airfield, which stood on a flat, bleak plain on the seaward side of the city, but had rejected this plan in favour of a direct approach through Tunis itself, keeping as far as possible to the long, straight road that ran behind the docks area and hoping that no special rules were in force about which routes were to be used by heavy armoured vehicles. They would just have to take a chance on that score.

The Tiger would make their task easier. Without the tank, in fact, he had not given much for their chances of success, although he had kept his fears to himself. Sooner or later the Tiger and its crew would be reported missing, but he hoped they would have at least until nightfall before anyone raised the possibility that the tank might have fallen into enemy hands.

‘We’ll certainly be challenged when we reach the airfield,’ Douglas told Conolly, ‘so we’ll just have to bluff our way through. If anyone asks us what we’re up to, just tell them that we have to report to Military HQ and that it’s

orders. Shrug your shoulders, or something.'

He had memorized the layout of the airfield, and now drew a sketch map for the benefit of the others.

'The HQ is here,' he explained, 'about a quarter of a mile from the main gate. It's a two-storey stone building, put up by the French before the war. Over here, a few hundred yards away, is a wooden barracks block housing airfield personnel and, we believe, our friends in the German special forces group. I hope they're at home,' he added, completely unaware that part of the group had already suffered considerably at the hands of his patrol.

'The plan of action,' he went on, 'is this. Once on the airfield we drive straight up to the HQ building. We announce our arrival with an 88-mm round, right through the front door. That'll cause a bit of confusion and we'll follow up with grenades as we go in. No messing around — a grenade into each room, shoot anybody we come across, especially anybody with red stripes on his trousers, then out again. We can do it in five minutes, if we're fast. Meanwhile, Olds, Conolly, Faber and Finch will remain in the tank and keep the barracks covered. Put a few 88s into the building and if anyone makes a run for it let him have it with the MG. I'm leaving you in the driving seat, Max, because you might have to manoeuvre around a bit, and in any case we want to make a quick getaway as they say in the cowboy films.'

He looked around at their faces. Some were expectant; most were impassive.

'That leaves just seven of us, and Suleiman, to hit the HQ,' Douglas said slowly, emphasizing his words. 'Speed and surprise are the important factors. After we've done the job, as I've already explained to Sergeant-Major Brough, we get away as fast as we can, shooting up the barracks and any aircraft that happen to be on the airfield as we go. Then we abandon the vehicles once we're clear — they won't have much fuel left, anyway — and

split up, heading for Porto-Farina Lake.' He told them where the lake was, and the exact spot where he wanted them to rendezvous.

'Aircraft, sir, low down to the north and coming this way.'

The warning came from Stan Brough, who, since he already knew the details of Douglas's plan, had volunteered to act as lookout. Douglas scrambled up the side of the wadi and peered over the top. A mile or so away, an aircraft was systematically quartering the terrain. Douglas could hear its engine purring quietly, almost inaudibly. It was a high-winged Fieseler Storch, which the Germans used for observation and liaison duties. Rommel, it was said, used one to drop in unexpectedly on Afrika Korps units, right up in the front line.

'Searching for us, do you think, sir?'

Douglas noticed that Brough spoke in a whisper, as though the crew of the aircraft might somehow hear him. He frowned.

'Must be, I suppose. But I don't understand why they're flying so low. I'd have thought they'd stand a better chance of spotting a half-track, or a tank for that matter, from higher up.'

Whatever the pilot of the Storch was looking for, he was making a thorough job of it, turning this way and that as he continued his methodical search.

Suddenly, a few yards in front of their faces, the tall scrub shivered as though a large animal were pushing its way through. Douglas nudged Brough, pointing; something was heading their way. The sergeant-major half-turned, looked down at the men assembled in the bed of the wadi, tapped his lips with his finger and signalled to them to have their weapons ready.

The scrub quivered again. Douglas and Brough could hear a gasping, panting sound, a tearing of breath such as that made by someone in an extreme of exhaustion. A moment later a dirty, dishevelled figure crawled out of the scrub on all fours, lurched head-first over the edge of the wadi and

went down the bank in a sprawling slide. He was seized by two of the SAS men, who pinioned his arms and held him fast.

The man struggled vainly for a few moments, then went limp. Through the camouflage netting, he caught sight of the large black cross painted on the Tiger's turret. His chin dropped forward on his chest and something like a sob broke from him.

The Storch was getting closer. Hurriedly, Douglas and Brough scrambled back down the side of the wadi.

'Get under cover, quickly,' Douglas ordered. 'Get him out of sight.' They dragged the stranger under the cover of the camouflage netting where he lay motionless, the muzzle of an MP-40 pressed against his ear.

The drone of the Storch's engine grew louder. Douglas peered up through the netting; the aircraft was over the wadi now, a few hundred yards to the west. If it turned east and flew along the line of the dried-up watercourse at low level, its crew must surely spot the suspicious hummocks that were the camouflaged outlines of tank and half-track.

But the aircraft turned west, then north again, and flew away in the direction of Tunis. Douglas breathed again, then looked down at the prone form of the man who had stumbled into their midst.

'Turn him over,' he said, 'and let's have a look at him.'

The stranger was young, perhaps twenty-five. His face was lined and drawn with pain and weariness, and on its left side a gash, crusted with dried blood, ran from temple to jawbone. He wore a roll-necked sweater, dark brown flying jacket with a fur collar, and olive green overalls tucked into short flying boots. All was besmirched with mud. He looked up at Douglas dully, his mouth slightly open. Someone gave him water; he drank greedily, and seemed to revive a little. Douglas squatted down on his haunches and regarded the stranger closely.

‘Well, now, and just who might you be?’ he asked. The man replied in a voice that was little more than a croak.

‘Crawford, Major, United States Army Air Force.’ He added a serial number.

Douglas smiled. ‘Relax, Major,’ he said. ‘You’re among friends. How do you come to be here?’

‘Crawford, Major, United States Army Air Force,’ the man repeated stubbornly. ‘You can’t fool me, you goddam kraut. You might speak the lingo well, but you’re no Englishman.’

‘No, I’m a Scot, as a matter of fact,’ Douglas informed him. ‘This is a British Special Air Service patrol, operating inside enemy territory. We, er, acquired these two vehicles in the course of our activities.’

It took several minutes of rapid talking, together with the production of identity disks, to convince Crawford that Douglas was telling the truth and that he had not fallen into the hands of the German Army. Brough gave the American another drink of water and something to eat, after which he told them briefly of his adventures.

‘Been on the run for three days,’ he said. ‘I’m an F-4 pilot — that’s the photo-recce version of the P-38 Lightning. Took off from Maison Blanche on a mission to photograph shipping in Tunis harbour and got bounced by a pair of Focke-Wulfs. Made it as far as the mountains over there’ — he waved a hand towards the west — ‘and then had to get out. Got down okay, apart from bashing my face on a rock. Thought about working my way west to join up with our own guys, but the hills were stiff with krauts — most of ’em looking for me, or so it seemed — and there wasn’t a lot of cover. So I thought the safest course was to strike out east, towards Tunis. Try and steal an airplane from one of the airfields there, maybe. Failing that, find some friendly natives and lie low until our people arrived, whenever that might be.’

He grinned suddenly. ‘Thought it was curtains just now, though. Say, just what are you guys up to?’

Douglas explained briefly, omitting some of the finer details. Then he looked seriously at the American pilot.

‘It’s up to you what you do,’ he said. ‘We can give you some rations and water and you can carry on with your own plans, if you like, or you can come with us. But it’ll be dangerous, and I should warn you that if you are with us and things go wrong, the Huns won’t take you prisoner. They’ll shoot you.’

Crawford shrugged. ‘What the hell,’ he said. ‘I’ll take my chances with you guys. But I don’t have a gun — I lost my Colt pistol somehow when I baled out.’

Douglas nodded, then worked his way under the camouflage netting to the half-track’s cab, in which Suleiman was sitting. The Scot picked up the MP-40 that had come with the vehicle, and as he did so said quietly to the Senussi, so the others could not hear:

‘Keep a close eye on our new friend. If he gets into a tight spot, help him out of it. If he does anything that might endanger our plans, kill him.’

Suleiman’s impassive face gave no indication that he had heard, but Douglas knew that he had got the message all right. Douglas went back to the American and handed him the MP-40.

‘Think you can use one of these?’

Crawford inspected the weapon.

‘Guess so. I’ve handled a Thompson, and this looks much the same. Can I hang on to this one?’

Douglas nodded, then said, ‘You’d better get some rest; you look all in. We move off as soon as it’s dark. You’ll be travelling in the half-track. Sergeant-Major Brough here will tell you anything else you want to know.’

Crawford smiled again, laid aside the machine-pistol, stretched out under

the netting and was asleep in thirty seconds.

The rest took turns to sleep too, dividing the watches between them. Suleiman did not sleep; he never seemed to. Instead, with Douglas's approval, he disappeared along the wadi towards the road, in order to give an early warning of any danger that might approach from that quarter. Douglas felt infinitely more secure in the knowledge that the Senussi was holding the outpost, so to speak.

It was a long, tense day, but the sun shone throughout, which at least made the waiting bearable. For several hours, Douglas kept casting worried looks at a range of cloud that hung over the hills; heavy rain was the last thing he wanted, for rain would send cascades of water down the wadi and turn its bed into mud, possibly with dire consequences when it came to getting the vehicles on the move. But the clouds stayed where they were, riding on the thermals that rose from the mountain slopes. Now and then, the dull grumble of thunder added its voice to the distant artillery fire, which still flared up at intervals.

At last the sun dropped behind the clouds that hung over the Dorsale, transforming them into black and monstrous shadows, and the air grew bitterly cold. Slowly, darkness crept over the Bled. Suleiman returned in his usual ghost-like fashion, bringing the news that, apart from some light transport, the road to Tunis was clear.

Sergeant-Major Brough woke the men who were still sleeping, and they set about stripping the camouflage netting from the tank and half-track. They left it lying in the wadi, for they would not be needing it again.

As they mounted up, Douglas took a last look at the faces of the men under his command. With sudden sadness, he wondered how many of them would be alive when the sun rose again.

Strangely, the thought that he too might not live to see the sunrise never

occurred to him.

Chapter Ten

The drive to Tunis was uneventful. A few vehicles passed by, mostly heading south, but no one took any notice of them. As they approached the southern outskirts of the town they could see landing-lights circling in the distance; aircraft, probably transports, were touching down in a steady stream at El Aouina. It was not a reassuring sight, for it meant that the field would probably be crawling with enemy troops.

Douglas could still see the aircraft lights from his commander's cupola as the tank, followed by the half-track, nosed into the suburbs of Tunis, following the straight road that led past the docks area. He silently blessed the French architects who had been responsible for this part of the town; their roads were long and straight, unlike the twisting alleys of the Medina, the Old Town, which was off to the left. As the tank rumbled on he saw that the harbour was crammed with shipping in the throes of unloading; this particular convoy, or at least most of it, seemed to have escaped the attention of the British strike forces on Malta. Under dim lights, Douglas made out lines of trucks and armoured vehicles, parked in long rows on the quays. German troops swarmed over them, getting the vehicles clear as quickly as possible to make room for more. Faber kept the Tiger well over to the right of the road, leaving space for a line of trucks that crawled past on their way south, bumper to bumper. Men in them, dimly visible in the glow from the docks area, waved; Douglas and the contingent in the half-track waved back.

Suddenly, the harbour lights went out. A few seconds later, so did those of the aircraft circling in the distance. Douglas seized his microphone.

'Put your lights off, Max,' he ordered, 'but keep going. Something's

happening.’ Faintly, through his headphones, he caught the wail of a siren. ‘I think it’s an air-raid,’ he added, half turning to glance at the half-track. Brough, following the leading driver’s example, had doused his lights too.

He looked up. Above his head, the darkness seemed impenetrable. Then, as if on a given command, the beams of several searchlights stabbed upwards from the perimeter of the town, probing the gaps in the cloud that had begun to creep overhead. Somewhere close at hand, a flak battery opened up with a terrific crash. It was joined by another, and then another.

The Tiger shuddered as a stick of bombs erupted in the harbour. Douglas had not heard the screech of their fall. Startled, he saw the flash of the explosions and felt a hot wind on his face. The bombs touched off a bigger explosion among the ships and a balloon of fire mushroomed high into the air, with glowing debris showering from it.

The second stick of bombs was closer. It marched diagonally across the road behind, pulverizing the leading vehicles of the convoy that had just passed. Half a minute earlier, and the tank and its companion would have occupied the same spot. Fires broke out in buildings alongside the road and masonry crumbled inwards, burying screaming men who were trying to flee from their shattered trucks.

‘Speed up, Max,’ Douglas ordered sharply. ‘Let’s get out of here. Don’t stop for anything.’

Douglas closed the cupola hatch and peered ahead through his periscope as the Tiger gathered speed. Bombs were exploding all around now; splinters and chunks of stone bounced off the tank’s armoured hull. Douglas hoped that the men in the more exposed half-track were all right. The Tiger lurched as Faber ploughed through a mound of collapsed brickwork, making a path for the vehicle behind.

High above, anti-aircraft shells spattered the sky in clusters of multi-

coloured stars. A bomber, caught in a searchlight, twisted desperately away, but within seconds three other searchlights had trapped it in a lethal spider's web of light. The twinkling shell-bursts crept towards it until it was completely surrounded. A tiny spark of flame clung to one of its engines, growing steadily until it enveloped the whole wing. The Wellington, for such it was, shuddered and began to fall, slowly at first, then gathered speed as its helpless plunge took it to final extinction out there somewhere in the darkened waters of the Mediterranean.

A single parachute blossomed out, a shining dot in the cone of searchlights. Then they swept away from it in search of another victim.

The shadow of a truck loomed up in front of Faber's vision slit. It straddled the road and was surrounded by German soldiers, who gesticulated as the Tiger bore down on them at top speed. Most, realizing that the tank was not going to stop, jumped aside to safety at the last moment. A couple, however, stood their ground, rooted to the spot in terror and disbelief, and were ground to pulp as the Tiger rolled over them. The tank struck the truck broadside on and hurled it aside as though it were no more than a toy.

Over the intercom, somebody was whistling.

'Cut out that bloody racket,' Douglas ordered, then grinned to himself as he realized how silly his remark had been; bombs were going off all around and making an ear-splitting din, and he was annoyed by a fragment of tuneless whistling. Well, he thought, it was always the same. It was the little things that got on your nerves.

He opened the cupola hatch again and stuck his head outside. Behind him, the harbour area was well alight, silhouetting the ruined avenue and the swaying bulk of the half-track, a few yards away.

Douglas switched his gaze forward again, trying to get his bearings. The two vehicles were well clear of the docks area now, and up ahead the road

divided into two branches.

‘Take the right-hand fork,’ he instructed Faber over the intercom. ‘It leads out of Tunis past the bay. The airfield is about three miles away, and I don’t think we can miss it. It’s lit up like a Christmas tree.’

El Aouina had come in for some attention from the Royal Air Force, too; its position was marked by the glow of fires. Douglas swore under his breath. In one way the unexpected air-raid was a blessing, sending German troops who might otherwise have been encountered on the road scurrying for shelter, but it also seemed certain to complicate their task. The airfield’s defences would be fully on the alert, and he doubted very much whether the senior officers he had hoped to eliminate would still be at their posts. He would just have to improvise as he went along, changing his plan as and when necessary.

They were out of Tunis now, and for the time being at least the road ahead was clear. The two vehicles forged on at maximum speed towards the airfield, from which tracer rose in clusters towards the clouds. El Auoina was less than a mile away now, and from his cupola Douglas could see the silhouettes of several distant aircraft, broken and burning. The flames lit up the outlines of hangars and buildings, enabling him to get his bearings.

They also illuminated the airfield’s perimeter fence, a long row of stakes with coils of barbed wire between. It would have been an easy matter for the Tiger to smash its way through, a thought that also crossed Faber’s mind.

‘Are we going through the fence, sir?’ he asked over the intercom.

But Douglas was cautious. ‘No. It might be mined. Wouldn’t do us much harm, but we can’t risk the chaps in the half-track. We’re going in by the main gate. It’ll be about half a mile ahead on the left. Conolly, stand by to come up here, and let’s get a story ready in case we’re stopped.’

A few minutes later, with Conolly in the commander’s seat, the tank and half-track turned aside from the main road and rumbled slowly along a

narrower track that led to the airfield's main entrance. Over the intercom, Conolly quietly informed the others about what he could see ahead.

'There's a blockhouse on either side of the gate,' he told them. 'Looks like an MG mounted on top of each one. I can see maybe half a dozen troops, weapons slung — they're standing behind the barrier and looking our way. Max, bring her to a stop a few yards clear of the gate.'

Faber did as he was ordered, and the Tiger ground to a halt. The anti-aircraft fire had ceased now, and the bombers had droned away. Conolly leaned out of the turret and called a robust greeting to the guards who stood behind the barrier, noting out of the corner of his eye that the machine-guns on the two small blockhouses were turned in his direction. He and Douglas had decided to stick to the tale they had used previously.

'Special Detachment Rossler,' he called. 'We were on our way to Kairouan when we were recalled for airfield defence against possible saboteurs. Have you heard that some have been dropped by parachute? Here are our orders.'

He handed down the late Feldwebel Rossler's movement authority to a guard who came forward. The latter seemed a little shaken, probably as a result of the recent air attack, and was not in a mood to be too thorough. He gave the movement order a cursory inspection and handed it back, waving at his colleagues to open the barrier.

'You're wasting your time,' the guard called as the Tiger started to move again. 'There are no enemy parachutists around here. But you can help to clear up the mess. Go and report to HQ, and watch out for delayed-action bombs.'

Once they were through the barrier, Conolly slid down from the cupola to allow Douglas to take his place again.

'Keep the speed down, Max,' Douglas ordered. 'We don't want to draw attention to ourselves. See the HQ? It's the tall building near the control

tower. The barracks are over on the right, and it looks as though the air force has done part of our job for us.'

The barracks were burning and in ruins, crushed by a stick of bombs. The black figures of men, made ant-sized by the distance, were milling around in front of the flames. Elsewhere around the field, crash crews were at work putting out fires that were flaring in a dozen places, mostly among the parked aircraft. No one took any notice of the two armoured vehicles as they rolled across the airfield towards the HQ building.

In the light of what had happened, Douglas revised his plans a little.

'We'll go into the HQ as planned,' he told his crew, 'but we won't use the 88-mm. Things are in a big enough state of chaos here as it is. With ammo and DA bombs going off all over the place, some extra shooting isn't likely to attract much attention — for a few minutes at least. Wait until we're all out, and then go hell for leather for the northern perimeter fence. We'll do as much damage as we can on the way out.'

Dim lights flickered on inside the headquarters building as the two vehicles approached slowly. The tank and half-track came to a halt outside the main entrance, shielding it from any fire that might come from across the airfield. Douglas had no wish to be trapped inside the building.

He clambered down quickly from the Tiger's hull. The door of the HQ was closed and there was no sign of anyone in the vicinity; most of the human activity on the airfield seemed to be centred on the shattered barracks, a few hundred yards away.

Douglas went over to the half-track and asked if all was well. Brough told him that it was, and Douglas quietly outlined what was now happening.

'No grenades until we're inside,' he ordered. 'It isn't necessary. I've a feeling that whoever is in there will be just crawling out of their cellars.'

At that moment, Brough nudged him and pointed covertly. Douglas turned

in time to see the door of the HQ swing open. A man emerged and came slowly down the steps, silhouetted against the dim light that filtered from the entrance hall. He carried a slung rifle and was preoccupied in brushing dust from his uniform. He looked up, saw the looming bulk of the Tiger, and stopped in his tracks, hurriedly putting on his steel helmet.

Douglas, still wearing his German tankman's beret, shouldered his own MP-40 and strode towards the soldier, doing his best to adopt an authoritative swagger as would become a German officer or NCO. The soldier snapped to attention and barked out something. Douglas, unable to understand, said nothing and strode on. He was ten paces away from the German.

The soldier shouted something else, his voice high-pitched now, and grabbed for his slung rifle. Douglas killed him with a single thrust of his commando knife and caught the body as it fell, dragging it into the shadow of some bushes. He gave a quick glance around, then waved at the others, who spilled from the half-track and flattened themselves against the HQ wall on either side of the entrance.

Douglas took a deep breath and, MP-40 at the ready, threw himself through the open doorway, closely followed by Brough. They found themselves in a long hall, dimly lit by emergency lighting. There was an unoccupied desk near the main entrance and four doors led to rooms on the right-hand side of the hall; a broad stone staircase at the far end ran to the upper Storey.

Brough signalled that all was clear and the other SAS men slipped into the hall, followed by Suleiman and Major Crawford, the American pilot.

'Stan,' Douglas said in a low voice, 'clear the downstairs rooms. Suleiman, come with me. You too, Major.'

Douglas ran for the stairs, followed by the other two men, and took them two at a time. The steps angled half-way up, and as Douglas turned the corner he was confronted by the biggest man he had ever seen — a massive German

in shirt-sleeves, who must have been six and a half feet tall and almost as broad. The man let out a yell and loosed off a shot from a pistol, but the bullet crackled past Douglas's ear and embedded itself in the wall behind. Douglas fired his MP-40 from the hip and saw bullets punch their way into the German's shirt-front. The man staggered, roared again and came on, reeling down the steps and raising his pistol for a second shot. A burst of fire from Crawford took away most of his head and he fell backwards on the stairs.

The element of surprise had been lost now, but it no longer mattered. From the hall came the crack of a grenade and the chatter of gun-fire as Brough's team dealt with some Germans they had discovered in one of the downstairs rooms. Douglas, Crawford and Suleiman dodged past the quivering body of the big German and continued upstairs, emerging on to a broad landing.

Douglas frowned. This place did not look like a major enemy headquarters. The thought crossed his mind that it might have served as such when the enemy had first arrived in Tunisia a few weeks earlier, but since then the General Staff of 5th Panzer Army must have moved on to another location, possibly in Tunis itself. Unless something dramatic happened to change his opinion, Middle East Command Intelligence had been wrong. And that meant that Douglas and his men were risking their lives for nothing.

From outside came the heavy bark of the Tiger's 88-mm cannon, closely followed by the chatter of Finch's machine-gun. Trouble was brewing.

'Come on,' Douglas said, 'let's get a move on!'

There were three doors on the landing, two of them closed. He told Crawford and Suleiman to take up station beside them, and made for the open one. It gave on to a small orderly room, which was empty, but there was another door beyond. Douglas approached it cautiously, turned the handle slowly and then kicked the door open, crouching to one side with his

machine-pistol levelled.

He took in the scene with one glance. On the other side of a large desk, a German officer knelt in front of a safe. He was busily stowing documents inside, taking them from a briefcase which lay beside him. Douglas fleetingly assumed that he had taken them with him to shelter in case the building was destroyed during the air-raid; if so, they must be important.

The officer looked up, reached for his pistol with one hand and tried to slam shut the safe door with the other. A burst of fire from Douglas's MP-40 blasted chips from the desk top and crept up an inch to take the man high in the chest, just below the throat. The impact hurled him back against the wall and his hand clutched convulsively at the handle of the safe door, dragging it open again.

Douglas crossed the room quickly. The German was not quite dead. He looked directly at Douglas, a look almost of surprise, and choked on blood before his eyes glazed over.

Douglas retrieved the documents from the safe. They were in three folders, each marked *Streng Geheim* — Top Secret; his German was good enough to translate that. He stuffed them into the dead officer's briefcase and went back to the landing; Crawford informed him that the other two rooms were unoccupied.

'Right,' Douglas said, 'let's get out of it.'

Outside, the sound of firing was growing more intense.

They ran downstairs to find the others waiting in the hall. Brough was kneeling beside a figure stretched out by the wall. He rose as Douglas came up, his face grim.

'Weston has had it, sir,' the sergeant-major said. 'We were clearing that room over there when one of the bastards got him with a lucky shot. No other casualties; eight enemy killed.'

Douglas nodded, looking down at the dead SAS man. Weston had been the youngest of the group, a keen, bright lad from Portsmouth. Lots of promise, all thrown away now.

‘What’s happening outside?’

‘We’re under fire, sir. Small-arms stuff for the moment. The boys in the tank are keeping Jerry’s head down, but it won’t be long before they bring up their anti-tank stuff. The sooner we get out of here, the better. We can reach the vehicles all right.’

‘Good. Let’s go. Oh — and if I get hit, look after this. It could be important.’ Douglas indicated the briefcase, then added; ‘We’ll stick to our plan to break out through the northern perimeter. We’ll go in line abreast so that the Tiger shields the half-track. Got it?’

‘Right, sir. I’ll get the half-track into line now. Wait ’til you see me pull up beside the tank and then make a dash for it,’ Brough told the others.

Douglas and Brough ran out into the night, making for their respective vehicles. Faber, Douglas saw, had turned the Tiger stern-on to the building to give Finch’s hull machine-gun a good field of fire across the airfield and also to shield Douglas as he entered the tank through the turret escape hatch. A burst of bullets spanged against the hull as he swung through the circular opening and landed in the sweaty interior.

Douglas saw that Olds had been acting as both gunner and loader, with Conolly in the commander’s cupola directing his fire. The Irishman vacated his seat when Douglas arrived, and the Scot climbed up to take a look through the periscope while Conolly explained what was going on. A good deal of small-arms fire was coming from the direction of the barracks block, which was still burning fiercely, and the heavy machine-guns on the blockhouses beside the main gate were also firing. Their escape route to the north, however, seemed clear, a long tunnel of darkness between the ruined

barracks and the hangars.

‘Half-track’s in position, sir,’ Finch said, peering at an angle through his MG slit. ‘Looks like everyone’s aboard.’

‘Then we’ll be on our way,’ Douglas said calmly. ‘You know where to go, Max — top speed, but for God’s sake don’t leave the half-track behind. We don’t know what sort of shape it’s in.’

The Tiger’s armoured hull clattered as more bullets struck it, but they had no chance of penetrating the tank’s tough hide and whined harmlessly away. Faber engaged gear and pivoted the Tiger on its left-hand track, heading for the gap Douglas had pointed out. He hoped the men in the half-track were keeping their heads down; for a few seconds, as the two vehicles turned on course in parallel, they would be exposed to the MG fire from the gate.

The enemy bullets striking the tank made a noise like handfuls of rocks hurled at an empty metal drum with high velocity. Douglas traversed the turret so that Conolly could bring the co-axial machine-gun to bear, and tracer spat out across the airfield as he opened fire. Hot cartridge cases spattered across the turret floor.

Through the periscope, Douglas caught sight of an armoured car racing across the airfield towards them. It was a light Kfz-222, armed with only a 20-mm cannon and a machine-gun, but he knew it to be a good twenty-five miles an hour faster than the Tiger. Unless he could knock it out quickly, it might manoeuvre itself into a position where it could turn its sights on to the half-track.

‘Gunner, traverse right ten degrees. Armoured car moving from right to left, past those fires … Got it?’

Olds acknowledged, and Douglas said: ‘Right a little more. Steady. On! Four-zero-zero yards. Fire!’

The Tiger’s 88-mm cannon went off with a dull crack and the breech shot

back, ready to receive the next shell that was cradled by Conolly. The round went over the top of the speeding armoured car. Tracer flashed out from the tank's co-axial machine-gun, dropping towards the enemy vehicle.

'Bang on!' Douglas shouted. 'Fire again! Fire until the bastard brews!'

There was no need for a third shell. The second round struck the armoured car squarely; Douglas saw its dark silhouette shudder and then it seemed to leap into the air before crashing over on its side. Dull flames spewed from it.

'Good shot,' Douglas complimented. 'There are some aircraft up ahead on the left, near that hangar. Let 'em have it, both guns, as we go past. What the hell …?'

He was startled by a sudden bright flash just ahead of the tank. It was accompanied by a puff of smoke and a vicious crack. He knew that sound only too well from past experience, and cursed himself for an oversight that might yet prove fatal for all of them.

Striving to remain calm, he peered through the periscope and said: 'The Huns are using their 88-milli flak guns against us. I'm damned if I can see where they are. Step on it, Max. Gunner, forget those aircraft and stand by for my orders.'

He saw it a moment later, a sharp muzzle flash over on the airfield's eastern perimeter. 'Got it! Trav —'

A fearful clang made the tank's occupants clutch at their ears. It was followed by the screech of tortured metal. A moment later, the Tiger slewed violently to the right and stopped. Douglas knew immediately what had happened. An 88-mm shell had exploded on the starboard track.

'It's no use, sir,' Faber yelled. 'She won't move. I think the torsion bar suspension has had it.'

Stan Brough, taken by surprise by the Tiger's unexpected halt, slammed on the half-track's brakes as the vehicle overshot the slewed-round tank by

several yards, exposing its flank. As he strove desperately to reverse back into the shelter of the tank's bulk, the second 88-mm round ripped through the engine compartment. The German gunners had now loaded with solid armour-piercing shot and the round continued its flat trajectory to punch a hole in the side of a hangar. The half-track's engine was wrecked. Shaken, Brough ordered everyone out to take shelter in the lee of the tank.

'Shit,' said Crawford. 'What a way to go!'

'Shut up!' Brough snapped at him savagely. 'We aren't done yet. Sir,' he added as an afterthought.

In the immobilized tank, Douglas suddenly remembered that the Tiger was equipped with smoke grenade dischargers on the port side of the turret and rapped out an order. Conolly passed the grenades to Olds, who loaded and fired in quick succession. A few seconds later, smoke from the first grenades began to drift over the airfield between the tank and the distant 88-mm battery.

The German gunners loosed off a final armour-piercing round. It penetrated the Tiger's front hull at an angle, passed through Finch's upper body, killing him instantly, then bounced off an armoured bulkhead to sever both Faber's hands at the wrists. Faber never knew what had happened to him: he felt only a sharp pain as a splinter penetrated his forehead. An instant later he was dead.

'That's it,' Douglas said quietly. 'They've got us cold, even through the smoke. Bale out.'

Olds and Conolly squirmed out through the escape hatch, dragging their packs and weapons with them. Douglas followed with the precious briefcase. He crouched behind the tank, panting, his brain working overtime. Maybe they could make a run for it, he thought. Maybe the smoke would last just long enough to blind the enemy gunners while they sprinted for the darkened

perimeter.

It wouldn’t work; he knew it wouldn’t. The Germans were spraying machine-gun fire through the smoke. Infantry would be advancing, fanning out across the airfield to cut off every avenue of escape. A wave of hopelessness swept over him.

He started suddenly as Brough grabbed his arm. ‘Look, sir! Over there.’

He followed the line of Brough’s pointing finger. A couple of hundred yards away, four Junkers transport aircraft were parked near some low huts. Douglas saw at once what the sergeant-major meant: one of the Junkers was moving slowly, its three engines revving.

Douglas turned to Crawford. ‘What are they up to?’ he asked. ‘They can’t be planning to take off among all this, can they?’

The American shook his head. ‘It’s my guess they’re taxi-ing them out of the line of fire. Maybe heading for the hangars over there.’

A slender, silver thread of hope rose in Douglas’s breast. He seized Crawford by the shoulder and almost yelled the question at him, hardly daring to think what the answer might be.

‘Can you fly one of those things?’

Crawford looked at him, and a broad grin split his grimy features. ‘Mister,’ he shouted back, ‘I’d fly a goddam broomstick! What the hell are we waiting for?’

‘Come on!’ Douglas cried. ‘Don’t bunch up! Run like hell!’

They broke away from the shelter of the tank and sprinted towards the taxi-ing aircraft. As he ran, clutching the German briefcase in one hand and his MP-40 in the other, Douglas caught a glimpse of shadowy figures emerging from the smoke and yelled a warning to the others. They fired as they ran, pumping bullets at the advancing figures. Olds cried out in pain as a bullet struck him in the upper arm but he kept on running, his pace unchecked.

The Junkers 52 was beginning to move faster now. Whoever was at the controls must have seen the running figures. The aircraft's fuselage door was open; as Douglas raced towards it, the breath tearing at his lungs, someone inside the machine reached out and tried to close the hatch. Crawford, running neck and neck with the SAS officer, loosed off a burst and a man pitched out of the aircraft's interior to lie crumpled on the ground.

Douglas and Crawford leaped over the inert body and the American, now slightly ahead of Douglas, hurled himself head-first through the fuselage door, rolling over as he hit the metal floor to lie flat on his belly, the muzzle of the MP-40 pointing towards the cockpit.

The man in the pilot's seat was an eighteen-year-old mechanic who had no desire to die for his country or anything else. He stood up, forgetting to bring the Junkers to a stop in his panic, and raised his hands. Crawford scrambled to his feet and ran forward up the sloping aisle, shoving the boy aside and hurling himself into the pilot's seat.

Douglas, preoccupied with helping to drag the other members of his team aboard, had no time to worry about what was happening up front. A burst of machine-gun fire punched its way through the Junkers' rear fuselage, narrowly missing his head. As each man scrambled into the vibrating cabin, Douglas ordered him forward to lie down in the aisle.

When the last of the nine survivors was safely inside, Douglas crouched by the open hatch and looked out. Men were running towards the aircraft and he raked them with gun-fire, seeing some of them fall. There was no way of telling whether he had hit them or whether they were simply diving for cover. Brough had joined him on the other side of the hatch and Suleiman crouched between them, seemingly oblivious of the fact that he was fully exposed. His rifle cracked and a German soldier went head over heels like shot rabbit.

In the cockpit, Crawford glanced at the drifting smoke, which told him that

the wind was from the north-east, off the sea. Thank Christ, he thought, that gives me the whole airfield to play with — take off through the smoke and hope to God there isn't anything solid in there.

Experimenting with the unfamiliar throttles, he revved the port engine and pressed his right foot down on the rudder bar. The big transport swung round laboriously until it was pointing in the desired direction. Crawford winced as bullets shattered the perspex on the right-hand side of the cockpit and drilled holes in the roof. Then, swearing fluently — which was his form of prayer in a crisis — he pushed open all three throttles and eased the control column forward to lift the tail.

The three-engine aircraft gathered speed ponderously. Crawford clenched his teeth and worked the rudder to keep her straight — a difficult task, for the engine in front of him obscured his view and he could see no reference point anyway through the smoke that swirled towards him.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the tail lifted and the speed began to climb. Bullets rattled like hail on the Junkers' corrugated metal fuselage. Someone appeared at his elbow and started shooting out of the side window; the noise was deafening. He had no idea of the take-off speed, so he held the transport down firmly to be on the safe side. Everything ahead was obscured by smoke now; he caught a fleeting glimpse of the shadowy figures of two German soldiers, hurling themselves out of the path of the speeding aircraft, and that was all.

The Junkers' fixed undercarriage rattled and jolted across the airfield's uneven surface. The aircraft was travelling so fast now that to hit even the smallest obstacle would mean disaster. The undercarriage was bounced clear of the ground, the rumbling and jolting punctuated by brief periods of calm as the machine tried to get airborne.

It sped out of the smoke, and Crawford saw stunted trees ahead, racing to

meet him. His instinctive reflexes took over and he hauled back the control wheel with one hand, keeping the other on the throttle levers.

The Junkers thundered into the air, vibrating as though it was on the point of shaking itself to bits. Crawford kept the nose down to gain flying speed and swung the control wheel, banking the aircraft sharply. The starboard wingtip clipped the branches of a tree and then the Junkers was clear, heading for the coast.

Crawford was drenched in sweat. He knew that the coastal batteries would be on the alert and deliberately stayed low to make the enemy gunners' task more difficult. Carthage was over on the left, the coast was under the nose, and he braced himself for the storm of fire that, he felt certain, would lance up at the Junkers at any moment.

Incredibly, the expected onslaught never came. The Junkers slipped out over the Gulf of Tunis unscathed, and Crawford started breathing again. But they were not out of the wood yet, and he was going to need some help. He half turned in his seat and looked at the SAS man who stood behind him, the one who had fired out of the window.

'Listen, pal,' he yelled above the roar of the engines, 'go find your boss and ask him to come up here, will you?'

The man nodded and left the cockpit, stepping over the outstretched legs of the young German mechanic, who was crouching beside the fuselage wall, white-faced and terrified.

Douglas was handing the captured German briefcase to Conolly.

'I want you to make a thorough examination of what's in there,' he said. 'If there's anything really important, make sure we all know about it. If we have to go down into the drink, some of us may survive and be picked up by our own people. They can pass on the information.'

Conolly nodded and set to work with the aid of Douglas's pocket torch.

Douglas made his way up the aisle towards the cockpit, pausing to pat the young German on the shoulder.

‘Don’t worry, son,’ he grinned. ‘We aren’t going to throw you back.’

The mechanic flinched away, looking more terrified than ever, and gave no sign that he had understood.

Douglas entered the flight-deck and eased himself into the second pilot’s seat.

‘Well done, Major,’ he shouted. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I’ve been trying to work out how much fuel this crate’s carrying,’ the American answered. ‘As far as I can see, her tanks are just over a quarter full. At a guess I’d say that’s enough for about 250 miles, if we don’t run into any strong headwinds. How far’s Malta?’

Douglas thought for a minute, then said: ‘About 200 miles. Nautical miles, that is. Are you talking about nautical miles too?’

‘Sure I am.’

‘Then we might just make it, if we don’t run into trouble. How long d’you reckon?’

‘Depends on our ground speed. The wind’s from the northeast, but it isn’t strong. There’s not much drift. Say about one and three-quarter hours. I’m steering one-one-zero and hoping for the best. That’s the Cape Bon Peninsula up ahead, on the other side of the gulf. It’s only about twenty miles wide and I’m heading straight across it. Once we’re over the Med, we should be okay. Keep your fingers crossed.’

‘I’ll keep everything crossed,’ Douglas told him. ‘Try not to miss Malta.’ He went back to confer with Conolly, who was still examining the papers he had taken from the briefcase. The Irishman looked up as Douglas squatted down beside him.

‘At first glance I think we have something here, sir. Looks like the

operational orders for a major German offensive. There's a code-name: *Frühlingswind*. That means spring wind. I haven't had time to make a thorough examination, but it seems that the Germans are planning to break through the American sector of the front in Tunis, in the south, with the idea of splitting the Allied armies in two and reaching the sea at Bone, in Algeria. From what I can gather it's a joint operation between 5th Panzer Army and armoured detachments of the Afrika Korps. Rommel's name keeps on cropping up, and I have a feeling the whole thing is his idea.'

'Sounds about right,' Douglas interrupted. 'Is there anything to say where the main weight of the attack will fall?'

Conolly examined the documents again. 'Look, sir, there's a sketch map here. The arrows indicate a pincer movement, and the numbers must indicate the Panzer divisions involved. The arms of the pincer meet just here.'

The spotlight of the torch fell on a place called Kasserine.

'Any date?'

'Nothing specific, sir, but there's a note to the effect that preparations must be complete by mid-February. In less than a fortnight's time, in other words.'

'Right,' Douglas said. 'Pass on that information to the others and make sure they memorize it. I'm going back up front.'

Crawford, despite everything, seemed to be enjoying himself. A range of hills rose darkly off the Ju 52's port wingtip. He reached forward and patted the coaming of the instrument panel.

'I'm getting to like this old bird,' he told Douglas. 'Sounds like forty thousand rivets flying in loose formation, but she'll get us there — if the Krauts don't sent night-fighters after us, that is.'

'Let's hope they haven't got any,' Douglas shouted above the roar of the engines, 'and try not to sound so bloody cheerful!'

'Yeah. Well, listen. In case you hadn't noticed, the old lady's got a twin

machine-gun mounting on the fuselage roof. Might be an idea to have somebody check it out and take up station — just in case.'

Douglas did so, and came back with the glum tidings that although the machine-guns were in position, there was no ammunition on board. If they were attacked, they would be completely defenceless. Nevertheless, he asked Suleiman, who had keener eyesight than any of the others, to climb up into the gunner's seat and keep a lookout to the rear.

The Ju 52 droned steadily on into the darkness. It was miserably cold in the fuselage, and the aircraft lurched as it ran through areas of turbulence. Olds, suffering pain from his injured arm, was violently sick. The others made him as comfortable as they could and settled down to wait as the minutes ticked by, each man lost in his own thoughts.

Douglas tried hard not to think of Faber, Finch and Weston, lying dead back there on the airfield. He consoled himself with the thought that the casualties might have been far worse. To take his mind off things, he went back into the cockpit.

The Junkers was flying just below a ragged cloud base. The Cape Bon Peninsula was far behind now, and the darkened sea stretched away into infinity.

'You okay?' Douglas shouted.

'Sure,' Crawford answered cheerfully. 'All we've gotta do is find a speck of dirt in the middle of nowhere, with no radio aids — none that I can fathom out, anyway — and land on it without getting shot down by a bunch of trigger-happy Limeys. Never felt better.'

The American suddenly leaned forward, looking down and to the right. He pointed. 'There's something over there. Looks like an island, at about two o'clock. You can just make it out. Got it?'

Douglas racked his brain, trying to recall the details of the naval chart he

had studied on the outward run from Malta.

‘Could be Linosa,’ he said doubtfully. ‘If it is, we should be about half way, and on course. If it isn’t …’ He left the rest unsaid.

The minutes crawled by, and Crawford was becoming increasingly uneasy about the fuel state. It would have been better, he told Douglas, to have climbed above the clouds to a height where he could have weakened the fuel mixture to a more economical degree, but if he did that he would lose sight of the sea.

After an hour and a half, Douglas’s eyes were watering from the effort of staring into the darkness, trying hopefully to catch a first glimpse of their destination. Another quarter of an hour went by.

Then Crawford said: ‘I thought I saw a flash of light then, away to the left. Keep looking.’

A few moments later Douglas saw it too, a vague flicker of light on the horizon. There was definitely something out there, something like a flashing beacon. The two men looked at one another.

‘Well,’ Crawford said, ‘my guess is this. If we’re too far north, that’s Sicily. If we’re too far south, it’s Malta. Either way it’s dry land, and we’ve only enough fuel for a few more minutes’ flying. I’m heading towards it.’

He swung the control wheel and the Junkers came round ponderously, settling down on the new heading. They saw the light flash a few more times as they flew on, then it was suddenly extinguished.

‘Damn,’ Douglas said.

‘I got its bearing,’ Crawford reassured him, ‘but what’s bothering me is that we might be the reason the beacon or whatever it is went out — we must have been picked up on radar by now.’

A minute later, the two men in the cockpit were able to discern a dark smudge on the horizon. It grew slowly into the solid outline of land.

‘That’s too small for Sicily,’ Douglas said jubilantly. ‘It’s Malta — you’ve done it, Major!’

He rose to go aft and tell the others the good news, and in doing so collided with Conolly, who burst on to the flight deck. His voice was high-pitched with tension.

‘Sir, Suleiman’s seen something — an aircraft he thinks, slipping in and out of cloud astern.’

‘Christ, I was afraid of that. It’ll be one of the fighters from Malta on our track. And us with bloody great iron crosses on our wings. Step on it, Major!’

Crawford pushed the Junkers’ nose down to gather speed and headed for the sanctuary of Malta with throttles wide open. The aircraft shuddered and rattled alarmingly.

‘Tell everybody to brace themselves,’ the pilot yelled at Conolly. ‘Lieutenant, get the hell back there. This could be rough!’

‘I’m staying,’ Douglas shouted back, hurriedly fastening his seat harness. ‘You might need some help!’

Crawford’s mouth opened to make a reply when a series of lurid flashes lit up the cockpit. A flickering line of tracer sped over the Junkers’ port wing. Crawford pushed the control wheel hard over to the right and applied full rudder; the big aircraft responded with desperate slowness, banking round to the right. A split second later, with a succession of terrific thuds, the fighter’s second burst of cannon fire found its mark in the transport’s wing.

Crawford levelled out and began to turn in the opposite direction, getting lower all the time. The land was very close now. More tracers raked the aircraft, luckily missing the fuselage with its human cargo, but they struck the wing that had already been damaged. The Beaufighter pilot had no intention of letting his quarry escape.

There was a dull thud and a sheet of vivid white flame streamed back from

the port engine. Crawford at once chopped all three throttles and the aircraft went down in a glide. The speed fell away dramatically and Douglas caught a glimpse of a dark fleeting shape overhead as their pursuer overshot, the pilot taken by surprise.

'I'm ditching,' Crawford shouted. 'Hang on to everything!'

Douglas braced himself as the American brought the Junkers curving down towards the sea. He levelled the wings and gradually eased back on the control wheel as the water slid up to meet the powerless aircraft. The nose rose higher and higher. Except for the whisper of the slipstream and the roar of the fire in the port wing, there was no sound in the cockpit.

The tail of the Junkers furrowed its way into the water and then the nose came down with an impact that hurled Douglas and Crawford forward in their straps. Water cascaded over the cockpit roof and everything went dark; Douglas, believing that the aircraft was plunging straight to the bottom, felt a moment or two of blind panic. Then the nose came up again, and the noise died away as the Junkers wallowed to a stop. Water began to pour into the fuselage through a dozen rents.

Crawford tore at his straps. 'Out!' he yelled. 'She won't float for long!'

The two men scrambled back, pushing the German mechanic ahead of them; the boy had cut his head and was dazed. Douglas saw that someone had already jettisoned the fuselage door and that the cabin was filling rapidly with seawater.

The Ju 52, which was normally used as a troop-carrier, was fortunately well equipped with life-rafts, stowed in racks along the fuselage side. The SAS men, waist deep in water now, hurriedly shoved a couple through the hatch and inflated them, then plunged into the sea and scrambled aboard. Douglas and Crawford pushed out a third raft and, between them, managed to get the young German into it. Conolly's voice came through the darkness, telling

Douglas that he had the all-important briefcase.

‘Paddle like hell!’ Crawford yelled. ‘There’ll be some suction when she goes down!’

They got clear just in time. The Junkers gave a great gurgling noise as she began to slide beneath the surface, and clouds of hissing steam rose from the burning wing as the sea closed over it. In a moment she was gone, leaving a swell that tossed the five-man life-rafts wildly in its spinning vortex.

The rocky shoreline was less than a quarter of a mile away, and they began to paddle vigorously towards it. After a few minutes, they heard the hum of high-powered engines as a launch approached. A searchlight flicked on and its beam swept across the water until it came to rest on the liferafts, illuminating their occupants in a pool of vivid light.

The rakish air-sea rescue launch circled the rafts, then came slowly alongside the one occupied by Douglas, Crawford and the young German. A rope snaked out, and Douglas caught hold of it, hauling the raft hand over hand towards the launch’s side. A short ladder hung down from the bulwark and a man in oilskins stood at its head, peering down.

‘All right, up you come,’ he said. ‘And no tricks, you Jerry bastard.’

Douglas placed a hand on the ladder and pulled himself up, grinning broadly.

‘Who’re you calling a Jerry bastard?’ he said.

The crew of the launch were still shaking their heads in disbelief when, with everyone safely on board a few minutes later, the craft nosed into the sheltering bay of Kalafrana.

Chapter Eleven

Douglas walked down the steps of the Middle East Command HQ in Cairo and returned the armed sentry's snappy salute. The day was warm and sunny and he decided to walk a little before taking a cab to Allene's flat.

It was three weeks since the air-sea rescue launch had plucked him and the others out of the sea off Malta. Half that time had been spent on the island while they waited for a vessel that had eventually brought them to Alexandria. The German briefcase and its documents had gone on ahead with top priority in a submarine, manacled to an Intelligence officer.

Douglas himself had undergone several days of debriefings in Alexandria, and it had come as something of a relief when he had finally been released and ordered to report to Middle East HQ prior to rejoining his unit. A telephone call to Major Marrick, the SAS adjutant, had resulted in the immediate award of seventy-two hours' leave.

'No need to rush back just yet, old boy,' Marrick had told him. 'Can't find anything for you to do just now, anyway. Everyone's swanning around all over the place, what with the Huns on the rampage in Tunisia and all.'

So Douglas had immediately telephoned Allene with the news that he was back, and that he had nothing to do except enjoy himself for the next three days.

'I've been expecting you,' she had said over the 'phone. 'Come round this evening — no, on second thoughts make it this afternoon, about four o'clock.'

She had hung up abruptly, and Douglas thought that she had sounded a little cool — almost mysterious. He hoped that there was nothing wrong.

His thoughts turned to Tunisia as he walked briskly along. Events there had unfolded exactly as the captured documents had foretold. At dawn on 14 February 1943, under cover of a sandstorm stirred up by a savage wind, German tanks and infantry had executed a beautifully planned attack on the American 2nd Corps, cutting off 2,000 men on two hills and annihilating an entire tank battalion in the first onslaught.

The Americans counter-attacked the next day, but failed to regain any ground. Instead they lost another complete tank battalion, bringing the total number of their tanks destroyed in two days of fighting to 98, along with 57 half-tracks and 29 artillery pieces. And that was only on the northern axis of the German pincer movement.

Farther south, Rommel's Afrika Korps detachment plunged on through Gafsa on 15 February. The German troops found the town deserted; it had been abandoned in conditions of near panic the night before, with French and American troops — together with Arab and French families and their animals — streaming back in pouring rain towards Feriana, forty miles to the rear. The Panzers reached Feriana on the morning of the seventeenth and found a wholesale withdrawal in progress; two forward airfields were littered with the wrecks of aircraft, destroyed by the retreating forces, and huge columns of smoke rose skywards from 60,000 gallons of burning aviation fuel. In both north and south, the outfought and outmanoeuvred American and French columns were falling back to establish a hasty defensive line at Kasserine.

From the northern sector of the front, the British 6th Armoured Division rushed south to check the Panzers' dash. Douglas could not understand why the move had not been made sooner; the intelligence he and his men had brought back had pointed clearly to where the German blow would fall. He had a private suspicion that the American commanders responsible, for the conduct of the Tunisian campaign, at loggerheads with the British for much

of the time, had simply dismissed the German battle plan as a fabrication. If that was so, they were now paying the price.

Nevertheless, the British move had frustrated Rommel's scheme for a rapid thrust designed to gain control of the key town of Tebessa and open the road into Algeria, for one of his two armoured divisions was suddenly moved north on the orders of von Arnim to contain it. As a consequence, 18 February was a day of inactivity — and it gave the battered Allies a breathing space in which to strengthen their defences.

There was another point in the Allies' favour. On 19 February, the British C-in-C, General Alexander, arrived to take command of all Allied ground forces. The orders he issued were simple and direct. Kasserine would be held, and there would be no withdrawal beyond the western Dorsale.

But the Panzers seemed invincible, and after two days of bitter fighting the pass at Kasserine was in Rommel's hands. He now had a choice: either he could advance through the pass on Tebessa, or he could strike northwards towards Thala. He chose the latter course. His Panzers broke through a desperate American defence, but then they were met and held by the British 1st Guards Brigade.

Allied reinforcements were now pouring in, and their arrival convinced Rommel that all hope of breaking through to the Algerian coast was lost. Operation Frühlingswind had ended in failure, although it had inflicted fearsome losses on the Allies. In the afternoon of 22 February, Rommel finally called off his assault and began his withdrawal from Kasserine. But so well did the Germans disguise their movements that the Allies were unaware of the fact that the battle had ended.

The Germans had lost a crucial battle, and Douglas knew that there was little likelihood that they would be in a position to launch another major offensive. Their forces were already in full retreat to their original positions

along the eastern Dorsale. But he also knew that many weeks, perhaps months, of fighting lay ahead before the Allies finally hurled the last enemy troops from the soil of North Africa. There would still be plenty of work for the Special Air Service before that day came.

In the meantime, he had three days' leave, and Allene. He fully intended to make the most of both.

He walked on briskly, timing himself. Four o'clock, she had said. It was almost that now, but he only had another block to go. He prided himself on being on time; it was almost an obsession with him.

He turned aside from the street and entered a courtyard, cool and decked with plants. His desert boots made a padding noise on the flags as he crossed the yard and passed through an open door on the far side. Allene's apartment was two floors up, at the end of a corridor that curved back on itself so that the apartment overlooked the street — the road where he had seen those disciplined, swinging troops of the 90th Light Division only a few short weeks ago. It seemed like an age.

He resisted the temptation to go up the stairs two at a time and glanced at his watch as he walked slowly up, smiling in satisfaction; it was one minute to four.

He knocked on Allene's door, then waited. There was no sound from inside the apartment. He knocked again, then tried the handle. The door swung open soundlessly.

Douglas entered the room and closed the door behind him, looking round. There was no sign of Allene, but he could smell fresh perfume. She must be around somewhere — perhaps in the bedroom, waiting for him. He grinned. If she wanted to play games, that was all right by him.

He had been right. The bead curtain that concealed her bedroom parted noisily and she stood there, looking at him. He noticed that she wore a dark

blue skirt and a white blouse, and that her hair was tied back.

He also noticed that she held a Luger in her right hand, and that its unwavering muzzle was pointing at his stomach.

‘I can’t tell you how much I regret this, Cal,’ she said quietly. ‘I really came to like you. But it has to be done.’

Before Douglas could speak, the bead curtain rustled again and a man stepped out of the bedroom to stand beside Douglas. He, too, carried a pistol.

Helmut Winter looked at his adversary without any particular emotion, as one soldier gazing upon another. His left hand came up and unintentionally stroked the livid burn mark on his face, a legacy left by blazing petrol spewing from a booby-trapped half-track in a Tunisian olive grove. Others among his men had not been so lucky. Winter felt utterly weary; his body felt as though it had been pounded by several large hammers. The PAG canister in which he had been dropped near the outskirts of Cairo three days earlier had landed heavily.

So this, he told himself, was the man who had caused so much trouble, the man whose identity had been revealed after much careful detective work by the Abwehr over the past couple of weeks with the help of their contacts in Cairo. A dangerous man, one who was better removed from the scene.

‘It would have saved a lot of trouble,’ he said in German to Allene, ‘if you had killed him at the outset.’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ she snapped at him in the same language. ‘I didn’t know then what his mission was. My brief was to watch him and win his confidence, to note everything he said and learn as much as possible about his organization.’ Her mouth twisted wryly. ‘I have to admit that he didn’t give anything away.’

Douglas found his voice at last. He knew that he was going to die, here in this room, but there was one thing he wanted to know above all else.

‘Why?’ he asked, looking directly at Allene.

He detected a faint sigh behind her reply. ‘Why? Oh, Cal, there are so many reasons. I’ll give you the obvious one. I believe in Fascism, as my husband did. I believe that Britain and Germany, together, could dominate the world. There would be an end to wars — senseless wars, such as that in which my husband died.’

Perhaps I can grab the gun, Douglas thought. Perhaps there’s just a chance. He steeled himself, feeling deathly calm.

‘Enough,’ Winter said brusquely. ‘Kill him.’

The muzzle of the Luger came up slowly until it was pointing at Douglas’s chest. Desperately, he hurled himself to one side, sensing rather than hearing the crash of a shot. His head struck something hard, stunning him. His senses reeling, he dimly heard a crash of glass.

‘It’s all right,’ a voice said. ‘It’s over.’

Douglas struggled to his knees and stood up groggily, clutching at a table for support. Allene lay on her back, arms outflung. A tiny splash of blood, no bigger than a penny, stained the front of her white blouse.

Douglas’s eyes focused on the doorway. A man in civilian clothes stood there, a smoking Smith and Wesson .38 revolver in his hand. His face struck a vague chord in Douglas’s memory; then, as his vision cleared, he saw that it was the RAF Intelligence wing commander.

A military policeman emerged from the bedroom. ‘I’m afraid the other has got away, sir,’ he said apologetically. ‘Took a dive through the bedroom window out on to the fire escape. Went down it like a monkey and vanished up an alley.’

‘Put out a general alert for him,’ the wing commander ordered. ‘We’ll pick him up, with any luck.’

He looked at Douglas. ‘You’ve got a nasty cut on your head,’ he said.

‘Better get it seen to.’

Douglas stared at him. ‘You knew,’ he said dully. ‘You knew about her.’

The wing commander shook his head. ‘We suspected,’ he said, ‘but we had no real evidence until now. I won’t bother with details, but we had reports that your lady friend had been seen with one or two people we’re rather keen to interview. When we round them up, we’ll doubtless learn how long she’s been an enemy agent.’

He smiled thinly. ‘Lucky for you my German’s good; I was listening at the door long enough to hear her say that you hadn’t given anything away. There’ll be no blame attached to you. Come on, now; I want you to come back to HQ and make a statement. These chaps will clear up the mess here.’

Douglas followed him from the room, pushing past two MPs who came in to take away Allene’s body. In the courtyard, he breathed deeply to ward off a sudden feeling of sickness.

‘You look terrible,’ the wing commander said. ‘I won’t detain you for more than a couple of hours. Got any plans for this evening?’

What a question, Douglas thought. What a senseless, bloody question!

He looked up at the sky. In a couple of hours it would be dark. Yes, he had a plan, one he’d just thought of. He would find himself a bar somewhere and drink himself into oblivion. A bar full of light and noise and people.

He did not want to be alone in the dark.

PARTISAN!

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Chapter One

It was at precisely eleven o'clock in the morning of 11 June 1943 that Admiral Gino Pavesi, commander of the island fortress of Pantelleria, emerged from his underground bunker and peered through the drifting haze of dust and smoke to see Nemesis bearing down upon him.

The dust drifted down in heavy particles to settle on Pavesi's white summer uniform; it lay in dark smudges on the thin sheen of perspiration that covered his face. The face was that of a man who bore the heavy burden of failure.

It was useless to try and convince himself that the failure had not been his alone, that the High Command had underestimated the weight of high explosive the Allies had been able to hurl at the island. The Duce himself had boasted that Pantelleria was impregnable, and Pavesi had shared that view. Who, after all, would have believed otherwise?

Pantelleria lay seventy miles south-west of Sicily and fifty miles east of Cape Bon, Tunisia. Despite its small size — a mere eight miles long by five wide — it was an uncluttered island. Its few thousand native inhabitants eked their living almost entirely from the land, which was famous for its zibibbo grapes, the sides of the vineyards dotted with their curious *dammuso* domed houses, surrounded by drystone walls and the landscape intricately patterned by the vineyards. They were an elusive people, and had seemed not to resent the massive influx of military personnel that had taken place in the spring of 1943, when the Axis forces in Tunisia were being pushed inexorably towards defeat.

By the beginning of May, the strength of the Pantelleria garrison had reached twelve thousand men, outnumbering the civilian population. Heavy

gun emplacements had been set up around the port area on the north-west tip of the island, and above the sheer cliffs that made Pantelleria so readily defensible against an assault from the sea. An observation post, from which the island's artillery could be directed, had been set up on the peak of the Monte Grande, the extinct volcano that was the principal landmark in this part of the Mediterranean and whose summit commanded excellent views of the seaward approaches for many miles around.

Within easy reach of the port and town of Pantelleria lay the airfield, big enough to handle eighty fighters and bombers and shelter many of them in huge underground hangars hewn from solid rock. The field itself was protected by a ring of anti-aircraft guns. No one had doubted the ability of Pantelleria's air strike squadrons to play havoc with the Allies' convoys if the latter made a hostile move in the direction of Sicily.

Admiral Pavesi was a shrewd and competent commander, and in the beginning he had been confident that he could hold the island with the forces at his disposal. The core of his defence was a force of five infantry battalions, troops as yet untested in battle, but good men who would he knew fight hard, as would the reservists that manned the artillery batteries. After all, Pavesi had reasoned, if the Allies wished to overrun Pantelleria they had first of all to get ashore, a task rendered almost impossible by the island's rugged geography except in the stoutly defended port area.

Those had still been Pavesi's thoughts when, on the morning of 8 May, the first formation of American Liberator bombers had appeared over Pantelleria and unloaded their bombs with devastating precision into the harbour area. None of the defenders had ever seen so many bombers at one time, and although the attack caused few casualties — thanks to deep air-raid shelters — the sight of phalanx after phalanx of four-engined giants, flying overhead and apparently untouched by the anti-aircraft fire, had stabbed the first needle

into the bubble of morale.

It was only the start. Day after day, night after night, the heavy bombers of the USAAF and RAF had systematically pounded Pantelleria's much-vaunted defences into rubble. By the first day of June the port was in ruins, the town destroyed and its vital electric plant wrecked, roads and communications disrupted. Water supplies had become virtually non-existent over increasingly longer periods; food and ammunition had started to run out.

Worst of all was the incessant thunder of explosions. There had been no respite. In the brief lulls between the air attacks, mighty warships had appeared on the horizon to cruise contemptuously back and forth and fling their salvoes of shells into the pock-marked ruins. During the first few days of June the bombers and the warships between them blasted Pantelleria with six thousand tons of high explosive that left the island reeling under a dark pall.

With the bombs came leaflets, thousand upon thousand of them, urging the garrison to surrender, and finally a surrender ultimatum itself. Defiantly, Gino Pavesi, through his last surviving radio station, had informed Rome that he was not even going to reply to it or acknowledge it in any way.

'Despite everything,' he said, 'Pantelleria will continue to resist.'

After three more days of continual bombardment, Pavesi's iron resolve at last began to crack. Shortly after dawn on 11 June, following a particularly fierce air attack, he reported to Rome that the Allied bombers had plunged Pantelleria into a hurricane of fire and smoke, adding that the situation was desperate, that all possibilities of effective resistance had been exhausted.

A brief look round outside confirmed his words. All was an expanse of rubble. Seawards nothing was visible at all, for although the weather was good, with a calm sea under a clear sky, the drifting dust obscured the western horizon.

Pavesi, a man of habit, saw no reason why his morning staff conference should not be held as usual. His subordinates, all showing signs of severe strain, were in full agreement that the island could no longer be held. Apart from the lack of water and a shortage of ammunition that had now become critical, the disruption of sanitation facilities had also brought a strong risk of disease. Most of the artillery batteries had been destroyed, the ammunition dumps blown up — some in explosions that had occurred for no apparent reason between the bombardments — and there were no aircraft left. Those that had survived the bombing, and they were few, had been flown out to the comparative safety of Sicily. It was all too clear that Pantelleria's garrison could expect no help of any kind from the outside, and even more apparent that everyone, civilian and soldier alike, had reached the limit of endurance.

At 09.00, Admiral Gino Pavesi issued his final orders to the Pantelleria garrison. Since all other means of communication were in a state of utter chaos, he instructed despatch riders to tour all military installations on the island and inform their commanders of his decision to surrender. They were to display large white flags, and the air commander was to place a white cross in the centre of the airfield to signify capitulation. Because it would take about two hours for his orders to reach all posts, Pavesi set the time for the cessation of hostilities at 11.00 hours.

In the underground conference room, the minutes ticked away slowly. A heavy, dejected silence hung like a blanket over the small gathering of staff officers. At last, just before eleven o'clock, the admiral rose to his feet. The other officers followed suit, standing stiffly to attention like mourners at a military funeral.

'Gentlemen,' Pavesi said quietly, 'it is time.'

He went up the steps into the daylight, followed by his entourage. Outside, after the mind-numbing concussions of the last few days, the silence was

oppressive and uncanny.

Pavesi clambered stiffly up to stand astride a pinnacle of fallen masonry, sneezing as his nostrils sucked in powdered stone. Squinting, he peered into the veil of smoke and dust that still rolled seawards from the ruined harbour. He fancied that he could detect a dull and distant throbbing, but perhaps he was imagining things, his hearing impaired by the incessant blasts of high explosives.

Then, as though on cue, the curtain of yellow haze shivered and drifted apart, and for the first time in days Pavesi caught a glimpse of the far horizon. Before, he had known failure; now he knew the utter misery of despair.

The horizon was black with ships: cruisers, destroyers, warships of all kinds, their blue-grey camouflaged hulls furrowing the sea as they cruised watchfully around clusters of bulkier vessels that could only be tank and infantry landing ships. Between the latter and the island, still a long way offshore, dozens of squat assault craft churned their way towards the harbour mouth; it was the noise of their engines Pavesi had heard through the murk.

There was another engine sound too, a deeper, heavier drone that had become all too familiar over the past weeks. Pavesi and his officers apprehensively looked skyward for the source of the noise, and found it immediately. High in the southern sky, silvery against the blue, fifty bombers cruised serenely towards the island.

Pavesi switched his gaze back towards the warships, just in time to see a series of dull orange flashes ripple from the rakish superstructure of a distant cruiser. They were followed by billowing clouds of ochre-coloured smoke that momentarily hid the warship from sight. The Italian officers needed no urging to take cover.

The cruiser’s salvo of 6-inch shells exploded on a shore battery. More shells howled down, until Pantelleria’s north-western shoreline was

smothered in smoke and dust. Meanwhile, the bombers, still in impeccable formation, droned over the island and plastered the airfield from end to end with their sticks of bombs.

On the upper slopes of the Monte Grande, a man lay among a tumble of volcanic rock and surveyed the scene through a pair of binoculars which he had recently appropriated from one of the Italians who had manned the observation post on the mountain's summit. The ground heaved beneath him and his teeth rattled with the fury of the bombing that struck the airfield four miles away with unimaginable intensity. High overhead, the Flying Fortresses wheeled as though tied together with strings and swung away towards the south-west.

'Nice bit of work, that,' the man said to himself. 'For Americans, anyway.'

Not a gun had opened up on the bombers, which had now steadied on their new course and were descending towards the North African coast. The watcher, steadying his binoculars on the activity out to sea, thought suddenly that he had perhaps been a little unkind on Britain's allies; they might have been raw a few months ago — as they had learned to their cost during the Tunisian Campaign — but they had learned fast. Having witnessed the latest attack on the airfield, he could almost believe the USAAF'S boast that its pilots could drop a bomb into a pickle barrel from thirty thousand feet.

The billowing smoke from the airfield effectively hid from view the lines of assault craft that were heading towards Pantelleria harbour. No enemy gunfire was directed against them, and the reason was not hard to find; sweeping his binoculars along the line of the coast, clear of the smoke cloud, the man saw white flags fluttering here and there above the Italian gun emplacements.

There was no longer any point in concealment. The man rose to his feet, stretching, and slung the binoculars round his neck, leaving one hand free to

heft a German MP-40 machine-pistol and the other to carry a small pack containing a few grenades. Half turning, he called out up the slope.

‘All right, it seems to be all over. Let’s go on down.’

Half a dozen more men rose from amid the rocks and came towards him, shepherding four dejected-looking Italian prisoners. The latter had surrendered the observation post without a struggle and no one could really have blamed them, considering the appearance of the tough and wild-looking soldiers who had suddenly descended on their secure nest out of the dawn. Their wildness had been something of an illusion, created by several days’ growth of beard and the weaponry festooned around them, and once the Italians had prudently decided to offer no resistance their captors had turned out to be quite friendly. Yet there was no doubting their toughness and professionalism; as the small party began its descent of the Monte Grande, the Italians were careful to do exactly as they were told.

Meanwhile, at their headquarters, Admiral Gino Pavesi and his staff awaited the inevitable. More aircraft flew overhead, but they were fighters, circling watchfully above the invasion fleet. Within a few minutes of noon the first assault craft churned through the entrance to the ruined harbour and troops of the 1st British Division poured from them, spreading out through the rubble with their weapons ready for instant action. But they were not opposed, and the only obstacle to their progress was the shattered masonry that filled the streets. Behind them came the Sherman tanks, their tracks grinding powdery paths through the littered docks area.

Later, with the surrender formalities completed and some semblance of order and organization already being restored to the docks area, a force of tanks and infantry set out to secure the all-important airfield, taking along a group of British and American engineers whose task it was to assess the damage and report on how long it would take before the field could be made

fit for use by Allied fighter-bombers.

Just short of the airfield, three vehicles detached themselves from the rest of the convoy, by-passed the turning that led to the ancient town of Siba and headed along an increasingly rough track towards the lower slopes of the Monte Grande. Two of the vehicles were jeeps, each armed with a mounted Bren light machine-gun and carrying two occupants; the third, making more stately progress, was a fifteen-hundredweight Bedford truck.

The man who sat in the passenger seat of the leading jeep, a major, suddenly clutched the top frame of the windscreen and half rose, peering ahead. An instant later he slapped the driver on the shoulder, signalling him to stop. The major looked round, seeing that the second jeep had caught up but that the truck was still some distance behind. He raised an eyebrow, gave a thoughtful tug at his wispy moustache and grinned as he swung himself out of the jeep.

‘I don’t think there’s any trouble, driver,’ he said, ‘but wait here for the time being, will you? And keep me covered with the Bren, just in case.’

A hundred yards in front of the jeep, a huddle of men sat by the roadside. A handful of others, carrying weapons, stood close by. The major walked briskly towards them, his nostrils tingling in the sweet, dusty island air. His grin broadened as one of the armed men detached himself from the group and came up to meet him. The man halted, brought his heels together and flicked his right hand up in a crisp salute, his fingertips brushing the sand-coloured beret he wore. The major wore identical headgear, including the badge — which looked like a winged dagger but which in reality was a representation of Excalibur, sword of the legendary King Arthur.

‘Well, young Douglas,’ said the major, who in fact was only a few years older than the other man, ‘I have to say it: you look dreadfully scruffy.’

Lieutenant Callum Douglas smiled wearily through his growth of beard. ‘I

feel dreadfully scruffy, sir,' he admitted. 'Tired, too. Don't know what we'd have done with this lot if you hadn't turned up.'

He gestured towards the group of seated Italians. The original four captives from the mountain-top observation post had swelled in number to about twenty. Some of them were sprawled in attitudes that suggested they were deeply asleep.

'Sorry-looking lot, aren't they?' the major commented. Douglas scratched the back of his head and chuckled.

'They've every reason to be. Most of 'em are dead drunk on raisin wine. It's the local produce, apparently, and they took to drinking it when they ran out of water. We met them shambling up the road a while ago and they surrendered to us, if that's the right word. It would be more accurate to say that they fell at our feet. I think they must be reservists, judging by their age and appearance. Anyway, they had obviously had enough and were heading for a safer 'ole, as the old saying goes.' Douglas fingered his beard and grimaced as the bristles made a rasping sound. 'Come to think of it, we've been existing on wine ourselves for the last couple of days,' he said. 'Our four-day recce of the island has turned into the best part of a fortnight. Let's see — it was May the twenty-eighth when we landed, and it's now what, June the eleventh or twelfth? I've lost track of time.'

The major, whose name was Marrick, coughed apologetically, as though the lengthened sojourn of Douglas and his small group of men on Pantelleria was his personal fault.

'Yes, I'm sorry about that. The submarine that was to have picked you up hit a mine and sank. There wasn't another one to spare.'

Douglas looked at him and then at the other members of his group, who had left the Italians to their devices and had come up to stand in a semi-circle around the two officers.

Quietly, he said: ‘You mean sixty-odd chaps came to grief trying to pick us up. And there we were, calling the navy all sorts of names for not turning up at the rendezvous.’

‘Oh, no, you mustn’t think that,’ Marrick reassured him. ‘The sub was on a normal patrol, don’t forget, and as a matter of fact it wasn’t anywhere near here when it went down. Actually, the navy think it hit one of their own mines. We tried to raise you by radio to tell you what had happened, but couldn’t make contact. However, we did get your recce report all right. Well done.’

‘The radio got a bullet through it later,’ Douglas told him. ‘When the sub didn’t turn up we thought we’d better make ourselves useful, and things got a bit hectic. We were lucky not to have any casualties. Right, Sar’ Major?’

Sergeant-Major Stan Brough, who had been keeping a weather eye on the Italians, nodded. ‘Right, sir.’

Privately, he thought that the word ‘hectic’ in no sense summed up their operations of the past few days. Since they found themselves effectively marooned they had blown up an ammunition dump and two fuel dumps, and tampered with several artillery emplacements so that their crews had doubtless received a nasty shock when next they had tried to fire their guns. Moreover, to divert attention from themselves, they had carried out these activities at night while the island was under heavy air attack. What his officer had omitted to mention, Brough thought wryly, was that the greatest danger to their persons had come from the Allied air forces; it had been a stray bullet from a low-flying aircraft that had smashed their radio.

Brough, a friendly man in his mid-thirties from the West Riding of Yorkshire — a man who would listen to anyone’s troubles, if they were genuine, but who was as ruthless with malingerers and barrack-room lawyers as he was in battle — had long since ceased to regard young Callum Douglas

in a fatherly light. He had felt that way initially when the two had first gone into action together a few months earlier, in a covert operation to round up German saboteurs who had infiltrated into Palestine; then the lad had seemed a bit unsure of himself.

Admittedly, the young Scots lieutenant had already seen plenty of action, first with the 20th Hussars during the murderous Western Desert tank battles of 1941-42, and he had also taken part in a very dangerous operation behind enemy lines with the Long Range Desert Group. But fighting of that kind, hazardous though it undoubtedly was, could have far less damaging an effect on the nerves than the deep-penetration, clandestine operations that were the speciality of the brigade to which both Douglas and Brough now belonged — the Special Air Service.

However, Douglas had acquitted himself admirably in Palestine, and later, during the bitter campaign in Tunisia, he had succeeded in extricating most of his patrol from what had seemed a hopeless situation in the heart of enemy-occupied territory. It had been touch and go, but they had made it. And Stan Brough, with the satisfaction of a man who has watched a favourite son reach respected maturity, had realized then that Callum Douglas needed nobody to look after him.

Two other men, standing not far from Brough, had shared the Tunisian adventure with himself and Douglas, and both had been indispensable. Corporal Liam Conolly, a graduate of Dublin University who had been on vacation in Germany and who had escaped by the skin of his teeth when Hitler invaded Poland, spoke fluent German and his talent had enabled the patrol to bluff its way through the enemy’s defences. Conolly, who had that odd Gaelic combination of jet black hair and pale blue eyes, looked habitually untidy even when wearing his best uniform. His slight stoop and faraway, dreamy expression gave no inkling that he was capable of killing

swiftly and noiselessly with a variety of weapons ranging from commando knives to crossbows.

The other man, Trooper Brian Olds, was different entirely. Burly and cheerful, Olds had been a farm labourer in Norfolk before the war. The army was his life now, but his country upbringing had left him with a subtle sixth sense, an uncanny flair for understanding the changing ways of whatever landscape he happened to be in, whether it was the Norfolk fenlands or the Libyan Desert. Olds could sniff the air like a hound and tell with unfailing accuracy what the weather was going to be like the next day. What was infinitely more important, he could pick out the location of an ambush, a sniper or an enemy patrol simply by observing the movements of birds and listening to their warning calls. Olds had had a close shave in Tunisia, when an enemy bullet had snicked through the flesh of his upper arm; fortunately the wound had only been superficial and had healed in a few days.

‘How did you know where to look for us?’ Douglas asked later, as they headed back towards the harbour in Marrick’s jeep. The other SAS men were divided between the other two jeeps and the Italians were packed into the truck, their destination a makeshift prisoner-of-war compound that had been hastily set up. Their senior man, an elderly sergeant, sat beside the driver and puffed contentedly on a cigarette the British soldier had given him. There would be no trouble from the Italians, who were either dozing or nursing thick heads.

‘We didn’t,’ Marrick admitted. ‘Fact is, we didn’t know whether you were still in one piece or not. So after we landed we made a few discreet enquiries as to your whereabouts, but the Eyeties hadn’t a clue what we were talking about. They had no idea you’d been operating on the island. The inference was that you were still on the loose somewhere. I wondered what I’d have done in your shoes, and I thought, well, I’d have made for the high ground.

So that's where I decided to look. Simple as that.'

Douglas gave the major a sideways look. 'Hadn't realized I was so predictable,' he grinned. 'Anyway, what's been happening in the rest of the world during our little holiday here?'

Marrick thought for a moment, then said: 'Lampedusa's next on the list. We've a raiding and recce party ashore there under Cowie' — he named a fellow SAS officer whom Douglas knew to be a demolition expert — 'and there's a bombardment scheduled for tonight. First Div's due to go ashore the day after tomorrow. Let's hope they don't have any problems there, either. We've got fighting patrols out in a few other places, too, but I can't tell you anything about that just yet. All in good time.'

The vehicles approached the smouldering town of Pantelleria. The place swarmed with every kind of activity. Italian prisoners, having been fed and watered, had been set to work to clear the streets of rubble and military transport was now flowing more readily through the less congested areas, directed by sweating MPs.

Douglas, feeling abominably hungry and thirsty, threw a few questions at Marrick as the jeep crunched its way towards the harbour. The major shook his head.

'Your next job? Can't say as yet, old man. All I know is that there's a motor launch in the harbour waiting to take you off. You and your chaps, of course. You're going to Malta, by the way. I'll see you there in due course — I've a few things to do on Lampedusa first. Feel a bit like a shepherd rounding up the strays, just at the moment.' Marrick looked seriously at Douglas for a moment, just as the jeep was arriving at its destination. 'I'd make the most of Malta, if I were you. It's changed, you know. The only planes you see there nowadays are ours, so there's not much danger of getting blown up. Relax for a while: I've arranged for the navy to look after you. I've a feeling you'll be

busy enough again before too long.’

Douglas shook Marrick’s hand amid the rubble of the harbour, only half listening to the major’s words. All he wanted at that moment was to sleep. If he had known what was in store for him, even that luxury might have been denied.

Chapter Two

Marrick had been right about Malta; the battered island had undergone profound changes during the past few months. When Douglas had paid a fleeting visit for the first and only time early in 1943, Malta had still borne the brutal scars, visible at every turn, of the great enemy air onslaught of the previous year. The scars were still there, to be sure, but Malta was absorbing them, as new skin grows over a wound, and they were no longer so obvious.

What was obvious was that Malta was no longer just a Mediterranean island, albeit a very gallant one. It had been turned into a huge aircraft-carrier measuring seventeen miles by nine; an additional airstrip had even been bulldozed from the more fertile earth of Malta's smaller neighbouring island, Gozo. On Malta itself there were four airfields — Takali, Luqa, Safi and Hal Far — which, together with the new strip on Gozo, accommodated the whole of the Desert Air Force and a large proportion of the 1st Tactical Air Force, which had come over from Tunisia. Day and night, the skies over the twin islands drummed with the roar of aero-engines.

The fact that he and his small team had been sent to Malta puzzled Douglas a great deal. He had expected, after the Pantelleria operation, to be returned to the SAS headquarters at Azzib, north of Haifa, where the 1st SAS Regiment was being reorganized for greater tasks to come.

Already, the Special Air Service was a far different organization from the one Douglas had joined the previous autumn. From relatively small beginnings in the Western Desert, the SAS had grown under the relentless drive and determination of its founder and commanding officer, Colonel David Stirling — now, alas, a prisoner of war somewhere in Italy — from a

sort of poor relation of the Long Range Desert Group into an elite fighting force in its own right, specializing in striking hard and fast at enemy targets deep inside hostile territory.

David Stirling's capture on a raid in Tunisia in February 1943, and the resulting loss of his leadership, was a blow that had been keenly felt by the men who had fought under his direction in North Africa. At that time the various SAS detachments had been scattered all over Tunisia, and with Stirling gone no one — not even men like Major Marrick, who was on the operational planning staff — knew what the captured CO's future plans might have entailed.

With the Tunisian Campaign over, and Stirling's scattered SAS units literally emerging from the undergrowth to join up with the regular Allied armies, it had seemed that the sensible thing to do was to pull most of them back to Palestine and virtually start afresh in terms of organization and planning. So Stirling's original Special Air Service, minus a few raiding and reconnaissance parties such as that led by Douglas, which were held back for operations on the Mediterranean islands, had been reconstituted at Azzib under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Cator, a highly experienced commando officer, and restyled the 1st SAS Regiment.

Most of Stirling's men had been drafted into what was now known as the Special Raiding Squadron, while the former 'D' Squadron SAS had now become the Special Boat Squadron. The latter unit was based at Athlit, on the coast to the south of Haifa, and specialized in seaborne raiding.

Meanwhile, the 2nd SAS Regiment had formed at Philippeville, in Algeria, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Stirling, David's brother, and had embarked on a period of intensive training with the First Army. The 2nd SAS had a hard nucleus of experienced men, veterans of the Tunisian operations. Once their training was completed, the plan was for the 1st and

2nd SAS to join forces for the ‘big show’ that everyone knew was in the offing — the invasion of southern Europe.

On their arrival on Malta, Douglas and his party had been taken to the naval headquarters at Fort St Angelo, which stood high on its pinnacle at Birgu, overlooking the entrance to bomb-battered Grand Harbour. There, to his astonishment, the SAS officer had been instructed to report to HMS *Talbot*. His astonishment dissipated a little — but only a little — when he discovered that HMS *Talbot* was in fact the base of No. 10 Submarine Flotilla, Royal Navy, whose boats had wrought such havoc among Rommel’s supply convoys all through Malta’s long blitz.

‘Any idea what this is all about?’ he enquired of the naval officer who gave him his orders, a portly lieutenant-commander who seemed to have something to do with Intelligence.

‘Haven’t the faintest notion,’ the naval officer told him. He waved a hand in the direction of a mound of paperwork that lay on his desk. ‘You’re just a statistic among that lot, and if you don’t mind my saying so, one less to deal with now. The *Talbot* people will look after you and your chaps. You’re to report to a Lieutenant Mason, who’ll show you the ropes. You don’t mind walking, do you? It’s not far, and I expect you’re used to hoofing it.’ He grinned and got an orderly to show Douglas out.

The SAS men, following the orderly’s directions, made their way to the submarine base, which was the Lazaretto on Manoel Island. The armed sentry on the gate, a Royal Marine, looked somewhat mistrustfully at the newcomers, but after inspecting the signed pass issued to Douglas by the officer at St Angelo wound up a field telephone and spoke a few words into it. After a wait of several minutes, another Royal Marine appeared, saluted crisply and announced that he would take Douglas and his men to Lieutenant Mason.

Mason turned out to be a short, round-faced young man with a surprisingly light complexion; either Malta's sun had not yet got to him or he was one of those unfortunates who shed skin in handfuls at the touch of high-intensity sunlight. His manner was brisk, though entirely affable, and his handshake was firm. His accent, Douglas thought, had a touch of Northern Ireland in it, but he was wrong; Mason was a Manxman, born and bred in Castletown.

The naval officer tilted his head a little to look up at Douglas, and grinned.

'I'm sure you've already asked the question,' he said, 'so I'll give you the answer before you ask me too. No, I don't know why you're here. I've had orders about what to do with you, but I don't know the reason behind them. Now, the Marine here will show your men and the sergeant-major to their quarters; I'll take you up to the wardroom and show you around. Haven't you got any kit?'

Douglas admitted that apart from what they carried in their packs, their gear was still in Tunisia.

'Well, not to worry,' Mason reassured him. 'I expect it'll turn up sooner or later. We can fit you out with whatever you need in the meantime.'

The Lazaretto, Douglas learned from Mason's commentary, was several centuries old and had been built by the Knights Hospitaller as a quarantine centre in the days of the bubonic plague. Its southern side overlooked the harbour, where a forty-foot depth of water enabled submarines to lie alongside when they were not on patrol. On the northern side the Lazaretto was protected by a high wall of solid rock, which gave excellent protection against air attack. The building itself was strongly constructed too — of limestone blocks and slabs hewn from the rock face; it was this limestone, which powdered rather than splintered, that had helped to cushion the blast effects of the enemy's bombs during the Blitz.

The main building of the Lazaretto, a long, two-storey structure, was sub-

divided into four sections by three courtyards with barrack-rooms aligned north and south. Douglas and Mason went in by the main entrance which was at the western end, and walked along a corridor that ran the full length of the building. There was a similar corridor on the floor above.

The ground floor corridor led to the rooms of what had once been the isolation hospital; they were now the officers' quarters, grouped around a central wardroom. The eastern end of the building opened out on to the harbour. Mason pointed out the emergency exit, at roof level at the head of a staircase; it led to a bomb-proof shelter hewn from the northern rock face.

Mason showed Douglas to his quarters and then indicated the ablutions, where the SAS officer enjoyed the luxury of a piping hot shower and a shave. Later, his transformation complete thanks to a change of clothing scrounged for him by Mason, he joined the latter in the wardroom for a pre-dinner drink.

The wardroom was quiet, and Mason explained that a number of the Flotilla's boats were out on patrol. The senior engineer officer came in, was introduced to Douglas, then downed a large gin before excusing himself. Mason grinned at his retreating back.

'Quite a character, that,' he confided. 'He was here all through the Blitz, and nearly drove the stores officer crackers by flatly refusing to have anything to do with paperwork. Kept the boats going through amazing feats of improvisation along with a hell of a lot of scrounging. Anyway, came the day when the stores officer told our "plumber" that if he didn't fill his vouchers in properly, and all that sort of thing, he was going to put the spoke in and not issue any more spares, war or no war.'

Mason ordered another couple of gins from the steward, selected an olive from a bowl on the bar and popped it into his mouth. Speaking round it, he went on: 'This conversation, mark you, was going on in the shelter in the middle of a raid. The words were hardly out of the stores officer's mouth

when there was an almighty bang close by and everybody rushed to the entrance to see what had copped it. Well, it turned out that the stores officer's office had just been blown to blazes, and they were just in time to see a great cloud of chits and flimsies fluttering gently out into the harbour. The engineer officer looked at it for a bit, filled his pipe and said, "You know — I shouldn't wonder if that loosens things up around here!" Even the stores officer couldn't help having a good laugh.'

The naval officer regaled Douglas with a few more anecdotes about life in the Tenth Flotilla and then they sat down to dinner, an excellent meal of pâté, followed by fillet steak, then cheese. 'Ah, me,' Mason sighed in mock regret, gazing at his plate, 'what happened to the good old days of bully beef and biscuit?' He winked at Douglas. 'We've supplemented our rations pretty well since the Americans arrived to set up an HQ here. I think they must have felt sorry for us.'

They had almost finished their meal when a steward came in and addressed Mason. 'Message for you from Ops, sir. *Unchallenged* is coming in.'

'Splendid!' Mason chewed on a piece of cheese, beaming, and rose to his feet. 'Come along,' he said to Douglas, 'let's go and take a look.'

They made their way to the quayside in time to see the incoming submarine, her grey hull scarred and streaked with the relics of numerous voyages, nosing her way across the harbour towards her berth. Some of her crew stood ready to cast lines ashore and make the boat fast. Douglas watched their neat expertise with admiration; his experience in submarines had been confined to the outward trip to Pantelleria, and it was one he had no wish to repeat. His presence at the Lazaretto, however, implied that he would shortly be seeing the inside of a submarine again, whether he liked it or not.

The commander of *Unchallenged* came ashore and spotted Mason, who saluted and said, 'Hello, sir. Good to see you back.'

The commander nodded. ‘Thanks, Pussy.’

It was the first time Douglas had heard Mason’s nickname, and he wondered whether it had been bestowed on him because of his Manx origins or as a result of some prowess with the fair sex.

‘Had my doubts whether we were going to make it once or twice,’ the commander said. He looked at Douglas. ‘Who’s this?’

Mason introduced them. The submarine’s skipper was Lieutenant-Commander Stuart Proud, a veteran, so Douglas later learned, of many daring operations and successful attacks on enemy shipping.

Proud glanced at Douglas’s SAS beret, which was perforce the only uniform article of clothing he wore, and his face crinkled into a smile. ‘How d’you do, Douglas?’ he said. ‘Been seeing quite a few of you chaps lately.’ He jerked a thumb towards the submarine.

Douglas turned, puzzled for a moment. Then recognition dawned, and he called out to one of a group of four men, previously unnoticed, who were manhandling equipment from the submarine on to the quay.

It was six months since Douglas had last seen Lieutenant Arne Larsen, an officer in the Special Boat Squadron, when Larsen’s canoes that had ferried Douglas’s patrol from a motor torpedo-boat on to the Tunisian shore under cover of darkness — a routine operation for the slim, fair-haired Norwegian, who was used to much more dangerous escapades. Larsen, who was a man with a score to settle, had fought the Germans in the mountains of his native country until the collapse. Escaping to the Shetlands in a fishing boat, he had immediately offered his services to the British Army, which had been shrewd enough to recognize his potential as a member of the new commando force. Almost inevitably, Larsen had found his way into the Special Air Service and had become one of the founder members of the Special Boat Squadron, originally formed to carry out raids from the sea on targets in enemy-

occupied Greece and Crete.

Larsen shook Douglas's hand, then clapped him on the shoulder. 'Good to see you, Cal,' he said warmly. The two men had developed a firm friendship before the Tunisian operation, but then had lost touch. 'What are you up to here, or shouldn't I ask?'

'I only wish I knew,' Douglas commented. 'Look, if you're busy —'

The Norwegian shook his head. 'No, I could do with stretching my legs for a minute or two. Let's take a walk up the quay.'

Douglas excused himself to Mason and Proud. As he moved away with Larsen, he saw that the latter had a slight limp which he had never noticed before and commented on it. The Norwegian smiled ruefully.

'That's what you get for being careless,' he said. His English was faultless, with only a trace of the Scandinavian lilt. 'Got a bullet through the calf a few months ago — not long after I last saw you, as a matter of fact. I was put in charge of a COPP, you see, and it wasn't exactly a picnic.'

'In charge of a what?' Douglas asked, mystified. Larsen looked around and made sure that they were out of range of curious ears.

'It stands for Combined Operations Pilotage Party,' he explained. 'That's a fancy way of describing our job, which is to make recces of enemy beaches that might be suitable for assault landings, when the time comes. That's what I've been doing for the past few months, but I'm not going to tell you where, so don't ask.'

Douglas raised an eyebrow. 'Sounds interesting,' he commented.

Larsen grunted. 'Don't know about that. Bloody dangerous, sure enough. There was certainly plenty to do. A COPP team has ten men operating in pairs. The usual drill is to be taken to within three or four miles of the enemy shore by sub or motor launch, then slip two-man canoes and paddle to about two hundred yards offshore. From there, one of the team swims in while his

mate stays in the canoe and checks the bearings of any likely obstructions. You know the score.'

The Norwegian rummaged in his shirt pocket and pulled out a battered inch or so of cigarette. He surveyed it balefully, then looked at Douglas with a faint glimmer of hope in his eye.

'Don't suppose you've started smoking, have you?' he enquired.

Douglas shook his head. 'Sorry, no. Can't help you, I'm afraid.'

'Damn. Oh well, time for that later on.' The Norwegian tossed the stub into the harbour. 'I'll tell you one thing,' he continued, 'the chaps we have on these COPP teams are very thorough in their work. You could tell them a Panzer division was coming down on their necks, and they'd still go on charting their minefields and pillboxes and the like until they were absolutely sure they'd got it right.'

'Did you have much trouble from the enemy?'

Larsen shook his head and tapped his leg. 'Apart from this one time, no. It was the weather that was the greatest danger, unexpectedly heavy seas, and that sort of thing. We had a hell of a time early in March; in ten sorties involving fifteen canoeists, we lost ten men. We know for certain that five were drowned. What happened to the other five we don't know. The problem is, that if a team loses its canoe and is stranded ashore on —' he almost gave away a name, but cut off the word just in time '— on an enemy coast, there is no chance of getting them out. You can only lie up and live off the land for a certain length of time; sooner or later, you are bound to be captured.'

Douglas nodded. 'I know the feeling. Had some of that myself over the last few days — living off the land and dodging capture, I mean.' He told Larsen about the Pantelleria operation.

The two men exchanged a few more words, then Larsen made his excuses and went back to the submarine, promising that he would join Douglas for a

drink later. Douglas returned to Mason, who had finished his conversation with the submarine's skipper, and walked back into the Lazaretto with him. Later, as they chatted over a drink, Douglas was able to glean something of the naval officer's recent history.

Mason had been an officer on the big mine-laying submarine HMS *Rorqual*, which in 1942, together with three others of its class, had been the backbone of Operation Magic Carpet, a scheme to keep besieged Malta supplied by ferrying in vital supplies under the sea. Mason told Douglas how, on one trip, *Rorqual* — with her mine-casing doors removed to make more room — had carried, on one trip from Alexandria, 24 extra personnel, 147 bags of mail, 2 tons of medical stores, 62 tons of aviation spirit and 45 tons of kerosene.

'The chaps on the other boats used to pull our legs a bit,' Mason admitted, 'but in fact store-carrying wasn't such an easy life as it sounds. Our boat was literally crammed from deck to deckhead. We carried drums of petrol externally, too, and when we did that our depth was limited to sixty-five feet maximum, and then only for five-minute periods. When we were surfaced, the smell of fuel on the bridge was so strong that the skipper forbade the use of flare signals. Since we needed them to identify ourselves to friendly aircraft, that wasn't exactly comforting.'

Mason laughed at a sudden recollection. 'There was the occasional funny side to it all, though. Before the Malta runs the old *Rorqual* used to be notorious for her rats, but they all buggered off before the first stores trip out of Alex and nobody saw a rat again until the other week, when the boat went into Haifa. I spoke to a chap who was there, and he swore blind that the rats were lined up in threes on the quay, all ready to march on!'

'That is the tallest story I've heard for years.' A new voice, very cultured and with the incisive tones of someone who knew exactly what he wanted

and demanded instant obedience, broke into the conversation.

Douglas and Mason half turned in their seats, then instinctively rose to their feet as a commanding figure strode across the room towards them. He had been standing by the door, unobserved, as they talked. They appraised him quickly; he was a tall man, over six feet, wearing a beautifully cut lightweight civilian suit and the tie of a very elite public school. Dark, wavy hair, receding a little at the temples, crowned a deeply suntanned face. It was a long, ascetic face, Douglas noted, the kind associated with the Norman-English aristocracy.

The newcomer addressed the naval officer, extending his hand. ‘You are Lieutenant Mason?’ he queried.

‘Sir.’ The form of address was automatic. Civilian clothes or not, there was something about this man that demanded respect.

‘And you must be Lieutenant Douglas.’ The latter nodded, grasping the proffered hand as he regarded the man as levelly as possible — a rather difficult task, for Douglas, by no means a small man himself, had to tilt his head back a little in order to do so.

The man smiled. ‘Please forgive this unannounced intrusion,’ he said softly, ‘but I had made up my mind to seek you both out as soon as possible. I have just flown in from England.’

That, Douglas knew, could take anything up to ten hours. Idly, he wondered if the stranger had made the trip in his best suit, or whether he had changed into it since. He gazed at the man enquiringly, wondering what was coming next.

‘My name is Masters,’ the stranger volunteered. He looked around. ‘Is there anywhere we can speak privately — somewhere completely secure, I mean?’

‘There’s my office, sir,’ Mason told him. ‘Would you care for a drink to take along with you?’

Masters smiled again. ‘Thank you. That would be more than welcome. A large Scotch and soda, if I may.’

Mason went into the bar and procured Masters’ drink, together with a refill for himself and Douglas. Then he led them upstairs, to his office, a small, sparsely furnished room with deep cracks in the walls and a lot of plaster missing from the ceiling. It overlooked the harbour. Mason turned and locked the door before perching himself on the edge of his desk, glass in hand. ‘We shan’t be interrupted,’ he assured Masters. ‘Do sit down.’

Masters sat down and crossed his left leg over his right knee, grasping his ankle in the manner that seems to be peculiarly English. He surveyed the two men for a few moments, as though assessing them.

‘Gentlemen, I shall explain who and what I am in due course,’ he said. ‘First of all, though, I should like to put a question to you both. If I were to ask you what you know of present events in Yugoslavia, what would be your reactions?’

Douglas and Mason looked at one another in puzzlement. Each shook his head, and Douglas remarked, ‘Personally, not a great deal, sir. Perhaps I’ve been a bit too preoccupied with staying alive to bother about current affairs.’

He regretted the remark instantly, because it sounded sarcastic, and that had not been his intention.

Masters did not seem offended, however, but smiled a little indulgently and went on: ‘Quite so. A few months ago my own knowledge of the matter was sketchy, too. But recently, you see, I paid a visit to Yugoslavia, so now I am somewhat better informed.’

They looked at him with sudden interest. This man, seated before them in his Savile Row suit, had recently been in enemy-occupied Yugoslavia. How, wondered Douglas. And why?

Masters uncrossed his legs, took a silver cigarette case from an inside

pocket and glanced enquiringly at Mason. The latter nodded in response to the unspoken question and passed an ashtray across. Masters lit his cigarette, inhaled deeply and let the smoke trickle slowly through his nostrils for a few moments, as though he were marshalling his thoughts.

‘Please bear with me for a few minutes’, he said, ‘while I try to explain the background to the events in that unhappy country. The whole history is extremely complex, so I shall start, for the sake of brevity, in April 1941, when Yugoslavia was overrun by the Germans as a prelude to their invasion of Greece.

‘When that happened there was a total loss of communication between Yugoslavia and the Allies, not to mention the government of the young King Peter, exiled in London. It was as though an iron curtain had fallen across that particular part of Europe.’ Masters smiled suddenly. ‘Actually, I rather like that expression. Very descriptive. So did the Prime Minister when I briefed him on the Yugoslav situation some time ago. I shouldn’t be at all surprised if he uses it in one of his speeches.

‘Anyway, to continue. The unfortunate result of this lack of intelligence about what was happening inside the country was a series of tragic misunderstandings. For months, we believed that the enemy had simply imposed their administration on Yugoslavia, as they have done on other occupied countries. The reality was that they instituted a deliberate programme of genocide.’

Masters stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette, got out his cigarette case, then hesitated and put it away again with a shrug. ‘Tempted to over-indulge these days,’ he said. He cleared his throat. ‘You see, what you have to understand about Yugoslavia is that its people — Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins and Serbs — are all still steeped in their ancient dreams of individual sovereignty. The Germans lost no time in exploiting these

divisions by creating an independent Croat state under the leadership of one of their puppets, a man named Ante Pavelić, who controls an extremist Croatian movement known as the Ustaše. The result was entirely predictable. No sooner was Pavelić installed than his underlings began slaughtering the Serbs, the Jews, and anyone else who had opposed them in the past. Meanwhile, Hungarian forces did the same in the province of Vojvodina and the Bulgarians in Macedonia. In Belgrade, the occupying forces set up a puppet government under an officer called General Nedić; he is nominally the head of the Croatian state, but it is Pavelić who is in effective control.'

Masters paused. 'Do you both get the gist of all this, or would you like me to go over any of it again? As I said earlier, or rather implied, understanding is important.'

'Please go on, sir,' Mason told him. 'I think we're following you okay — but I hope you won't ask us to spell any of the names!'

'That will not be necessary,' Masters smiled. 'Not yet, anyhow. Well, to get on with my story, the occupying forces in Yugoslavia have not quite had things all their own way. For some time, a very spirited resistance has been put up by armed groups in the mountains of Serbia and Montenegro. One faction, which is pro-Serbian, is led by a former regular officer of the Yugoslav Army, Colonel Draza Mihajlović. His so-called Četnik Movement is royalist in outlook and has been backed by the British Government since its existence was known. The name Četnik, incidentally, derives from the Serbian word that described the local guerrillas who once fought the Turks. Mihajlović's headquarters are in the densely wooded hill country of western Serbia; you could hide an army there, which is just about what Mihajlović is doing.'

A frown briefly creased Masters' forehead. 'The problem is that we — the British, I mean — may have been backing the wrong horse. Mihajlović has a

lot of followers and has enjoyed some notable successes, but it seems that he has been following a policy of caution. To put it bluntly, he's been waiting to see who was likely to come out on top, the Germans or the Allies, before committing himself to stronger action. So, as a consequence, the Prime Minister is keen that we make every effort to investigate the other main faction that forms the Yugoslav Resistance movement, and if necessary to give it full material support. Have you any questions so far?'

Douglas, already half understanding why he was being told all this, thought for a moment and then said, 'Only one, sir: I don't understand why our support for the Yugoslav guerrillas is so important. Wouldn't it be better if we put more effort into, say, supplying the French Resistance? Yugoslavia's a long way from home, after all.'

'Ah, yes, I thought you might say that.' Masters' smile was a little indulgent. 'Perhaps I should have explained at the outset the extent of guerrilla activity in Yugoslavia. You see, it's keeping at least eight enemy divisions — five German and three Italian — pinned down in the mountains there. Those divisions could make an enormous difference if they were released to strengthen an area that might be threatened by an Allied invasion — let's say the French Riviera, for the sake of argument, or Greece.'

Douglas nodded slowly. 'Yes, I see that now. And the more aid we give the Yugoslavs, the more enemy troops it's going to take to counter them.'

He looked sharply at Masters. 'So the invasion is going to take place in the Balkans, after all. There've been rumours …'

'I can't tell you anything about that,' Masters interrupted. 'You'll find out soon enough. In the meantime, it's best that you know as little as possible, just in case … Well, more of that later. There's a good deal more I have to tell you about Yugoslavia, for the moment.'

He took another sip of whisky, and looked into his glass thoughtfully as he

spoke. ‘I mentioned the Četniks as being one significant faction in the Yugoslav Resistance. The other is a good deal more mysterious, although we are led to believe that it has been inflicting far more damage on the enemy than Mihajlović and his men have succeeded in doing. The reason for our lack of information about it, mainly, is that the Četniks are our only source. We have liaison officers with Mihajlović, and they are in radio contact with London, but everything they send us is censored. All we really know about this second resistance movement is that the people who belong to it call themselves Partisans, they appear to be mostly Communists, and they are led by somebody called Tito.’

‘Tito?’ Mason interjected. ‘Sounds more Italian than Yugoslavian.’

Masters smiled. ‘There are various opinions,’ he said. ‘One is that Tito is not a personal name at all, but the initial letters of the Yugoslav words for Secret International Terrorist Organization. Another is that ‘he’ is actually an extremely beautiful young lady who carves notches on her gun butt, a sort of Balkan Calamity Jane. Personally, I don’t believe that one.’

Douglas, who had been listening attentively, had a sudden thought. ‘You said we have liaison officers with the Četniks,’ he said. ‘How is it, then, that we don’t have any with these — what d’you call ’em — Partisans?’

‘In the main, it’s because all their dealings so far have been with the Soviet Union,’ Masters explained. ‘That’s another good reason why the Government wants to make contact with them. The Russians are our allies now, but when Germany loses this war — as she surely will — nobody knows what the Russians may get up to. So, understandably, there are certain far-sighted people who would like to see the Partisans brought round to our way of thinking, because they don’t really relish the prospect of a post-war communist state in the middle of Europe.’

Douglas shook his head. ‘It’s all a bit too profound for me,’ he said. ‘I

never did take much interest in politics. But I still don't see why we can't parachute people in to do the necessary.'

Masters had an answer ready. 'That's just the point. We've tried. Twice in the last two months we've dropped liaison teams in the places where the Partisans were reported to be. Both the dropping aircraft returned safely, but we haven't heard a thing from our men. Not a squeak. It's very worrying. What is also worrying is that we haven't heard from our men with the Četniks, either. Not for some months. We suspected the Germans must have got on to them somehow, so we didn't send any more. Yes, very worrying indeed.'

Douglas looked at Masters thoughtfully. 'Perhaps now would be a good time to tell us exactly who you are, sir, and what all this is about — although I've a feeling I know the answer to that last bit already.'

'Yes.' The man smiled. 'It is quite unforgivable of me not to have identified myself properly. I am Brigadier Sutton Masters, and I am in charge of the Balkans Section of the Special Operations Executive. Quite naturally, I do not carry any identification to that effect, so you will just have to take my word for it.'

So that was it, Douglas thought, SOE, the cloak and dagger brigade, with its network of agents and saboteurs spread throughout the occupied territories. He had guessed as much already.

'Soon — very soon — operations in the Balkans are going to assume a great deal of importance,' Masters went on. 'For that reason, we are anxious to establish contact with the Partisans, and to establish the true situation in Yugoslavia. We therefore intend to send another mission into the country, but this time it will go unannounced and by sea. The mission will consist of two Yugoslav-speaking SOE officers, and they will be accompanied by a small escort of specialist military personnel. The idea is to land the mission by

submarine on the coast of Montenegro.'

Masters took out his cigarette case again and toyed with it, as though engaged in a struggle of will. Douglas took advantage of the pause to make a comment.

'You said that you had been in Yugoslavia yourself recently, sir,' he stated, and there was open curiosity in his tone. 'Weren't you able to make any headway?'

Masters was suddenly guarded. 'I wasn't in a position to see events at first hand,' he explained cautiously. 'Let's just say that I was in Belgrade as the guest of the Ambassador of a certain friendly neutral country … I don't wish to say any more than that. It was all very illegal from the diplomatic point of view, anyway.' He looked slightly embarrassed, and changed the subject abruptly.

'The reason I am talking to you, as you may already have guessed, is that the specialist military personnel assigned to this operation will be drawn from the Special Air Service. I know of your exploits in Tunisia, Douglas, and it seems to me that you are an excellent choice for command of the venture. What do you have to say?'

'Thank you for the compliment, sir,' the SAS officer replied. 'Do I have much of a choice?'

Masters gave a lopsided grin. 'Only insofar as the team you choose to take with you,' he said.

'Well, that's easy. But will seven men be enough?'

'Seven men were enough to kill the SS murderer Heydrich in Czechoslovakia,' Masters commented grimly. 'They would have got away with it, too, if they hadn't been betrayed by one of their own people. Yes, I would say the smaller the party involved, the better. It'll be easier for you to go to ground if you have to. And don't forget the two SOE men.'

Douglas looked pensive, and Mason gave a polite cough. ‘I hope you’ll forgive me, sir, but I don’t quite see where I fit into all this. All I’ve had so far was a cryptic signal to the effect that Lieutenant Douglas would be coming here, with his men, and that I was to be responsible for them. I’m just wondering if I should really be listening to all this.’

Masters finally lost his inward struggle and lit a cigarette before speaking. ‘Oh dear, Lieutenant, hasn’t anyone told you? You see, we want you to go along as well. I believe you have quite a bit of experience in ferrying supplies by submarine?’

‘A fair bit, sir, yes.’ Mason gave an audible gulp.

‘Well, we are keen to investigate the possibility of sending supplies to the Partisans by this method. We want you to locate the most favourable landing spots — places where a sub can get close inshore without too much danger of discovery — and work out some sort of rendezvous procedure with the Partisans. Should be right up your street, I’d have thought.’

‘Very good, sir.’ Mason sounded thoroughly miserable, and Douglas smiled inwardly at his naval colleague’s discomfiture. He wasn’t feeling over the moon himself. It sounded a very dicey business indeed.

Masters sat back in his chair and looked pleased. ‘Excellent! I’m glad that’s settled. Now, you’ll go in ten days’ time. That should give you plenty of opportunity to sort everything out. Douglas, let me have a list of anything you may require in the way of equipment and I’ll see you get it. Doesn’t matter what it is. The other SOE chaps should be here tomorrow morning, so once they’ve settled in I’ll give you a fuller briefing and you can all get to know each other.’

The brigadier rose, and the others followed suit.

As Mason went to unlock the door, Masters said, ‘Oh, there is one more thing: if you do find out that this Tito is not all he’s supposed to be, and that

he’s playing some sort of double game, we want you to kill him.’

Chapter Three

In the cramped bowels of the submarine, the passengers did their best to keep out of everyone's way during the long wait for darkness.

The outward voyage from Malta had seemed never-ending, and had been notable only for its lack of excitement — for which Douglas was profoundly grateful. Lieutenant-Commander Proud, the skipper, had warned him that there might be some excitement as the boat slipped through the Strait of Otranto, which was heavily mined and patrolled, but they had sighted only two Italian vessels as they made their run at periscope-depth from the Ionian Sea into the Adriatic; both had been fat merchantmen, presumably running supplies to the Italian garrison in Albania, and Proud had sworn fluently because his orders forbade him to attack them.

There were ten passengers on board the submarine, too many to be accommodated in any degree of comfort. Six of them were Douglas's SAS detachment, comprising Brough, Conolly, Olds and the three troopers he had taken into action for the first time on Pantelleria, Barber, Lumsden and Mitchell. They seemed sound enough, although Barber, a cockney, talked a little too much for Douglas's liking. Nevertheless, his ability to move with cat-like stealth over any kind of terrain had come in handy during the Pantelleria operation.

Lumsden was a complete contrast. Born and bred in the Cotswolds, he was large and slow-moving, a little like Olds, was an expert shot with every kind of infantry weapon and had a punch that could break the spine of a bull. Off duty, Barber had tried every trick in the book to get Lumsden ruffled, and had so far failed abjectly.

Mitchell, the signaller, was something of a mystery. He was a Rhodesian, from one of that country's longest-established settler families, and had the look of the veldt in his grey eyes. He spoke only in monosyllables, as though conserving reserves of energy, which appeared inexhaustible. Mitchell could run up one side of a mountain and down the other, carrying a radio pack, with scarcely an increase in his heartbeat rate.

The two SOE men were even more mysterious, although probably with good reason. They had introduced themselves as Forbes and Eldridge, although Douglas doubted whether those were their real names. Both were older than Douglas had expected; Forbes, who spoke fluent Serbo-Croat, had an aura of youthful toughness about him, an impression belied by a receding hairline and mild manner; Eldridge seemed tougher, with a lined and weather-beaten face that denoted much time spent in the outdoors. They were a curious couple and kept very much to themselves, as though they felt ill at ease in the company of professional soldiers. Douglas could not help wondering how they would shape up if it came to some action; he had no idea whether either had been in contact with the enemy before, and the two were certainly not giving away any details of their backgrounds.

For the past few hours the submarine had made a daylight reconnaissance of that part of the Montenegrin coastline, or at least that part of it known as the Gulf of Kotor. Looking through the periscope from four miles out, Douglas had at once been struck by the area's sheer natural beauty. Kotor, he thought, appeared to be more of a series of deep inland fjords than a gulf, with green, massive mountains sweeping down to meet the water. Forbes, taking his turn at the periscope, explained the salient features to the SAS officer.

The most prominent landmark was the six-thousand-foot peak of Mount Lovćen, the highest point in the Njeguši mountain range that dominated the

gulf. To the right of it lay the medieval town of Budva, to the south of which Douglas and the others would shortly be going ashore before striking out inland towards the northern tip of Lake Skadar, which straddled the border between Yugoslavia and Albania. Reports suggested that the Partisans controlled the area between the lake and the town of Podgorica, so this was where contact with them was most likely to be made.

Night fell swiftly. There was no moon, and the sweep of the periscope revealed only star-hung skies above the stark silhouettes of the mountains.

Lieutenant-Commander Proud made another three-hundred-and-sixty-degree sweep of the horizon through the periscope, just to make doubly certain that the submarine was under no immediate threat, glanced at his watch and then turned abruptly, bumping into Douglas, who was still doing his best to keep out of the way. The latter apologized.

'That's all right,' Proud said. 'Tell your men to stand by. We're going up.'

'Right, sir.' Douglas went forward from the control room, stooping to pass through the watertight bulkhead into a narrow corridor festooned with pipes and cables. Pushing his way through a curtain he entered the wardroom into which his men were squeezed, their equipment piled on a small central table.

On Douglas's orders, Olds and Barber went forward into the next compartment, the engine-room artificers' mess, where the Folboats were stowed, and unlashed them. The collapsible canoes, already used to good effect by Douglas and his men in Tunisia and during their clandestine landing on Pantelleria, did not take up much space; it was hard to believe that each craft, when erected, could accommodate two men and a considerable weight of equipment.

Noises, familiar to the crew but alien to most of the others, surged through the boat as its captain gave the order to surface. Douglas had been through this procedure before, on the way into Pantelleria, but he had never fully

understood the mechanics of it. Now, with nothing to do except stand by until the submarine was on the surface, Mason took the trouble to explain what was happening.

'Surfacing is usually carried out from periscope depth,' he said. 'The first thing is to open the lower conning tower hatch, then the full force of compressed air — that's the lifeblood of any submarine — is admitted to the tops of the main ballast tanks and water blown out. The boat is going ahead at half-speed at the moment; as soon as the water is blown out she'll have positive buoyancy and start rising to the surface, with a little help from the hydroplanes.'

The roar of compressed air and the surge of water along the hull caused Mason to raise his voice slightly. A few moments later, a dull clang sounded aft.

'The conning tower's out of the water,' Mason said, 'and that's the upper hatch being opened. You can hear the air pumps starting up now; they're using fresh air to blow the remaining water out of the ballast tanks and bring the boat up to full buoyancy. It'll take about five minutes.'

As Mason finished speaking, *Unchallenged*'s first lieutenant stuck his head around the wardroom curtain.

'The skipper's taking us in to about two thousand yards offshore,' he said. 'That's as close as we dare go, because our charts for this area aren't as complete as they might be and there's a danger of running aground, which could be just a little embarrassing. Get everything through to the forward hatch and wait for my signal.'

Swiftly and efficiently, for this was part of the procedure they had been practising for the past ten days, Douglas and his men manhandled the Folboats and other equipment through to the torpedo loading hatch, which was located in the forward part of the boat. There they stood and waited

again, surrounded by torpedoes, the boat's hull vibrating around them as she moved slowly forward.

After a while, Douglas sensed that the rhythm of the vibration was changing. The noise of the water surging against the hull became less pronounced as the engine revolutions were gradually reduced. A rating came forward, squeezed past the men, ascended a short ladder and undid the clamps that held the forward hatch in place. He heaved on it, grunting, and it came open, admitting a welcome rush of salt-laden night air. Then he turned to Douglas with an encouraging grin, his face unnaturally pale in the dim lighting.

'Right, sir. Off you go. You know the drill. The skipper'll keep an eye on you from up top. We'll float you off when you are all in position. Good luck.'

Douglas nodded his thanks. 'All right, boys, let's go.'

Followed by Mason, he swung up the ladder and eased himself through the hatch on to the submarine's slippery forward casing. After the claustrophobic atmosphere of *Unchallenged*, the air was fresh and clean and the two men sucked it gratefully into their lungs.

Olds and Conolly joined them on the casing and the four set about pulling up the Folboats and other equipment as it was handed to them from below. The five collapsible boats were quickly made ready and the various equipment packages lashed to them. Each man carried his personal supplies, his weapon — in the case of the SAS men, an MP-40 machine-pistol — and ammunition strapped securely to his webbing.

Looking aft, Douglas could make out the heads and shoulders of two men in the conning tower. That would be Proud and his first lieutenant, he thought, waiting for his signal that all was ready. The remainder of his party, with Brough bringing up the rear, came up from below; behind them, the torpedo loading hatch clanged shut.

‘That’s it, sir,’ Brough told Douglas. ‘Nothing left downstairs.’ Brough had never managed to come to terms with nautical phraseology.

‘Fine, Stan. Everything’s secure here. Let’s get into our places.’

Gratefully, the ten men eased themselves into the Folboats. Conolly was crewed with Douglas and both men now grasped their paddles firmly, waiting for the launch.

‘All set, everyone?’

One by one, the men in the other boats acknowledged. Douglas glanced aft again and waved his hand in the agreed signal. One of the men on the conning tower waved back; both heads disappeared and Douglas heard the hatch being slammed shut. It was a terribly final sound.

Douglas, crouched with paddle poised in the front seat of his Folboat, felt the submarine begin to vibrate under him once more. Slowly, very slowly, it began to move astern. Proud was easing the boat down inch by inch, handling her like a woman. Spray blew across the casing as air vented from the main ballast tanks, which began to admit water with a rushing sound. Douglas knew that the skipper would go astern until the casing was awash, then go ahead to dive the boat fully.

Suddenly, water swirled across the casing and the Folboats became buoyant, like cygnets floating from the back of a mother swan. The ten men aboard them began to paddle furiously, swinging the noses of the collapsible craft round towards the shore, endeavouring to escape from the wash of the submarine as quickly as possible.

Douglas’s paddle swung in unison with Conolly’s, slicing through the water. He was glad that the sea was calm, for the heavily-laden boat was difficult to control. He glanced around, quickly ascertaining that the other boats were in position behind him, then struck out with renewed vigour, his breath coming in short gasps. Astern, above the swish and lap of the water, he

could hear the muted murmur of the submarine's engines growing fainter. There was no time to look back now, or to dwell on the sudden loneliness he felt as the bulk of the submarine receded behind him. Soon, *Unchallenged* would be on her way back through the perilous Strait of Otranto, seeking targets of opportunity for her torpedoes as she headed for Malta. Mentally, Douglas wished her and her crew bon voyage.

The canoeists made steady headway, judging the trend of what was a surprisingly mild current as they headed for their objective, a point on the beach where two hillsides sloped down to form a V. There was no sign or sound of life either ashore or afloat, except for the steady beat of their own paddles, but Douglas stayed fully on the alert, his eyes constantly roving the area ahead. From experience, he knew that one could never be sure what lay unseen in the enemy darkness.

They came ashore on the crest of a gentle wave, grounding in the shallows, Douglas and Conolly scrambled out of the Folboat and dragged it clear of the water. A quick look assured the officer that the others were also beaching safely. The first, most urgent thing to do was make sure that their tiny beach-head was secure.

Leaving their boat for the moment, the two men ran for the shelter of some rocks further up the beach, their machine-pistols at the ready. They lay there for a while, scanning the darkened hillsides that sloped down towards the water, but the night was remarkable only for its silence. Satisfied that no one had observed their approach, they rose and made their way more slowly back to where the others were waiting.

Douglas gave the order for the equipment to be offloaded and stacked in one place, well clear of the water. The next thing to do was to collapse the Folboats and conceal them, a task that did not prove as difficult as Douglas had anticipated. Quickly, the men scooped out a narrow trench between some

rocks, well clear of the high-tide mark, and within minutes the boats were well hidden under a layer of stones and sand. It was hard to tell how the hiding place would look in daylight, but Douglas was convinced that it would take a very keen eye to see that anything had been disturbed.

The men collected their packs and moved away from the beach in single file, with Douglas leading. Behind him came Mitchell, with the all-important radio, then Barber and Conolly, followed by the two SOE men. Lumsden, Olds, Mason and Brough brought up the rear, the sergeant-major carefully smoothing out all traces of their footprints as he went.

Douglas, having made a careful study of the available maps, was under no illusion about the hard slog that lay ahead of them. Although it was only fifteen miles from the coast to Lake Skadar, between the two lay the Rumija mountain range, its peaks climbing to five thousand feet. Douglas's planned route would enable them to avoid the worst of the high ground, but it would be daybreak before they reached the summit, even if they maintained a steady pace. As they toiled on through the barren, lunar landscape of jumbled rock, he hoped that the SOE men would be able to keep up.

Six hours later, and as many miles into the mountains, Douglas knew that he had underestimated Forbes and Eldridge. The two agents plodded on steadfastly, showing no sign of fatigue when Douglas called the brief hourly breaks. Whoever had trained them had done his job well.

They all but reached the crest of the mountain range in the dawn twilight, and made a makeshift camp in the lee of some rocks. According to Douglas's map, their vantage point was some three thousand feet above sea level; on either side, stark peaks rose two thousand feet higher. He felt satisfied with himself, for he knew that he had picked the least arduous way through the range, but at the same time the satisfaction was tinged with unease, a strange sensation that there were unseen watchers on the surrounding crags. If so, he

hoped the eyes were friendly; but maybe it was just his imagination running riot.

Leaving the others to breakfast on some of their iron rations, Douglas, accompanied by Brough and Forbes, who claimed to know the area reasonably well from pre-war travels, climbed the last couple of hundred feet to the crest, following the line of a narrow defile that cut through the rock. As they reached the top, the ground fell away with a suddenness that took them by surprise.

Flat on their bellies, careful not to show themselves against the skyline now that they were at the top, they crawled to a spot from which they could look down on the land that lay to the east.

The scene that met their eyes was one of breath-taking beauty. On the horizon, the upper rim of the rising sun, red and molten, pushed its way above yet another wilderness of mountains, shedding a path of rippling light across the great expanse of water that was Lake Skadar. All around the lake was green, fertile land, contrasting sharply with the bare limestone mountains to the north-east.

‘That’s called the Karst,’ Forbes explained. ‘Cetinje, Montenegro’s capital, is in the middle of it, although you can’t see it from here.’ He smiled. ‘There’s quite a nice legend about this landscape. It goes that at the creation, God was flying over the Balkans with a huge sack of stones when the devil crept up behind him and slit the sack. What you’re looking at was the result.’

Douglas grunted. Irrationally, the landscape reminded him of an apple crumble, and that thought in turn sent a brief pang of yearning through his stomach. He shrugged it off, quickly, and placed his binoculars to his eyes, scanning the terrain in sections.

To the north of Lake Skadar, a low, featureless plain ran in the direction of Podgorica. Through his glasses, Douglas could make out what appeared to be

a couple of small villages, the nearest about two miles distant. He passed the binoculars to Forbes, who examined the far-off buildings. After a minute, the SOE man handed back the glasses and frowned.

'That's odd,' he said. 'The peasants here rise at dawn and put in what amounts to a full day's work before it gets too hot. But there's no sign of any smoke — in fact, no sign of life at all. I don't like it.'

'Just what I was thinking,' said Douglas. 'You'd think somebody would be up and about, especially as the area's supposedly under Partisan control.' He thought for a minute, then turned to Brough. 'I'm not going to risk going down there in daylight,' he told the sergeant-major. 'It's too exposed. Once out of these hills we'd be sitting ducks. You two go back to the others and tell them I intend to stay put until it's dark — then we'll move. I'll keep watch here for the time being. Have somebody come up to relieve me in an hour.'

Brough acknowledged the order and disappeared, followed by Forbes. Douglas settled down to his vigil, his eyes narrowed against the glare of the rising sun. The morning air warmed rapidly under the sun's rays and made him drowsy; he fought off the feeling with an effort and forced himself to concentrate on planning ahead, on what to do if he suddenly discovered that they had been landed in entirely the wrong part of Yugoslavia. At the moment, he was forced to admit to himself that he had no idea. He would have to work on each new problem as it arose. After an hour, Douglas was relieved by Olds. Moving back to where the others were waiting, he found that someone had made a smokeless fire with some of the little solid fuel blocks that each man carried in his pack and had 'brewed up'. Barber handed him a mess-tin with a few mouthfuls of warm, sweet tea in it and he drank gratefully, feeling new strength course through his veins. He ate some biscuit and bully beef and then went and sat some distance away, his back against a rock, busy with his thoughts.

He must have dozed, for an urgent hand on his shoulder brought him groggily awake. It was Brough, and there was a note of warning in his voice.

‘Barber wants you, sir. Something’s happening.’

‘Barber?’ For a moment Douglas was puzzled, then he realized that he must have been asleep for at least an hour and that the watch had changed. In fact, it had changed twice, and the sun was now relatively high in the sky.

He grabbed his MP-40 and scrambled up the slope to where the lookout was lying, inching into place beside him.

‘What is it, Barber?’

The man handed the binoculars to Douglas. ‘Down there, sir. Just on the outskirts of the nearest village. There’s a truck of some sort, and some people near it. Can you see?’

Douglas focused the glasses. At this distance the truck was toy-like, and it was impossible to tell whether it was a military or civilian vehicle. A dozen or so minute figures moved nearby. He watched them until his eyes ached, cursing the haze that obscured detail, then passed the binoculars back to Barber.

‘Can’t make out a damned thing,’ he muttered. ‘See if you can do any better. How long have they been there?’

‘Just arrived, sir. I let you know right away.’

There was a note of reproach in Barber’s voice, as though Douglas had accused him of not keeping a proper look-out. Douglas had a sneaking suspicion that the cockney’s vigilance had not been particularly acute.

Suddenly, the morning air bore a noise to their ears: a staccato popping sound, the unmistakable signature of rifle-fire. It lasted for only a few seconds, and then the air was silent again.

A minute later, Barber said: ‘Looks as though they’re leaving, sir.’

Douglas took the glasses and saw that Barber was right; the truck was

moving away, trailing a plume of dust in its wake as it headed north-eastward. A few moments later it was lost to view in the haze.

‘Barber, go back and round up the others,’ ordered Douglas. ‘We’re going down. I’ll wait here. Bring my kit up, will you?’

Within five minutes the men were assembled, some blinking sleep from their eyes. Briefly, Douglas explained what had happened.

‘All right, let’s go. Single file, and keep well spaced out.’

Strangely, now that he had decided on a course of action, Douglas felt almost happy, even though he had no idea what they were likely to encounter. Keeping close to the rocks they set off rapidly down the eastern slopes of the Rumija, following an almost indefinable track that gradually levelled out as it wound through the foothills.

The day was hot now, and sweat ran in rivulets down Douglas’s back as he marched on towards the village, moving now through a plain of coarse, dusty grass. Beyond the village, a heat-haze danced over the lake; through it, the bare-topped mountains in the distance shimmered in patterns of grey.

A quarter of a mile short of the village, Douglas ordered his team to spread out in line abreast. There was still no sign of life, but the men moved forward cautiously, half crouching, their MP-40s ready for instant action.

As far as Douglas could make out, the village’s wooden houses — eight or nine of them — were set in a rough semicircle, the open side facing the lake. Close in, a jab of his hand sent Brough, Conolly and Olds running to enter the place from the northern side, while he headed for the opposite flank with Barber, Lumsden and Mitchell. He ordered Mason, Forbes and Eldridge to stay where they were, fifty yards or so from the nearest house, and ready to provide covering fire if necessary.

Panting slightly, Douglas reached the shelter of the house on the extreme right of the semi-circle and crouched in the shelter of its wall. There was a

small window just above his head, opaque with dirt.

Carefully, Douglas inched forward on his belly until he was in a position to peer around the corner of the house, his head almost at ground level. That was an old trick. If anybody hostile was waiting on the other side, he would be watching a position at chest height, not low down.

Taking a deep breath, the SAS officer simultaneously poked his head and his MP-40 around the angle of the wall — and came face to face with a corpse.

'My God!'

His exclamation was low and savage, issued between clenched teeth. A single glance had been sufficient to tell him all he needed to know. Apart from his own men, the village was peopled only by the dead.

Douglas rose slowly to his feet and moved out into the open, motioning the others to follow. Across the village he saw Brough, Conolly and Olds also emerge. Between the two small groups of soldiers, the space in front of the houses was littered with bodies — men, women and small children — lying in grotesque attitudes where the bullets had flung them.

Behind him, Douglas heard the sound of someone being sick. He moved forward, carefully avoiding the pools of blood that were already beginning to congeal. The doors of the little, brightly-painted houses gaped open. Some of the bodies, he saw, were partly clothed, as though the people had been torn from their sleep.

A scrawny chicken came squawking out of one of the houses and alighted on the chest of an elderly woman. He shoo'd it away with the muzzle of his gun. Nearby lay the body of a hound, its head half blown away. He counted sixteen bodies, his gaze moving rapidly over the children. He did not want to dwell on them.

Stan Brough came and stood beside him. The sergeant-major's lips moved

in a steady flow of silent curses.

‘The bastards,’ he choked out at length. ‘The bloody bastards! Those little kids …’

Douglas pulled himself together with an effort. Imagine this is not real, he told himself. Imagine this is some kind of horrible tableau, a nightmare in daylight that will go away when you blink your eyes. But the carrion birds that were beginning to circle overhead, their cries raucous in the morning air, were real enough.

‘All right,’ he said roughly, ‘we’ve got a job to do. Barber, go and fetch Lieutenant Mason and the others. The rest of you, clear the houses. And watch your step.’

To Brough, he said quietly: ‘Stan, we’ve got to think this out. Who the hell would have done this? Germans? Italians?’

The sergeant-major shook his head. ‘Not the Eyeties; they wouldn’t have the stomach for anything like this. Jerries, maybe — the SS. Christ, I’d like to get my hands on them!’

‘So would I, Stan,’ Douglas agreed. ‘So would I. Well, at least we know there’s danger here. Perhaps not to us, immediately, but this calls for —’

He stopped abruptly, looking at Brough. The latter had placed a warning finger to his lips. ‘Can you hear anything?’ he whispered.

Douglas shook his head, puzzled; then suddenly he knew what Brough meant. There came a sound, quite audible this time, of a muffled sneeze. It was coming from the direction of what appeared to be the village muckheap, a low mound of straw and dried dung that reeked faintly a few yards away.

‘Keep me covered,’ Douglas said quietly. Looking round, he spotted a long piece of wood with a pointed end, the sort of instrument peasants use to goad their cattle. He picked it up and approached the muckheap from one side, at the same time hearing a reassuring ‘snick’ as Brough cocked his MP-40.

Douglas jabbed the pointed end of the stick experimentally into the foul-smelling pile. Nothing happened, so he tried again, harder, spacing out his jabs at intervals of a foot or so.

Then suddenly a heap of straw burst upwards into his face. He recoiled as a small figure in stained brown clothing leaped out at him. One of its hands clawed at his eyes; in the other a knife glittered, swinging in a vicious arc towards his neck. Instinctively Douglas rolled backwards, breaking the force of his fall with outstretched palms, his feet coming up together in a kick that made savage contact with the assailant's midriff. There was a loud gasp and the figure flew over him, landing with a thud in a cloud of dust to lie motionless on its back. Instantly, Brough was at its throat with the muzzle of his MP-40.

Douglas quickly scrambled to his feet. Brough had lowered his machine-pistol and had tilted his beret forward, scratching the back of his head in a gesture of bewilderment. It did not take Douglas long to see why. A khaki forage cap had fallen from the head of the sprawled, gasping figure, releasing a cascade of raven-black hair caked in dust and sweat. Dark eyes, glazed with shock and pain, glared up at Douglas in naked hatred from a face that under different circumstances would have displayed only sheer loveliness. Its full red lips gaped wide open in the struggle to admit air to winded lungs.

Before Douglas had time to get over his surprise, the girl emitted a choked scream and scrabbled for her knife, which had fallen a yard or two away. Brough stood on the blade quickly and his MP-40 once again swung round menacingly.

The girl spat something unintelligible at him.

'It's all right, love,' Brough said soothingly. 'Nobody's going to hurt you.'

'Bloody hell!' Douglas swore. He looked round at the others, who had come running up, attracted by the commotion, and his eye alighted on Forbes.

‘See if you can sort this out, will you?’

Brough stood back a little, allowing the captive to sit up. Forbes crouched on one knee in front of her and looked into her face.

‘*Zdravo*,’ he said. ‘*Ja sam engleski oficir*.’

The girl stared at him for a moment. Suddenly, Forbes was wiping a gobbet of spittle from his cheek.

‘Little bitch!’ he burst out, wiping the moisture away. ‘All right, I’ll try again. Would you other chaps mind moving away a bit? You’re obviously making her nervous. If she shows any sign of making trouble I can handle her.’

They did as they were asked. While Forbes spoke to the girl, Conolly reported to Douglas that they had found nothing living in any of the houses.

‘Whoever killed those people did a thorough job,’ he said bitterly. ‘They even killed their goats and dogs. Funny, though; they haven’t touched any food. We’ve discovered quite a little store of cheese, and some sort of pastry. There are clay jars with buttermilk in them, too, and some with what seems to be brandy.’

‘Well, some of the food will come in handy,’ Douglas admitted. ‘Get it all together, and we’ll see how much we can carry.’ As he spoke, he realized with what was almost a feeling of panic that he had no idea where they were going next.

‘The booze, too, sir?’ Conolly asked hopefully.

Douglas nodded. ‘Yes, the booze too. You never know — it might come in useful as an anaesthetic, if we need one. Come to think of it, I imagine we could all do with a shot of it right now. Have some issued all round, will you? Not much, mind, taste it yourself first to make sure there’s nothing wrong with it.’

‘Already have, sir,’ Conolly said, his face brightening, and hurried away.

The fiery spirit — it turned out to be plum brandy — burned their insides, but they all felt better for it. Forbes handed a jar to the girl, who took a small sip and handed it back, coughing a little as she did so. Forbes rose to his feet and looked down at her, then turned to Douglas.

'I think I've got her convinced that we're genuine,' he said. 'Damned hard work, though. Not that I can say I blame her for being cautious.'

'Let her get up,' Douglas ordered. Forbes placed a hand under the girl's elbow and helped her up. Douglas had half expected her to shrug off the friendly gesture. Instead, she smiled sweetly at Forbes and planted a light kiss on the SOE man's cheek before turning to look up at Douglas. Clean her up and put her in a dress, he thought, and she'd be a stunner.

An instant later, dirty and ragged though she was, the girl succeeded in stunning him anyway. She grimaced and rubbed her middle, then glared at the SAS officer.

'You big ape,' she said in perfect English. 'You've got a kick like a mule. But I forgive you — I *was* trying to kill you at the time. You can call me Mila.'

Chapter Four

The village of death was far behind them now, but the shrieks of the squabbling carrion birds still rang hideously loud in Douglas's ears. There had been no time to bury the dead; the story that Mila had told Douglas had imparted a new sense of urgency to his mission.

He watched her now, sure-footed and swift, as she led the small column along the winding mountain track that followed the northerly course of the River Morača, the fast-flowing watercourse that fed Lake Skadar. The going was slow because of the need to avoid the main road and to detour around the town of Podgorica, and it would be well into the next day before they reached their destination, the monastery of Morača, perched high in the mountains above the river gorge thirty miles away.

Douglas knew now that a village had been massacred because of this slim girl, whose revelations had astonished them all. If what she said was true — and he saw no reason to doubt her — she was one of the most wanted people in Yugoslavia, hounded by Germans, Italians and Četniks alike. For a while, Douglas had found himself wondering whether she was, in fact, the mythical Tito, the Partisan leader feared so much by the enemy, but as her tale unfolded that notion had gradually been dispelled.

Mila's father, Douglas had learned, was a writer living in London. He had been there since 1921, living a life of exile that was not entirely self-imposed. He was a Communist, and had escaped from Yugoslavia one step ahead of the police authorities and almost certain imprisonment for subversive political activity. He had eventually reached England by devious routes, in a penniless state and bringing with him one suitcase full of clothing, a wife

suffering from tuberculosis, a three-year-old daughter and a command of the English language that had enabled him to eke out a living writing a twice-weekly column for a left-wing political newspaper.

So, in an atmosphere of embittered poverty and political fervour that Karl Marx would have recognized immediately, Mila had spent her formative years. After a basic education completed at the age of fourteen, she had worked as a waitress six days a week and been tutored by her father in the evenings, her mother having succumbed to disease in the meantime. Finally, in the summer of 1938, she had decided that her new-found knowledge and power of oratory could be better employed elsewhere, and so, with money saved from her tips, she had bought a one-way rail ticket across Europe to the homeland she could not remember, and had departed with her father's blessing.

Ignoring the personal risks involved, she had used the contacts given to her by her father to get in touch with the Yugoslav Communists. From then on, her life had become that of a professional revolutionary, with all its attendant dangers; continual hide-and-seek with the police, fugitive journeys across the length and breadth of Yugoslavia, escapes across the frontier — but always to return and carry on with her revolutionary mission.

It was in Belgrade, some months after her arrival, that she had first met Josip Broz, recently returned from Moscow, where he had been officially appointed Secretary General of the Yugoslav Communist Party.

'Soon afterwards,' she explained to Douglas, 'we moved the Party headquarters to Zagreb. We now had twelve thousand members, all of them dedicated to the cause, all totally under the spell of Josip's dynamism.'

'What sort of man is he?' Douglas asked.

Mila smiled. 'Very forceful — a born organizer. Always telling people to do this, do that. *Ti* and *to*, as we say in our language. That's how he got his

nickname.’

Douglas stared at her, the first pieces of the jigsaw at last beginning to fall into place. ‘Tito? You mean this — this Josip Broz is Tito? The man we’re here to … make contact with?’ Masters’ parting words had suddenly sprung to his mind. He had better keep quiet about that, he told himself.

When the Germans invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941, Tito’s Partisans had at once begun a campaign of active resistance. Two months later, on the eve of Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union, Partisan units were active in every part of the country, and shortly afterwards Tito sent out a call for all the peoples of Yugoslavia to rise in rebellion against the invaders. At the same time, he summoned the leaders of all the active Partisan brigades to a meeting in the Serbian town of Stolice, which was under revolutionary control, to organize a proper military campaign.

‘It was inspiring,’ Mila told Douglas, and there was something more than fervour in her voice. ‘They came from all over the land — young and old, men and women, on horseback and on foot, wearing improvised uniforms or the traditional dress of their native regions. There were seventy thousand of us then, spread throughout the country. We had pride and courage and determination, but what we needed above all were weapons and ammunition.’

Prompted by Douglas, she told her story in fragments during their short periods of rest. So far, as they climbed higher into the mountains, they had been lucky; the few peasants they had sighted had looked at them curiously and then turned a blind eye. Of the enemy there had been no sign, except that once a formation of twin-engined aircraft — probably Junkers 88s — had passed high overhead. Mila reassured the SAS officer that they ought to be relatively safe until much later in their journey, when they approached the mountain strongholds still held by the Partisans. Then they would have to

pass through more than one cordon of enemy troops — but a march of three or four days lay ahead of them before they needed to worry about that.

The uprising, Mila went on to say, had really begun in Montenegro, which had been occupied by the Italians. She had been in command of a Partisan company in the province at the time, a young star rising fast towards a zenith of authority.

'We routed them,' she said simply. 'Even though we had few automatic weapons, in a matter of days we drove the Italians almost into the Adriatic. We captured four thousand of them, took away all their weapons and then let them go; we had nowhere to hold them and nothing to feed them on. The Italians later sent five divisions across the border from Albania, but it took them a year to establish a new authority here. Even then, they were only able to control the towns and the main roads.'

Mila's eyes suddenly shone with hatred. 'The Italians, for all their faults, were kinder masters than the Germans. Our people found that out in Serbia, where the revolt also spread quickly. I still remember the words of that swine Keitel, the order issued to the German occupation troops. In reprisal for the life of a German soldier the general rule should be capital punishment for fifty to one hundred Communists. The manner of execution must have a frightening effect …'

She paused and turned her face away. When she spoke again, her voice trembled. 'They killed six thousand men, women and children in Mačva, and seven thousand more in Kraljevo. At Kragujevac, in October 1941, they murdered two and a half thousand, the whole male population. Classes of schoolboys were marched out and shot …' She choked on the memory, and fell silent.

They had camped for the night high on the mountainside, beneath a rocky overhang. The air was ratified and bitterly cold, but they dared not light a

fire. Each man kept warm as best he could under the single blanket he carried in his pack; Douglas had given his to Mila, partly out of courtesy and partly because he did not feel the cold as much as most. It was at times like this that he had cause to be grateful for his upbringing in the Scottish Highlands.

He was aware that some of the others were also listening to Mila's words. Since talking was one good way of passing what promised to be a sleepless night, he urged her gently to continue. A cigarette might have helped her, Douglas thought, but for obvious reasons he had forbidden smoking. Conolly, sensing that something was needed, wordlessly passed over a jar of plum brandy; she took a few sips and then passed it to Douglas, who also drank. Almost immediately, warmth began to flow through his veins, but he knew that the feeling of wellbeing was illusory; alcohol had the effect of lowering the body temperature, and at these altitudes too much could be dangerous.

Prompting the girl, Douglas said, 'Of course, I've heard about the German atrocities — the camps and so on. But I wouldn't have believed them capable of wholesale massacres — not the German Army, at any rate — if I hadn't seen what they did to those people in the village back there.'

She rounded on him in sudden fury that took him aback. The harshness of her tone caused the others to stare at her too, their faces pale blobs in the starlight.

'You fool! The Germans didn't do that — those people were murdered by those German-paid scum, the Četniks!' Her outburst over, she was suddenly contrite. 'I'm sorry. You naturally assumed that the "enemy" I spoke of earlier, the ones that were on my trail, were the Germans or Italians. In fact they were Mihajlović's men. The same men to whom you, the British, are dropping supplies and arms.'

Douglas was silent for a while, digesting this surprising piece of information. At length he said, quietly — for he was conscious that the sound

of raised voices could carry a long way in this crisp air — ‘Let me get this clear. You’re telling me that the Četniks are in league with the Germans?’ He suddenly thought of the SOE agents who had been dropped to liaise with Mihajlović. ‘If what you say is true, it’s the answer to at least one mystery. But please go on. I want to hear the whole story.’

And so, as the night passed, she told him in as much detail as she could muster about the events of the past months, events which had turned everything supposedly known about the Yugoslav Resistance by British Intelligence completely upside down. Douglas listened with a growing sense of dismay, and an awareness that God knew how many lives had been wasted because the British Government had been backing the wrong horse. Even as the girl spoke, his mind was working overtime, wrestling with the problem of what he might do to put matters right.

At first, attempts had been made to form a united front between the Communists and the Četniks, but the difficulties had been apparent right from the beginning. Ideology was one of the main problems, and it was soon clear that the Partisans and the Royalists could never reconcile their opinions. Even before negotiations finally broke down, fighting had occurred between Partisan and Četnik units; the Četniks helped the Germans to drive the Partisans out of some of their Serbian strongholds, and as time went by Mihajlović’s forces operated increasingly with the Germans and Italians, accepting arms and payment in return for taking part in major offensives against Tito’s men.

Mila was able to give Douglas a complete description of those offensives, together with details of the enemy units involved — facts which he committed to memory, asking her to repeat herself when he was unsure of something. If he came out of Yugoslavia alive, he was going to make certain that the authorities knew everything there was to know.

The first German offensive against the Partisans had begun in western Serbia in September 1941, the Germans committing three divisions, plus police and auxiliary forces — a total of eighty thousand men — against twenty-five thousand Partisans organized in twenty-three detachments. The offensive had developed in two distinct phases: the first an assault on the Partisan headquarters at Užice, the second a pincer movement aimed at trapping the retreating Partisan forces. Battered by tanks and bombers, the Partisans had somehow managed to hold on to Užice until the end of November, when Tito had given the order to withdraw. He himself, machine-pistol in hand, had got away on foot only twenty minutes before the first German troops entered the town.

The German plan to encircle the Partisans, however, had failed. The main body had crossed the River Lim into Bosnia and kept on the move through December and January, dragging their wounded and equipment in bullock carts, ever higher into the mountains through ice and blizzard and deep snow, with little food. Three thousand died from exposure and wounds on that terrible march before the survivors reached the Bosnian town of Foča, where Tito set up a temporary headquarters until the summer of 1942.

Despite the deprivations and constant danger, by November 1942 Tito had an army of over a hundred thousand men and women, organized into twenty-eight brigades. Throughout the summer and autumn, although they were driven out of Foča, the Partisans succeeded in fighting off renewed enemy offensives against their mountain strongholds.

‘I fought in the defence of Mount Kozara, in Bosnia,’ Mila told Douglas proudly. ‘There were three and a half thousand of us, against twenty thousand Germans, Italians and Četniks, supported by tanks and aircraft. That was when we first knew those Četnik swine were supporting the enemy. They couldn’t defeat us, though; we fought them off, inflicting heavy losses. But

they had their revenge, in a way … They rounded up five thousand old men, women and children from the villages in the area and shipped them off to their death camps.'

She fell silent for a long time, and Douglas thought that she was dozing. But after a while, she said: 'For us, it was a time for hatred. Hatred of the enemy, and yes, of the British too, who were still dropping supplies to Mihajlović. Hatred of the mountains, for now we were on the march again, this time across a hundred and fifty miles of country into western Bosnia. Here we fought the Croats, and beat them too. But we could not go on for ever.'

Her voice sounded weary now, and Douglas found himself half wishing that she would go to sleep. But the dawn was still a long way off, and the night's cold as bitter as ever.

'Our wounded were dying of gangrene, blood-poisoning and tetanus. In the winter there was frost-bite, too, and an outbreak of typhus. We had neither bandages nor disinfectant, not to mention drugs and surgical instruments. Outside Yugoslavia, we were in contact only with the Russians. Over the radio, we appealed to them for medicines, ammunition, boots, anti-typhus serum, and material for uniforms. They said they would supply everything, so we built an airstrip to receive them. For thirty-seven days and nights we waited in the freezing temperatures and deep snow for the Soviet aircraft to arrive. But they didn't arrive, and eventually we were told that they would not be coming at all.'

There was no note of condemnation in her voice, as there had been when she spoke of Britain's aid to the Četniks. It was, Douglas supposed, because she was a dedicated Communist, and in her eyes the Soviet Union could do no wrong. He made no comment on the matter, and she continued her story.

'That was last April. In the meantime the enemy had launched another

offensive against us, with a hundred and fifty thousand troops. All we could do, encumbered as we were with thousands of sick and wounded, was to make another fighting retreat back into east Bosnia. From there, the plan was to reach the high mountains of Montenegro, where we believed we would be safe.' In the darkness, Douglas sensed the woman's shudder, and knew that it was not entirely a product of the cold.

'That journey to Montenegro was a nightmare. We fought every step of the way, our mobile columns protecting the rear and the flanks of our long columns. By day, we were bombed and strafed almost continuously. Many died. But we kept on, forcing our way through the enemy's lines to cross the Neretva river, nearly a hundred miles north-west of here. On the line of the river stood an Italian division and twelve thousand Četniks. We cut the Italians to pieces and routed the Četniks utterly. Then, with four thousand wounded, we crossed the river. The water was icy and waist-deep, as well as fast-flowing; the crossing took seven days, and many of our weakest people were swept away, or were killed in the air attacks. But we crossed the river, and so we reached the mountains.'

'Are the Partisan forces still here — in Montenegro, I mean?' Douglas asked. If they were, it would make his task a great deal easier. Mila gave a sigh.

'I can't tell,' she said. 'When I left Tito's headquarters, three weeks ago, terrible fighting was in progress. The Germans had thrown in one of their crack Panzer divisions — the "Prinz Eugen", I think it was called. My orders were to break through the enemy lines with a small party of men and head south to enlist the help of the people in the villages here. The plan was to form small groups of saboteurs who would attack the enemy in the rear areas, causing diversions to take some of the pressure off the Partisans. But we ran into an ambush, and I was the only survivor. I escaped in the dark, and

decided to continue my mission alone. What I didn't know,' she continued at length, 'was that all this part of Montenegro was under Četnik control. Word of my presence spread, and they were soon on my trail. The villagers back there sheltered me. This morning, I got up to … answer nature's call when I saw the enemy coming. There was nowhere to run, so I hid in the manure heap. That was where you found me. Oh God, I thought that you were Četniks and that you were going to … those poor people …' She broke off, sobbing.

The hardness, Douglas thought, is only on the outside. He reached out a hand and patted her on the shoulder, uncertain about how to cope with the situation.

'It's all right,' he said gruffly. 'You're quite safe now. Nothing's going to happen to you. Try and get some sleep, now. We'll go on at first light.'

Mila murmured something, and Douglas sensed her movement as she settled into a more comfortable position. A moment later, there was a rattle of small stones as Conolly crept up.

'D'you fancy another drop of brandy, sir?' he asked. Douglas declined, and asked who was on watch. Conolly told him that it was Olds's turn, and cautioned the Irishman again to go easy on the spirit. Then, feeling slightly numb with cold and fatigue, he gradually drifted off to sleep.

He awoke groggily to a lightening sky and the feeling of someone shaking his shoulder urgently. Instinctively, he reached out for his MP-40. In the distance, someone was screaming.

It was Forbes, the SOE man, who had raised the alarm, for he had taken the dawn watch. Now Douglas followed him to the edge of their little plateau and peered down into the valley below, where the road curved round the mountainside. Along the road three figures were running, as yet shadows in the early twilight. The first one was a woman — that much was clear from

the terrified shrieks that were coming from her. Her pursuers shouted to one another, and one laughed harshly as he ran. Both increased their speed and slowly began to overhaul the fugitive.

Douglas found himself silently counting off the paces between the leading man and the fleeing woman. She had stopped screaming now and was running as though the devils of hell were in pursuit of her, head back, her long hair streaming behind her.

She had no chance of getting away, and she knew it. With a last despairing cry she hurled herself off the road and began to claw her way up the hillside, scrabbling at the stones in desperation. She was heading almost directly towards Douglas's vantage point.

Beside him, he heard the metallic sound of Forbes cocking his machine-pistol and reached out a restraining hand.

'No shooting,' he hissed. 'Wait!'

Thirty yards below him, there was another scream as the panting man reached out in a lunge and caught hold of the woman's ankle. She fell and he dragged her towards him. He forced himself on top of her, pulling her roughly round to face him. The screaming was incessant now as he strove to pin her flailing arms under his knees.

The second man caught up and flopped down heavily beside the struggling figures. He was laughing in short, gasping barks. The first man, who had now succeeded in trapping the woman's arms, said something to him. Still laughing, he got to his knees and began to tear at her clothing.

Douglas pulled out his combat knife and half turned, showing the weapon to Conolly, who nodded. No words were necessary. As the two men got to their feet, Douglas calculated mentally how long it would take them to cover the distance to the three writhing figures.

Even as Douglas made his move, a small, lithe shape shot past him and

bounded silently down the slope. The dawn light glinted on the knife Mila held in her right hand. Her arms outstretched for balance, she seemed to float over the rocks. She was on the ground below before Douglas and Conolly had gone a couple of yards.

The man clawing at the woman's clothing was the first to die. The deadly knife flickered as Mila swung past, changing direction with the agility of a mountain goat. The man fell back, clutching at the gash across his throat, an incipient scream choking off in blood. Mila pirouetted round him, her knife continuing its arc. The second assailant tried to rise, his hands releasing the woman on the ground and rising to ward off the expected blow. The blade flashed beneath his elbows and slid into his diaphragm, the point seeking his heart. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Douglas and Conolly were still only half-way down the slope. Mila was still now, standing like an avenging angel over the still-quivering corpses of the two men. The woman on the ground gave a long wail, a mixture of gratitude, relief and disbelief. Struggling to her knees, she clasped both arms around her saviour's lower legs, sobbing uncontrollably.

The woman was, in reality, a girl in her middle teens, barefoot and dirty. Her voluminous skirt, which she had hitched up in order to run faster, now hung in tatters round her legs. They were, Douglas noted, very attractive legs. He wished that she would cover them up.

With Conolly's help, he gently disengaged the girl from Mila, who began to talk soothingly to her. The sobbing gradually ceased, but it was several minutes before Mila was able to relay the gist of the girl's story to the SAS men.

'It's the Četniks again,' she said grimly. 'Perhaps not the same ones we have already encountered, because the girl says that there are twenty of them, and they arrived in two trucks. They seized her village yesterday afternoon;

it’s about a mile up the road. The young men are away fighting with the Partisans — some of the younger women, too. You can probably gather the rest. The Četniks murdered every male they could find, no matter what his age, and drove the older women away into the mountains. Then they herded the young women into the church. There are fifteen young ones, including this one. All of them have been raped repeatedly.’

The matter-of-fact tone of Mila’s voice sent a chill up Douglas’s spine. It was more horrible, in a way, than the cold-blooded speed and efficiency she had shown in dealing with the two men. Douglas was at last beginning to have an inkling of what ordinary people were being forced to go through in this tragic, war-torn land.

The others came down from the high ground at his summons, checking their weapons. From Mila, they learned that the village was situated below the mountain road by a fast-flowing stream that fed the Morača river. Mila got the trembling girl to draw a rough sketch of its layout in the dust. Douglas saw that the church where the women were being held captive was at the far end. So much the better; his men would be able to use the houses for cover.

Douglas thought for a moment, then turned to Lieutenant Mason.

‘Pussy, we’re going to sort these bastards out. They’re the enemy, after all, and I’m damn sure we can use their vehicles. Listen, I want you to bring up the rear with this girl. Stay clear of the action. If we run into real trouble and come off worst, get the hell out of it and head back to the coast. Steal a fishing boat, or something. Just do your best to get back and tell the brass hats what we know. Right?’

Mason nodded. ‘Right. I don’t like it, but you’re the boss.’

Moments later, after a rapid briefing, Douglas led his men and Mila along the road at a fast trot. He had placed the Partisan girl in the middle of the group and given her strict instructions to refrain from any heroics. One

precipitate move on her part could land them all in deep trouble.

As they rounded the flank of the mountain the road began to dip towards the valley. The light of the rising sun was touching the mountain peaks now, and a reflected ray fell on the village, which nestled in a patch of fertile land that looked incongruous amid these barren slopes.

The layout of the village was exactly as the girl had described it. The small stone church stood at the eastern end, beyond the huddle of low houses. The two trucks were parked just off the track that led to the little settlement, beside the stream that gurgled down from the mountains to pass through the village on its way to the Morača, deeper in the valley.

Douglas knelt in the shelter of some rocks and surveyed the scene from a distance of a couple of hundred yards. As he watched, a man, naked except for a shirt, staggered out of the church and urinated on the step. Then he reeled back inside, clutching at the door for support. Douglas turned to the others.

‘It doesn’t look as though they’re expecting trouble,’ he said quietly. ‘They haven’t posted any sentries. Remember — no shooting if we can help it. I don’t want to alert the whole damn neighbourhood.’

They ran down into the village, ready to hit the ground at the first sign of danger, their MP-40s cocked and ready for action. Silently, they cleared each house as they came to it; as Douglas had suspected, the only tenants were corpses.

The tiny church had only one door and a single window, the latter in the east-facing wall. From inside the building came the sound of deep snoring and subdued whimpering. Douglas nodded to the others, flattened himself against the wall, took a firmer grip on his MP-40 and stepped noiselessly inside.

Men were asleep everywhere, sprawled on the floor or across the wooden

pews. At the eastern end of the building, by the altar, the women sat huddled together. Most seemed to be in an exhausted sleep, but one, a dark, wild-eyed creature, saw Douglas and the others sidling into the building and gave a small, bird-like cry of alarm. It did not disturb the sleeping men, but one or two of the other women came awake, their eyes wide and mouths trembling in fear at the sight of the armed men. Reassuringly, Douglas placed a finger to his lips, then drew the same finger across his throat, pointing to the sprawled bodies of the Četniks. Hope flickered in the dark-shadowed eyes of the women, who sat like obedient statues.

Mila by-passed Douglas and, stepping over a recumbent body, stood protectively with her back to the suffering women. Her eyes blazed with suppressed fury. Douglas raised an admonitory hand, cautioning her not to make any sudden move.

Douglas's men were all in place now, the muzzles of their MP-40s menacing the snorting Četniks. Douglas walked over to the nearest of them, a black-bearded giant with a mat of chest hair that was befouled with sour wine and vomit, and kicked him sharply in the ribs. The man, who was wearing a pair of unbuttoned riding breeches and boots, grunted. Douglas kicked him again, and this time the Četnik's eyes came open. He was lying on his back in the aisle, his arms outstretched. His mouth gaped, revealing blackened, irregular teeth. Douglas almost gagged at the stench of stale alcohol.

Without a word, he rammed the muzzle of his MP-40 hard into the Četnik's mouth. Teeth splintered and the man gave a muffled scream. Douglas jabbed harder and the man choked on the cold metal. Blood spurted from his upper lip where the foresight had torn into it. Douglas relaxed the pressure very slightly, and the man got the message. He lay there unmoving, eyes marbled in shock, his body rigid except for the tremors of fear that shuddered through it.

‘Wake up the other bastards,’ Douglas ordered. His voice sounded unnaturally loud as it echoed round the church. ‘Mila, tell them not to move as much as a finger, or we’ll kill them. And tell those women they have nothing to fear from us. I don’t want a lot of screeching females on my hands. When you’ve done that, go and find whatever rope you can lay your hands on. The sooner we’ve got this lot trussed up, the happier I’ll feel.’

Amid the grunts and groans of the Četniks, now being roughly aroused from their drunken stupor, her voice blazed at him. ‘What do you mean, trussed up? They should be shot out of hand! Isn’t that what you’re going to do? Give me a gun, and —’

‘Shut up, and do as you’re told!’ Douglas’s voice cracked like a whip-lash, carrying an unmistakable note of authority. ‘You might be a big shot in the Partisans, but right now I’m giving the orders. So get on with it, or I’ll kick your pretty little backside ’til your nose bleeds buttermilk!’

Mila flushed deep red, and for a moment Douglas thought she was going to fling herself at him. Then, suddenly demure, she nodded and did as he had asked. A few minutes later, after a search of some outbuildings, she returned with several lengths of rope. Within a short while the Četniks were securely trussed to the pews. They seemed stunned and uncomprehending, and made no protest — apart from one man, who appeared to be some sort of officer and who spat what sounded like a torrent of curses at Douglas. Olds tapped him gently behind the left ear with the butt of his MP-40, and he subsided.

With the Četniks secured, Douglas ordered Mila to shepherd the women outside. The wild-eyed one came up to him, clutching the rags of her dress; her face and lips were bruised, and tears of gratitude ran in rivulets down her cheeks. She said something to him and he shook his head, not understanding. Mila spoke to her and the woman suddenly seized his hand, planting kisses on it. Embarrassed, he shook her off, noticing that his men were grinning

broadly at his discomfiture.

‘Don’t stand there gawping,’ he snapped at them. ‘Olds, check out the trucks. The rest of you, take a look at those weapons and see if there’s anything that might be useful.’ The Četniks, he had noticed, had piled their guns carelessly in a corner of the church, together with their ammunition bandoliers. He saw at a glance that the weapons were mainly German Mk.98 carbines, with a few British Lee-Enfield .303 rifles thrown in — supplied to Mihajlović’s forces by courtesy of the RAF, he imagined.

Outside, he breathed deeply of the dawn air to clear his nostrils of the smell of sweat that permeated the church. Looking towards the mountain road, he saw the figures of Mason and the fugitive girl emerge cautiously on to it and waved to them. Mason waved back and the two began the descent towards the village.

The women he and his men had just freed were scattering among the houses. A terrible wailing rent the air as they discovered the bodies of their loved ones. Douglas and the others, with no stomach for this kind of thing, went over to where Olds was inspecting the trucks.

‘They’re Opels, sir,’ he reported. ‘Three-tonners, not very different from our Bedfords. Looks as though they’ve taken a bit of a hammering, but if they’ve been flogged up and down mountains for months on end I’m not surprised. Better than walking, though,’ he added thoughtfully.

At that moment, a scream reached them. It was the most hideous, animal sound Douglas had ever heard, and it was coming from the church. It did not last long. Cursing himself for a fool, for not having placed a guard on the prisoners, he led the race back to the building.

As he burst inside, he was just in time to see a meat cleaver bury itself in the neck of the last living Četnik. The others were in bloody rags, hacked to death by the mob of screaming, laughing, hysterical women who had gone

back to the church unseen, armed with whatever weapons they had been able to find in the charnel-houses that had once been their homes. Dappled in blood, they continued hacking at the lifeless bodies until their frenzy left them and they subsided to the floor, oblivious of the red pools that were spreading over it, their vengeance exhausting itself in racking sobs.

And beyond them, Mila sat cross-legged on the altar, smiling.

Chapter Five

‘Stan,’ Douglas said quietly to Brough, ‘I must be out of my bloody head even to contemplate the idea.’

He looked at the village women, who seemed to have recovered remarkably quickly from their ordeal. They had buried their dead as best they could in the hard earth, assisted by the SAS men; now, having exchanged their dresses for oddments of male clothing and equipped themselves with the Četniks’ rifles and ammunition bandoliers, they stood in a little group and stared expectantly at the British officer.

‘Well, sir, it would be a bit unkind to leave ’em here,’ Brough said. ‘They can’t stay in the village, and there’s nowhere else for ’em to go. Besides, what’s-her-name here says that they’re all pretty good shots — apparently everyone is in this part of the world. They might come in useful. After all, there are only ten of us, and things are likely to get pretty hot when the opposition gets on our trail.’

Douglas thought for a moment, then nodded. ‘That’s true. The word that we’re here is going to spread before very long.’ He reached a decision suddenly, then turned to Mila.

‘All right, they can come along. But understand this — they are under my orders, and no one else’s. If any of them start getting uppity, they’re out on their ears. That goes for you, too. Now tell them.’

Anger smouldered briefly in Mila’s eyes, then she turned to address the women. They listened gravely, then the wild-eyed one came forward and stood in front of Douglas. She gazed directly at him and spoke a few sentences. He looked enquiringly at Mila, who supplied the translation.

‘She wishes to thank you — all of you — for what you have done. On behalf of the others, she swears loyalty to you. You need have no fear that they will obey your orders. They will fight to the death if need be. After all, they have nothing to lose.’

Douglas nodded slowly, then smiled at the wild-eyed woman, who smiled back. Just for a moment, the wildness left her eyes; then she was the animal again, on the defensive and wary as she stepped back to join the rest of her group. A sudden burst of desire flickered through Douglas like a bolt of lightning. He took a deep breath and stifled it. The thought of what the Četniks had done to the woman helped.

The sun was high, and he was anxious to be off. If reports were correct of the areas where heavy fighting was in progress between Partisan and enemy forces, they were now faced with the prospect of negotiating a hundred miles of fierce, mountainous country before they were close to coming within sight of their goal. Their route lay due north, straight through the Durmitor Mountains — and territory which was now in enemy hands. The possession of the two trucks brought with it both advantages and disadvantages: on the credit side there was relative ease of travel, but against this was the fact that they would be easy to spot from the air. They would have to keep away from the main mountain roads as much as possible, but Olds had assured Douglas that the Opels would be able to cope with all but the roughest going.

Douglas spread out his map on the bonnet of one of the trucks and explained his intentions to the others, tracing the route he planned to take with his index finger.

‘The road we’ve been following curves down to cross the Morača just here, a few miles short of the monastery. We don’t need to go there any more. Then we’ll head north through Šavnik and this place here, Pljevlja. That’s as far as I’m going to plan ahead at the moment. The main thing is to keep

heading north and keep our eyes skinned. If all goes well we should reach Partisan country to the west of Sarajevo tomorrow or the day after, depending on what the going's like and who we meet up with. Any questions?'

There were none.

'Very well, then,' Douglas continued. 'We'll split up as follows. Lieutenant Mason in the rear truck, with Olds driving and Conolly in the back with ten of these females. I hope you'll be able to cope all right, Conolly.'

The Irishman grinned and said nothing. 'I'll take the front vehicle,' Douglas said, 'with the sergeant-major driving. The rest of my party in the back with five of the women. Mila, I want you up front with me in case we have to do any fast talking. Olds, if anybody in your vehicle spots any potential trouble, sound your horn three times. If the horn doesn't work, flash your lights. We'll then stop and find out what's up. Okay?'

Douglas surveyed his motley command. The expressions on the faces of some of the women, he noticed, were positively eager as Mila explained to them what was going on. Feeling a little more cheerful, he gave the order to mount up.

Then Forbes, who had been keeping a watchful eye on the sky, saw an aircraft. It was a Fieseler Storch, a high-wing monoplane with a wide, fixed undercarriage. Douglas knew it well from his time in the desert, where it had been widely used for observation and light transport. The legendary Rommel himself had used one to drop in unexpectedly on his front-line units.

The Storch buzzed towards them like a great insect, its cockpit windows glittering in the sun. It was low, following the contours of the mountains as it flew along, its wings rocking slightly in the turbulence. There was no chance, Douglas knew, that they would not be spotted by its crew.

One or two of the women became agitated as the aircraft approached, growing larger by the second. Douglas turned sharply to Mila.

‘Tell them not to run away,’ he ordered. ‘When the plane comes overhead, I want everyone to wave. With any luck, the pilot will think we’re Četniks.’

Mila quickly passed on the instruction. All eyes turned towards the Storch as it drew nearer; the note of its engine changed slightly as the pilot throttled back to lose a little height, then its drone swelled again as he levelled out, dropping a wing to circle the village. Douglas could make out every detail. The aircraft, he saw, still bore desert camouflage; it was sky-blue underneath, with its upper surfaces a mottled mixture of sand and grey-green. The white-edged black crosses stood out starkly. The heads and shoulders of the two-man crew were clearly visible in the cockpit.

Douglas raised a hand and waved, and the others followed suit. Beside him, Forbes said, ‘We could shoot him down from this distance.’ Douglas told him not to be a bloody fool.

The Storch continued to circle, flying very slowly. Suddenly, the pilot levelled the aircraft’s wings and came down so low that his wheels almost touched the ground. The engine roared as the Storch picked up speed, running in from the far end of the village.

‘He’s going to land!’ someone cried.

‘No he bloody well isn’t,’ Stan Brough shouted. ‘Hit the ground!’

Douglas saw at once what the sergeant-major meant. The machine-gun in the rear of the Storch’s glasshouse cockpit was swivelling round to point directly at them. An instant later, as the aircraft swept past, it opened up in a rapid chatter. Bullets hissed and crackled around the prone figures, sending up spurts of dust. Someone gave a high-pitched scream that was cut off abruptly.

The machine-gun ceased firing as the Storch banked steeply a few hundred yards away to make another run. Douglas scrambled to his feet as the aircraft approached head-on.

‘He hasn’t got a front gun!’ he yelled. ‘We’re safe for the moment — let him have it before he comes abeam!’

He cocked his MP-40 and raised the butt to his shoulder, snuggling it firmly against his cheek and taking careful aim on the Storch’s windscreen. He forced himself to wait until the aircraft grew large in his sights, and knew that the others were doing the same. Nearby, rifles began to crack as some of the women opened fire.

Douglas pressed the trigger. In front of him, the aircraft seemed to fill the whole of the sky. The bullets from ten MP-40s converged on it. Everything was happening in slow motion, as though in a dream. Pieces broke away from the Storch and fluttered astern in its slipstream. The broad windscreen suddenly became opaque. An instant later, Douglas and the others were throwing themselves flat again as the Storch passed a few feet overhead in a bellow of noise. There was a smell of oil and doped fabric and hot metal.

The drone of the engine faltered. Douglas swivelled round on his knees, just in time to see the Storch’s right wing-tip hit the ground. The whole wing crumpled, very slowly, accompanied by a series of cracks from the struts and the rent of fabric. The aircraft’s nose dug into the earth and the whole machine cartwheeled, scattering pieces in all directions. Douglas was reminded of the fate of a model aeroplane he had built long ago, a masterpiece that had been weeks in the creating and seconds in the destroying, caught in a sudden downdraught on a Scottish hillside.

The Storch completed three cartwheels and was half-way through another when its progress was checked abruptly by one of the stone houses. There was a hollow thud, and a bright tongue of flame shot out of the wreckage. There was no gradual spreading of the fire; one moment there was just the single tongue of flame, and the next the whole of the wreckage was engulfed in a fireball. Amid the inferno, ammunition started to explode in a series of

staccato cracks. Slowly, a column of oily smoke began to rise into the mountain air.

‘That’ll teach ’em to fart in church,’ an unidentified voice said.

Douglas found himself feeling vaguely annoyed by the remark. What had just happened was precisely what he had wished to prevent. That column of smoke would soon be visible for miles. He got to his feet and looked around.

‘Anybody hurt?’ he asked.

It was Conolly who replied. ‘One of the women has bought it, sir — the one who was running for her life from those two bastards back there.’ He pointed.

A few yards away, Mason was kneeling by the body of the girl they had so recently rescued from the Četniks. She lay on her back, her eyes wide open. A bullet had passed through her throat, severing the top of the spinal column.

Mason gently closed the girl’s eyes and rose to his feet. ‘What a waste,’ he said, his voice trembling slightly. ‘What a senseless, bloody waste.’

Mila came up and stood beside him. ‘Perhaps it is as well,’ she said quietly. ‘Her husband was shot by the Četniks some weeks ago, and yesterday they murdered her little son.’

Douglas felt it was time he made his voice heard. ‘Never mind about that now,’ he said roughly. ‘Jerry is obviously on to us, and the sooner we get out of here the better. Put that girl in one of the houses — there’s no time for burial ceremonies. Get moving!’

Two of the men carried the girl into one of the huts and laid her as decently as they could on a bed and covered her with a blanket. Meanwhile, Olds had made a rapid inspection of the two vehicles and was relieved to find that they had not been hit in the air attack. The German gunner had clearly been concentrating on human targets; he would have done better to have knocked out the trucks. Now that the enemy knew — or seemed to know — their whereabouts, no transport would have posed a real problem for Douglas and

his men.

Later, as the trucks lurched up the steep mountain road, Douglas found himself wondering over and over again how the enemy had come to know that he and his men were inside Yugoslavia. Perhaps the air attack had been accidental — perhaps the crew of the Storch had mistaken them for Partisans. But Mila had assured him that no Partisan groups were operating this far south. No doubt the key to the puzzle would reveal itself sooner or later.

Progress was painfully slow; at this rate it would take them five or six hours to cover the twenty miles or so to Šavnik. What awaited them there was anybody's guess, but Douglas's map told him that if they were to go any farther they would have to cross the River Komarnica, and he had little doubt that the crossing-point would be guarded. The immediate danger, however, would come from the air, of that he was certain.

'I reckon we have a two-hour start before the balloon goes up,' he told Brough. 'That plane might have radioed our presence, but I doubt it. It was very low, and I've a feeling the mountains will have blocked its transmissions. So, let's assume that it was due back at its base in half an hour. It doesn't turn up, so another plane comes looking for it half an hour after it becomes overdue. Another half-hour to an hour to locate the wreck and raise the alarm. So we've two hours, perhaps more with any luck. What's worrying me is that we have no idea what's up ahead; there could be a Panzer division, for all we know. And it'll only take a radio signal to land us in trouble.'

'Every mile we put behind us is a mile nearer the Partisans,' Mila said. 'Once we're through Šavnik and into the Durmitor Mountains we ought to be relatively safe. I've fought there, and there are plenty of places where a handful of men — or women, for that matter — can hold off an army.'

Douglas looked out of the cab at the rock walls that towered on either side. They shimmered and scorched in the heat of the sun. He was glad that his

men had been able to replenish their water-bottles from the cool stream that ran through the village; the women, too, had brought a supply with them in goatskin containers. The next few hours were going to be very hot. At least, he thought, if they come at us from the air on this stretch, they won't have much room to manoeuvre. On the other hand, neither would the trucks, which were clinging to the twisting mountain road like flies to a wall.

Brough was pleased with the performance of his Opel's three-tonner engine. 'I wish we could produce trucks like this,' he said at one point. 'She's got a two-speed transfer gearbox and front drive shaft — gives a choice of ten forward speeds. Just the job in country of this kind.'

As time went by, Douglas began to lose some of the tension that had remained with him, clutching at the back of his neck since the earlier air attack. There was no reason, he told himself, why they should not get away with it. The main concentrations of enemy troops were a long way to the north, locked in the battle against the Partisans. The area through which they were now passing was likely to be only lightly patrolled — and then by Četnik forces rather than Germans or Italians. He felt certain that if regular enemy troops had been in the vicinity, they would have put a stop to the Četnik atrocities. It seemed that the Germans were using aircraft rather than ground patrols to police this part of Yugoslavia.

In the rear truck, the prospect of an encounter with the enemy was just about the last thing in Liam Conolly's mind. He was sitting in the back of the vehicle, keeping an eye on the women, leaving the cab to Olds and Mason, and he was now wishing that he hadn't. The women, all nine of them, were beginning to give him the creeps. They sat there on the hard benches, swaying in time with the vehicle's motion, their faces carved from stone, never speaking, their eyes blank as they relived the horrors they had been through. Yet Conolly saw the way they stroked and caressed the rifles they

held; there was a chilling rhythm to the movement, as though the women were linked by a single mind with a single purpose. Suddenly, Conolly realized that was the exact explanation: these women, so recently wives and mothers tending their homes and families, now existed only to kill, to exact the maximum penalty of revenge on those who had destroyed their lives.

The river they were still following curved sharply round towards the north and the mountain road suddenly dropped steeply towards the valley to match its course. The road was straighter now, and both vehicles accelerated, their drivers revelling in the sudden absence of hairpin bends and precipitous drops. On either side the mountains loomed, colossal and majestic. Dust boiled behind the trucks, obscuring the rearward view.

They drove on all that day, stopping once in a gorge to rest, eat and refuel the trucks from jerricans lashed to the sides of the vehicles. They passed through Šavnik and found it undefended. The inhabitants of the little town, believing them to be Axis troops, stared sullenly at the Opels as they sped by, or else ignored them altogether. Beyond the town, progress became slower once more as the trucks climbed laboriously from the gorge of the Komarnica to the Sinjajevina plateau, rising seven thousand feet above sea level. It was tiring work, and the men took turns to drive every couple of hours.

From the plateau the road plunged down again towards Žabljak through a landscape that was breath-taking even under these dangerous circumstances. Deep pine forests cloaked the mountains and canyons, affording welcome cover to the Opels as they wound their way through a green semi-twilight.

Ahead of them, the road dipped suddenly again and the forest began to thin out. The leading Opel slowed down and turned off the road, coming to a halt in a small clearing among the trees. Conolly, who was taking his turn at the wheel of the rear vehicle, followed suit and drew up alongside. The Irishman switched off the engine, climbed stiffly from the cab and went across to

Douglas, who was already standing beside his vehicle and examining the map.

‘Anything wrong, sir?’

Douglas looked up and shook his head. ‘I hope not,’ he replied, ‘but I want to do a recce of the river crossing here before we go on. Mila tells me it’s not an easy one, and I don’t want to run into anything unexpected. I want you and Olds to come with me. Lieutenant Mason and the sergeant-major will keep an eye on things until we get back.’

He turned to Brough, who had been talking to Eldridge. ‘Stan, see if you can get the trucks any further under cover, will you? And for God’s sake don’t let any of those females go wandering off, even for a pee.’

Brough grinned. ‘Right, sir. How far’s the river?’

‘About a mile and a half. We should be back well before dark. If we aren’t, you can presume we’ve copped it, in which case get well under cover, stay put for the night and proceed on your own in the morning. Here — I’ll leave you the map, just in case. I’ve memorized the lie of the land up ahead.’

Brough took the map and said: ‘Hope it doesn’t come to that, sir. Good luck.’

Douglas, Olds and Conolly checked their MP-40s and set off through the trees at a brisk trot, their footfalls making no sound on the springy loam, following the line of the road but keeping well under cover. After a few minutes Douglas signalled to them to slow down and they proceeded more cautiously, slipping from tree to tree until they could see clearly what lay ahead of them. The downward slope of the ground steepened rapidly and they crawled the last few yards on their bellies, cradling their machine-pistols in their arms, until they could look down into the valley below. What they saw made their hearts sink.

Far below them, and a few hundred yards away horizontally, the Tara

thundered on its way between towering rock cliffs, which soared three thousand feet into the sky. Halfway down the cliffs, the massive gorge was spanned by a frail-looking viaduct that must itself stand a good five hundred feet above the river. The bridge was suspended by cables that ran from great upright columns at either end. From this distance it did not look strong enough to support the weight of a man, let alone a vehicle.

'That's quite something,' Conolly said quietly. Douglas made no reply. He had taken out his binoculars and was studying the nearest end of the bridge. It was flanked by two red-and-white striped sentry posts, but there was something else too. He focused his binoculars on what appeared to be a jumble of rocks by the roadside, fifty yards short of the bridge.

'Just as I thought,' he murmured, handing the glasses to Conolly. 'See those rocks down there? Well, they aren't. It's actually a very clever piece of work with some camouflage netting. If you look carefully you can see a gun sticking out. It's either an armoured car or a light tank — can't really tell from here.'

He took the binoculars back and scrutinized the other end of the bridge where a small huddle of buildings stood by the road. Tiny figures were moving among them. After a few minutes, Douglas gave the glasses to Olds and took a pencil and small notebook from the pocket of his battledress blouse.

'Both of you take a long look at what's down there,' he ordered, 'and then we'll compare notes.'

Working swiftly, he began to sketch a map of the area below, putting in as much detail as he could. After a while, the others added their own impressions. By now the light was beginning to fail, but there was still enough left for them to compile a fairly accurate picture of their objective.

The sentry posts and the armoured car, or tank, appeared to be the only

defence placed at this end of the bridge. At the far end, however, where the ground began to slope upwards once more, there were two scars of freshly-turned earth, one on either side of the cluster of buildings. Douglas was certain that they were emplacements for either mortars or machine-guns, possibly both. Whatever they were, they were in a sufficiently commanding position to play havoc with anyone approaching the bridge along the road, let alone trying to cross it. And whoever attempted that would first have to deal with the armoured vehicle.

Taking advantage of the remaining light, Douglas scanned the cliffs on either side of the bridge. They were barren. Then, as he surveyed the bridge once more, he caught sight of something he couldn't quite identify, something he had missed on his previous scan. He handed the glasses to Conolly and rubbed his eyes.

'Tell me what you make of that,' he said, 'just under the far end of the bridge, between the two supporting uprights. Something seems to be jutting out from the cliff.'

'Okay, got it.' Conolly was silent for a while, then said, 'I think I know what it is. It's the buttress of an old bridge — you know the sort of thing. The ones you see in Tarzan films, suspended by ropes. They had wooden platforms at either end to give the necessary support. They probably had steps leading down to it from the track.'

'In which case', Douglas mused, 'there's almost certainly another one at this end. Now, if we could get a line across between the two, we'd be able to get a party over without being seen. I'm certain we'd be able to reach the bridge girders from the platform at the far end, and get up on to firm ground that way. It'd be a start.'

'But how, sir?' Olds objected. 'We don't have any rope.'

'True,' Douglas agreed, 'but we do have Lumsden. Have you forgotten

what he’s got with him? Come on, let’s get back.’

The others followed him, temporarily mystified. Then realization dawned in Conolly’s mind. ‘Lumsden,’ he said quietly to himself. ‘Oh, my gawd.’

They jogged back to the clearing where the others were waiting. As it was now getting too dark for anyone to see his sketch map unaided, Douglas ordered his men, together with Mila, to get into the back of one of the trucks and pull the canvas tilt securely into place, forming an effective blackout curtain. He produced his sketch and passed it round so they could study it by the light of a pencil torch. When they had all had a good look, he explained his intentions.

‘First priority is to get across the river unseen, and I think there’s a possible way.’ He told them about the buttresses, then turned to Lumsden. ‘Got your bits and pieces with you?’ he asked.

Lumsden nodded, and reached into his pack. He drew out the component parts of a small but powerful crossbow, then a large skein of what looked like very thin white rope.

Douglas, suddenly feeling unsure of himself, looked at it doubtfully. ‘You’d better explain that particular item,’ he said.

‘It’s something the boffins have come up with,’ Lumsden explained. ‘This is nylon rope. It’s very light and very, very strong. What’s more, it’s reinforced with spider’s web.’

The others looked at him in astonishment, and Lumsden grinned in the dim light. ‘Oh, you’d be surprised what spider’s web is used for,’ he said. ‘It’s got a tensile strength far greater than steel, and it can be stretched for a fifth of its length before it breaks. Don’t ask me how the boffins managed to come up with this idea, or what manufacturing process they used.’

Brough reached out and fingered the rope thoughtfully. ‘This is strong enough to support a man’s weight?’

‘It supports people under parachutes,’ Lumsden said, ‘and that’s without the spider’s web. I’ve got three hundred and fifty feet of rope, sir,’ he said to Douglas. ‘How far is it across the gorge?’

‘I reckon about a hundred yards. It doesn’t give us much leeway, but there should be enough. It’s not the nylon rope that worries me — it’s whether your crossbow bolt will take the strain.’

‘It will,’ Lumsden told him confidently. ‘It’ll go through six inches of oak, and once it’s in it’s in for good. There’s a special attachment on the bolt for clipping on the rope.’

‘Well, we have to give it a try,’ Douglas said, ‘so here’s the plan. We wait until well after dark, then I go down to the bridge along with the sergeant-major, Conolly, Olds, Barber and Lumsden. Once we’re across, our primary task will be to knock out the MG positions on the high ground. Having done that, we’ll come back down to take whoever is guarding the far end of the bridge in the rear.’ He made it sound as if he were about to partake of a Sunday afternoon stroll. ‘Meanwhile,’ the SAS officer continued, ‘I want you, Mr Eldridge, and you, Mr Forbes, to work your way down to a position within sight of the enemy armoured vehicle. I’m assuming you’ve been taught umpteen ways of dealing with tanks and so on?’

Forbes nodded unsmilingly.

‘Good. Then as soon as the shooting starts at our end, go for the armoured vehicle and sort it out. If you can take it in one piece, so much the better. If not, don’t worry. Just eliminate it. Then lay down some covering fire on the two sentry posts.’

He looked at Mila, who was showing signs of becoming agitated. ‘Calm down, you’ll get your turn. Split up your women between the two trucks and make sure they’re ready to start shooting when the time comes. Lieutenant Mason and Mitchell will drive the vehicles.’

Mason looked crestfallen in the dim torchlight, and Douglas grinned at him. ‘I’m leaving you behind, Pussy, because you’d be a bit of a liability when it comes to attacking machine-gun nests. Torpedoes are more in your line. And you, Mitch, because I don’t want to risk any damage to the radio. Incidentally, we leave our packs with the trucks, too; weapons only for this show. We want to be travelling light.’

He paused for a moment, then added: ‘Don’t start your engines until you hear the shooting, then get down the hill as fast as you can. Just before the stretch of road that leads to the bridge, you’ll come to a hairpin bend. Stop the trucks on this side, where they’ll be under cover, and go forward on foot to add to the SOE chaps’ firepower. By that time they should have dealt with the armoured vehicle.’

He looked directly at Mila. ‘This is your big chance. Make an assessment of the situation, and if you can do so without unnecessary casualties, secure this end of the bridge. If anybody tries to get across, knock them out. When you hear three long blasts and two short blasts on a whistle, that’ll be me and it means cease firing. If you don’t hear the whistle, it means we’ve run into serious trouble at my end. In that event, do all you can to get across and lend support. All clear?’

He looked around at their faces. One by one, they gave their assent.

‘Okay. Mila, you’d better go off and brief your women. But tell them to keep quiet — they’ve been very good so far.’ He extinguished the torch as she made to leave the truck.

‘One last thing.’ She turned, a dark shadow against the square of deep twilight, and looked back at him. ‘This goes for all of you. I don’t like to give orders like this, but we’ve no alternative. We can’t take prisoners.’

‘There are those of us,’ Mila said softly, ‘who will regard that as very good news indeed.’ An instant later, like a phantom, she was gone.

Chapter Six

The pine forest sighed and rustled in the night breeze that furrowed its way down the mountain slope towards the valley below, masking the slight sounds made by the six SAS men as they slipped towards their objective. It was well past midnight, and Douglas was banking on the senses of the bridge guards to be at their lowest ebb, dulled by the torpor that grips men in the early hours of the morning. He was leading his party through the forest a quarter of a mile to the left of the road, so that they could approach the bridge from an upstream direction along the lip of the gorge. The night was moonless, and with the dark backdrop of the forest behind them they would be invisible to any watcher on the far side. Whoever manned the sentry posts on this side would more than likely be concentrating on the approaching road — if, indeed, they were concentrating at all.

For the last couple of hundred yards along the edge of the gorge, however, there was no real cover, for the sloping line of forest funnelled outwards from the hairpin bend of the road, leaving the approaches to the bridge clear. It was obvious that the trees had been felled to afford a good field of fire. Douglas and the others went down on their bellies and crawled over this section, deliberately keeping their movements slow and easy. Far below them the river rushed on its course and the sound of it was reassuring, forming a protective blanket of background noise as the bridge loomed larger.

The white stripes of the guard posts' markings were dimly visible now and Douglas forced himself to crawl even more slowly, the others matching his movements. He saw, now, that the posts were positioned a few yards in front of the entrance to the bridge, which was all to the good, for his party would

actually pass behind them as they crawled the last part of the distance. Nevertheless, they would have to be very, very careful. The pungent aroma of strong tobacco reached his nostrils on the breeze, which meant that someone was awake and enjoying an illicit smoke.

Ten yards … five. He was behind the sentry post now, and mercifully still undetected. But he would have to move quickly, for the others behind him were still out in the open and exposed. He slithered forward another couple of yards, reaching out cautiously, and his fingers touched the cold metal of a girder. He grasped its edge firmly and pulled himself forward again until he was right up against it, then encircled it with his other arm.

He was lying right on the edge of the cliff. Looking down, he could make out white foam as the river's torrent narrowed into rapids, channelling through the hundred-yard width of the gorge. And he saw something else, too. Directly below him, spanning most of the width of the modern bridge, a dark object jutted out from the cliff face. It was a platform, a replica of the one he had spotted on the other side.

In a moment, relief swept through him. Then, glancing back quickly to see the dark shape of Lumsden right behind him, he took a firm hold of the girder and hauled himself round it so that his legs were on either side. Clinging to it like a fly, he began to inch his way down.

A few feet lower, the girder bypassed one of the wooden supports of the old platform. Douglas, his hands already feeling raw, transferred his grip to it and continued his descent until he was able to swing his weight on to the platform itself. Breathing hard, he tested the wood with his feet; it seemed sound enough.

Lumsden swung down to join him and at once began unpacking his crossbow and rope. By the time the last of the six reached the platform, he had fastened one end of the rope firmly around a stanchion and the other to

the attachment on his quarrel, which was knocked into place on the crossbow.

Lumsden peered across the gorge, and found that he was unable to see the platform on the other side in the darkness. He would have to shoot by guesswork, praying that the bolt would find its mark in one of the supporting timbers that formed the backing of the platform against the cliff face.

Going down on one knee, he snuggled the butt of the crossbow into the hollow between his shoulder and cheek and aimed at what was the right spot, as far as he could judge. He took a deep breath and began to expel it slowly, his finger tightening on the trigger as he did so. At exactly the right moment, with an expertise born of long practice, he checked his exhalation for a fraction of a second and increased his finger pressure by the final hair's-breadth.

Douglas had expected to hear a loud twang. Instead, the crossbow discharged its bolt with a crack like a subdued pistol shot. Almost immediately, a faintly audible thud sounded from the far side of the gorge.

For a few moments the six men stood rock still, holding their breath, listening for the slightest sound that might herald their discovery by the bridge's guards. Apart from the constant rush of the river, the night was still.

Lumsden gathered in the slack and heaved on the nylon rope with all his strength, then put his lips close to Douglas's ear.

'It'll hold,' he whispered. 'Not much to spare, though.' He untied the end that was fastened to the stanchion, wound the slack tightly around it, then fastened it firmly again. Calmly, he set about dismantling and packing away his crossbow. He, alone among them, had brought his back pack, which he carried in addition to his MP-40.

'I'll bring up the rear, sir, if you don't mind,' he said. 'This'll take a minute or so — the rest of you had better get on your way.'

Douglas, feeling far from confident, grasped the thin rope in both hands and

pulled hard on it before swinging up his legs until he was able to cross his ankles over it. The weight of his MP-40, which was slung tightly across his back, dragged at him as he began to manoeuvre himself across the chasm hand over hand, a yard at a time. Subconsciously, he found himself counting off the distance.

As he progressed, his confidence increased. After all, he told himself, this was only the kind of thing he had done many times during his training, albeit with more conventional ropes. He tried not to think about the rapids far below, broken by jagged rocks.

He reached the half-way point, and knew that the hardest part was still to come. He was hauling his body upwards now, fighting with all the strength of his arms against the pull of gravity. Gasping for breath, aching with exertion and fatigue, he forced himself to think of nothing but the rhythmic movement of his arms and legs, the thrust of his upper and lower limbs working in unison to propel him onwards.

It must be now, he thought, his mind half-dazed with effort. It must be now.

He risked a look down. The outer edge of the platform was almost below him. Another couple of yards … He released the grip of his ankles, one at a time, and swung down to hang by his hands alone. Lumsden's bolt had lodged in the buttress a good ten feet above the platform, but there was no time to worry now about what effect his weight would have if the wood had rotted. He willed his body to go limp and relaxed his grip on the rope, his knees slightly bent. A moment later, his rubber-soled boots hit the platform with a dull thump and he went down on his knees, his outstretched hands breaking his fall. He knew that he had done it all wrongly, that he might have broken a wrist, but just now he didn't care. He was across, and it felt like being born again. Whatever lay ahead of him would seem like far less of a challenge.

The others came across one by one, gasping with exertion as they dropped on to the platform. The buttress in which the quarrel was embedded was beginning to make alarming creaking noises, so the men already across put their backs against it to take some of the strain while the last man, Lumsden, made the dangerous journey.

Douglas looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. There was still half an hour to go before they were scheduled to start their attack. Time enough to get their breath back, then work their way towards the two dugouts.

He listened carefully, straining his ears to catch the sound of anyone patrolling the bridge, but heard nothing except the river. At length, he tapped Brough on the shoulder. It was time to go.

Douglas, with Olds and Lumsden, would tackle the left-hand dugout while Brough, Conolly and Barber attacked the one on the right. The two separate groups now began to climb the girders on opposite sides of the bridge, their boots finding purchase on protruding rivets. The vertical girders joined with horizontal ones, set into massive concrete blocks recessed into the cliff face; between the concrete and the edge of the cliff there was a ledge, just wide enough for a man to stand on and edge his way along.

This Douglas did, followed by his two companions, flattened against the rough concrete. On reaching the edge of the block he crouched, feeling for the ground, taking the utmost pains not to dislodge any loose stones. Swinging his left leg round, he tested the ground; it seemed solid enough, so he took his full weight on his left foot and levered himself through ninety degrees, negotiating the corner.

To his amazement, he found that he was standing on a rough flight of stairs, presumably carved out of the rock by the bridge’s unknown engineers so that they could inspect the supports more readily. He ascended a couple of steps to make way for Olds and Lumsden, who were close behind him.

Douglas led the way up the steps, hoping that Brough's party had enjoyed similar good fortune. At the top he paused, his eyes searching the ground ahead. The bulk of the bridge rose on his right, and he could make out the dark shapes of the buildings beyond. To the front and to the left for a distance the bare ground sloped upwards at an ever-increasing angle until it was lost once more in the line of the forest. Just short of that line of trees, at an angle of about forty-five degrees and perhaps two hundred yards from where they now stood, lay their objective.

Keeping low, the three men moved diagonally up the slope, aiming to by-pass the dugout and get into the cover of the trees. After a hundred yards they got down and crawled, and as he glanced to his right he could now make out the faint mound of the target. Vaguely, he wondered why the twin dugouts had been sited on this side of the river and not the other; from what he had seen, the area south of the Tara seemed to be firmly in enemy hands.

But there was no time to dwell on that now. Reaching the trees, they stood up and worked their way along until they were directly behind the dugout, which was now about fifty yards away. They waited; there was still ten minutes to go before the time he had fixed for the assault to start. He hoped that Brough's team was making good progress.

When it was time, crawling again, they emerged from the trees and made their way down the slope towards the dugout. From this angle, Douglas thought he could see a chink of light, leaving him in no doubt that the dugout was occupied. As they drew nearer he could hear voices, and someone gave a low chuckle of laughter.

A couple of yards short of the dugout he stopped, and indicated that he would go on alone. The tang of recently-turned earth reached him as he crouched in the lee of the dugout's wall, which was constructed of sandbags. The entrance, through which the chink of light was showing, seemed to be

covered by a carelessly-hung square of canvas.

A grenade might have done the trick, but he wanted to be sure of killing everyone inside outright. He stood up, his MP-40 levelled, and reached out until his fingers touched the square of canvas. Then, taking a deep breath, he ripped it aside just as someone gave another laugh.

Inside the dugout, bathed in the dull yellow glow of a paraffin lamp suspended from the handle of a bayonet embedded in a sandbag, three men in shirt sleeves sat cross-legged around a square of blanket, playing cards. Douglas took in the scene in a fraction of a second, and his last impression before he opened fire was of one of the men, who wore a heavy beard, clutching his hand of cards to his chest as his mouth dropped open in surprise.

The MP-40 chattered briefly and the bullets slammed the bearded man on to his back, where he lay shuddering. The muzzle of Douglas's gun continued its arc and the other two men crumpled on the blanket, their blood spattering on their cards and the few coins that lay there. None of the three had uttered a sound.

Douglas called to Olds and Lumsden, and stepped forward into the dugout. Feeling slightly sick, he saw that the bearded man still held his cards, although now they were bullet-torn and stained, Douglas avoided looking at the man's open eyes and instead picked up a tunic that lay nearby, inspecting its flashes.

'Italians,' he announced as the other two came in, slowly lowering their weapons. 'Looks like the 154th Division. These chaps are motorized MG troops — you can tell that from this collar patch, red with three white stripes and a star.'

'Looks like they were taking a break from cleaning their machine-gun, too,' Olds pointed out, indicating an MG that lay semi-stripped by the dugout wall.

It was an Italian Breda, a type of weapon with which Douglas was very familiar from his time in the desert. The slit through which this one was meant to be trained was covered by a groundsheet. Nearby, an open box contained a belt of ammunition.

At that moment there came a rattle of gun-fire. It was some distance away, but there was no mistaking the signature of an MP-40. Brough's attack must be going in, a few seconds late.

'Let's go,' Douglas said, feeling annoyed with himself for having lingered at all. Brough might be in need of help.

They ran towards the road, where they had planned to make rendezvous with the other party midway between the two dugouts. Confused shouting was already coming from the darkness. The sergeant-major was breathing quickly and Douglas asked him if everything was all right.

'Yes, sir, no trouble. The dugout's secure. They never knew what hit 'em.'

A sudden commotion across the river caught their attention. Beyond the bridge, the darkness was split by a lurid tongue of flame, its appearance followed by a cracking explosion. Forbes and Eldridge were taking care of the enemy armoured vehicle.

'Damn,' Douglas swore under his breath. Remembering his patrol's exploits with a captured enemy tank in Tunisia, he had hoped that the SOE men might have been able to take this one intact.

There was more gun-fire as a fire-fight developed between the SOE men and the bridge's guard posts, and more yelling from the direction of the buildings. It was time to create a diversion.

'Stan, take the left side of the road and we'll take the right,' Douglas ordered, 'and keep your heads down. There'll be a lot of stuff flying around.'

Splitting into their two small groups they ran towards the buildings, among which dark figures were running around in a state of apparent confusion.

Some lights came on, and were immediately doused again.

The SAS men held their fire until they were right among the buildings. Someone called out to them in Italian, probably believing them to be the soldiers from the dugouts, and was shot down by Brough.

Douglas threw himself down in the shelter of a building and hurriedly changed the magazine of his MP-40. Behind him, Olds snapped off some shots at a scurrying figure and saw it tumble head over heels like a rabbit.

Taking out a grenade, Olds extracted the pin with his teeth, kept the level depressed and kicked open the door of the building against which Douglas was lying. There was a confused impression of a big dark shape, and he recoiled as foetid breath brushed his face. Then the bray of a mule almost split his ears and he found himself laughing out loud at his earlier terror. He hurled the grenade down the road, where it exploded with a flash and a crack, and there was a sharp cry of pain from the shadows.

Douglas was on his feet again, and firing. On either side of the road, the other SAS men were methodically tossing grenades into each building they came to, following up the explosions with bursts of MP bullets. Apart from a few wild and desultory shots, there had been no serious opposition, and Douglas was beginning to realize that the bridge garrison had been much smaller than he had thought it at first.

On the other side of the bridge, however, firing was still in progress. The guard posts must be well sandbagged, their defenders in a good position to pin down the other half of his force. It was time to let the others know that all was under control at this end.

He drew a whistle from his pocket and blew the required number of blasts on it. The firing on the other side slackened and eventually died away. The Italian machine-gunners held their fire, too, possibly believing that they had beaten off the attack.

Douglas and his men ran silently across the bridge, fleeting from girder to girder. Suddenly, bullets crackled around their ears from one of the guard posts, striking sparks from the bridge's metal structure and whining away into the night. The SAS men threw themselves down behind whatever cover they could find. They still had fifty yards to go.

Douglas shouted: 'Stan, grenades! The rest of you, give us cover!'

The MP-40s began to chatter again as Douglas and Brough threw themselves forward, dashing in short sprints between the sheltering girders. The enemy fire was now directed at them from sandbagged emplacements beside each of the guard posts.

Douglas felt bullets pluck at his sleeve as he lobbed two grenades in quick succession at the emplacement in front of him. On the other side of the bridge, Brough repeated his action. The explosions, muffled by the sandbags, produced small clouds of smoke and dust. A man, shadowy in the hazy darkness, staggered from one of the emplacements, cannoned into the parapet of the bridge and fell headlong into the swirling waters hundreds of feet below.

Douglas and Brough ran forward, jumped on to the sandbags and sprayed the interior of the emplacements with gunfire. Nothing moved as the echoes of the shooting died away. Wearily, Douglas lowered the barrel of his gun.

'This is Douglas,' he called into the darkness. 'It's all over. You can come in now.'

They came hurrying to the bridge, led by Forbes and Mila. Mason and Mitchell had gone back to bring down the trucks. Douglas knew at once that something was wrong.

'Where's Eldridge?' he asked.

Forbes shook his head. 'I'm afraid he's had it. Took a bullet through the head, just before you blew the cease-fire. He's out there, by the tank. It was a

tank, by the way, an old M-13. Eldridge dropped a grenade down the hatch and it went up like a torch, so there must have been fuel cans inside. We actually found the crew asleep nearby and disposed of them first.'

Douglas was suddenly furious. 'I thought I told you to try and capture the armoured vehicle intact,' he snapped. Forbes stared at him, then looked at the ground. 'Sorry,' he muttered. 'Forgot about that, in the heat of the moment.'

Douglas grunted, then said: 'Well, there's no point in bothering about it now. Mila, get your women to clear up the bodies. Chuck 'em into the river.'

Forbes looked at him. 'Eldridge, too?'

'Yes, him too. There's no time to waste in digging graves. What's done is done. It'll be getting light in about an hour, so we need to make some plans. The racket we've just made must have been heard for miles, so we need to get going just as soon as we've taken stock of things.'

Olds told him about the mules. 'Check them out,' Douglas ordered. 'Take Barber with you, and then bring down the MGs and ammo from the posts up the hill. We'll wait until the trucks get here, then hold a briefing.'

Fifteen minutes later, the SAS party — except for Olds, who was keeping watch — Mason and Forbes assembled in one of the buildings under the light of an oil lamp. The trucks were safely across the bridge and Mila's women were completing their grim task outside.

'There's still a hell of a long way to go,' Douglas was saying as he pored over the map, 'so we'd better stick to the original plan. Up the mountain road from here to Odzak, and then on to Pljevlja. I don't know what we might run into there, but at least we have some extra fire-power now.'

He looked round at the others; they all looked desperately tired, and he suddenly felt his own bone-weariness creeping up on him. None of them had enjoyed more than a doze for more than seventy-two hours. Still, they had to keep moving; there would be time enough for proper sleep, and food too,

when they reached a place of safety.

A gust of air swept into the room as the door swung open and Mila stepped inside. ‘It is done,’ she said simply.

‘Were they all dead?’ Douglas asked, although he had no real wish to know.

Mila shook her head and smiled her terrible smile. ‘Not all. But now …’ She left the sentence unfinished, and the SAS officer suppressed a shudder. ‘There were twenty-five of them,’ she added.

‘Twenty-six,’ said a voice from the doorway. ‘Look what I found, hiding behind some bales of fodder.’

Olds came out of the night, his huge fist holding a very young and very frightened Italian soldier by the scruff of the neck.

‘I was just looking over the mules — there are four of ’em, by the way — when I heard a sneeze. I took a look, and out popped this character with his hands up, gibbering away twenty to the dozen.’

‘Well, well,’ Douglas said. ‘Let’s take a look at him. How’s your Italian, Conolly?’

‘Rusty, but adequate,’ the Irish linguist replied, and addressed a sharp question to the soldier, who spewed out a torrent of words in a high, quavering voice. After a while, Conolly cut short the spate with a wave of his hand.

‘No trouble getting this chap to talk, sir,’ he told Douglas. ‘He’s shit scared. In fact he’s not really a combat soldier at all. He’s a private in the Veterinary Corps and he’s in charge of the mules.’

‘Why waste time on him?’ Mila interrupted. ‘Kill him. You said we couldn’t take prisoners, remember?’

Douglas remembered, and felt a twinge of conscience, half-heartedly consoling himself with the thought that at least he and his men had not been

compelled to shoot anyone out of hand. The knowledge that Mila's women had been responsible for the deaths of some of the Italian wounded was bad enough.

'I have already told you,' he said icily, 'that I will tolerate no interference from you. Now kindly shut up. This man might have information which could be useful to us.'

He turned to Conolly. 'Ask him if he knows what's at Pljevlja.'

The Irishman addressed a few words to the prisoner, who this time replied haltingly, as though striving to make sure that his answer was accurate. Douglas caught the word '*tedeschi*'. Conolly nodded his head, then looked at the officer.

'That's torn it, sir,' he said. 'According to this fellow, Pljevlja is an assembly area for the Prinz Eugen Panzer Division. They're getting ready to launch an offensive into the mountains east of Sarajevo and they've got all access routes blocked. They've set up a series of outposts, manned by Italians — this bridge party was one of them — to guard against infiltration by small groups of Partisans. Closer to Pljevlja, the whole countryside is stiff with Germans and Četniks. He says the Italians don't get on very well with either the Germans or the Četniks, and get all the dirty work to do.'

Douglas stared at the young Italian, who had developed a sudden attack of hiccoughs induced by fear. 'He seems to know a great deal, for a veterinary private, but I suppose they get around a bit. Tell him that his story had better be true or I'll turn him over to the women, who will take great delight in carving off his balls.'

Conolly did so. The Italian's hiccoughing fit grew more severe and large tears rolled down his cheeks. He babbled something, choking on his sobs.

'Swears he's telling the truth on his mother's life, sir,' Conolly said. Douglas nodded slowly.

‘All right. So Pljevlja’s out of the question. We can’t get through that way, or any other way, by the sounds of it.’

‘Except on foot, through the mountains,’ Mila said. ‘We can use the mules.’

Douglas pondered over the map for a few moments, then said: ‘Yes, it’s our only choice. We’ll have to abandon the trucks. If we were to run into enemy tanks on this road, we wouldn’t stand a chance.’

He turned to Conolly. ‘Explain to this Italian that we need his mules, and that we also need him to handle them. Tell him that if he co-operates with us, he will come to no harm, if not —’ He drew his index finger across his throat.

Conolly told the Italian what was happening. The young soldier stifled both his sobs and his hiccoughs and looked up at Douglas with gratitude and hope in his large brown eyes. Impulsively, he seized the SAS officer’s hand and pumped it vigorously. Embarrassed, Douglas shook him off.

‘Olds, take this character with you and get the mules sorted out. Mitchell, get all the gear off the trucks. Where’s Barber gone?’

‘Outside, sir, with the MGs and ammo.’

‘Right, get them packed up on the mules as well. Mila, you’d better tell your women what’s going on. Let them know they’ve a tough march ahead of them; if any want to drop out, I’ll understand.’

He followed the girl outside and breathed deeply. His eyes were sore and his limbs felt like lead, but as he inhaled the clean pre-dawn air some of the tiredness left him. He promised himself that soon they would all sleep, once they were safely in the mountains. To the east, the outlines of the peaks were etched in faint pink, the first sign of approaching day.

Brough and Mason drove the two trucks into the middle of the bridge. Regretfully, they removed the distributors and hurled them into the river.

Within a few minutes their equipment was loaded on the mules. For the sake of travelling light, Douglas had decided that the animals could carry

their personal packs, leaving the men with only their weapons and ammunition. The mules also carried the two stripped-down MGs and a supply of fodder for themselves. There had been a substantial windfall in the shape of a store of 7.9-mm ammunition, discovered in one of the buildings; it would fit the magazines of their MP-40s and supplement their own dwindling supply. This was one of the reasons why Douglas had selected the German-made machine-pistol for his operations inside enemy territory; ammunition for it could be obtained fairly readily from German and Italian sources.

The young Italian's name was Enzo. Before setting off, he scurried around among the buildings, gathering food from various points which Douglas's men had missed. It had been the habit of the Italian soldiers, he told Conolly, to hide their rations in unlikely places in case of theft, which apparently was commonplace. Enzo returned with several packets of dried pasta and several other commodities, which he assured Conolly would make a valuable addition to their diet. Douglas was pleased with Enzo's initiative because, with the women to feed as well as his own men, the question of supplies was one that had begun to worry him badly. Now, with strict rationing, they would have enough for several days.

As they turned aside from the road and headed on their long climb into the mountain fastnesses, Douglas wondered if ever a British officer had had a stranger command: one naval officer, one SOE man, six SAS troopers, one female killer, fourteen village women also turned murderesses, and an Italian soldier plus four mules.

A few paces behind Douglas, Stan Brough suddenly wondered what his commanding officer had found to chuckle about.

Chapter Seven

It was the sixth day of their trek through the mountains, and Douglas calculated that they had covered about thirty miles. Since the third day, the thunder of artillery in the north had formed a constant background to their progress.

Each day since leaving the bridge had been much the same as the one before it; a back-breaking progression up steep inclines, the sheer physical exertion of helping to drag the mules over difficult parts of the track, occasional alarms when aircraft were sighted, the relief of reaching a crest only to find one more valley to cross and another crest beyond it.

Douglas wondered, should he survive the war, what he would remember of this journey in years to come. Would it be the killing and the hardship — or moments that had brought sheer delight, such as when the party had come upon a waterfall cascading down a rock face, losing itself briefly in a deep pool before continuing its course down the mountain towards a distant river?

He smiled as he recalled a stern-faced Stan Brough, perched on a rock and standing guard while the women bathed, revelling in their delight of the cakes of carbolic soap loaned to them by the men, swearing that he would break the neck of anyone who tried to take so much as a peep; then their own plunge into the icy pool, the strong lather lifting off the grime of days while the women, with none of Brough's sense of modesty, looked on and giggled.

More than anything else, that dip in the pool had helped to break the ice between the women and Douglas's men. Although there was still a degree of aloofness between the two sides — which was no bad thing, Douglas told himself — the women were now far more approachable, perhaps because

they were beginning to get over their recent ordeal, had, in some measure, taken revenge for it, and were beginning to make themselves useful in numerous small ways, not the least of which was the cooking and distribution of the daily ration.

Douglas was beginning to admire the fortitude of the village women, some of whom were starting to suffer from the effects of the trek. This was mainly because they had no proper footwear; a woman might be able to use oversize men's clothing, but boots were another matter. So whatever shoes they possessed were now beginning to have a harmful effect on their feet; blisters and sores were becoming common, and one or two of the more unwise women were reduced to wearing rags around their swollen feet because they had removed their shoes during a halt before anyone could stop them, and had not been able to get them on again. Yet they kept going and were outwardly cheerful, although Douglas knew that inwardly they were in pain, both physically and mentally. At last, he was beginning to understand why the enemy, for all their efforts, would never conquer people such as these.

Before nightfall on the sixth day, with the thunder of artillery loud in their ears, they came to a mountain ridge and halted, gazing on the panorama that unfolded to the north.

They were high above the valley of the Drina, looking down on the sector where the river wound its way through mile upon mile of apple and plum orchards between Goražde and Višegrad. Beyond the river, the mountain slopes that swept up towards the Devetak plateau were densely wooded. Between the trees, columns of smoke burst up into the evening sky.

From emplacements on the southern side of the road that followed the course of the Drina, heavy artillery batteries hurled their shells at invisible targets on the distant slopes. Along the road itself, tanks and trucks crawled in a seemingly endless procession.

Suddenly, as though on a given signal, the hurricane of artillery fire ceased, and an uncanny silence fell over the valley. It did not last for long. As Douglas and the others watched, they became aware of a heavy, pulsating drone that swelled in intensity with each passing moment. Then they made out the aircraft: forty gull-winged Stuka dive-bombers, sliding across the northern mountains in four tight echelons.

The leading echelon broke formation with beautiful precision, each aircraft peeling off and rolling over on its back before plummeting down in a vertical dive, the fearsome banshee screech of the sirens under its wings splitting the air. Douglas found himself wincing; that strident wail brought back unpleasant memories of the desert.

The leading bomber pulled out of its dive. Douglas thought that he could see the bomb part company with it, but at this distance it was hard to be sure; his eyes, and the fading light, might be playing tricks. But there was no mistaking the fountain of earth and smoke that erupted from the wooded hillside, nor the heavy crump of the explosion that reached his ears a few seconds later.

One after the other, the procession of Stukas dived down, each aircraft unleashing its bomb and then speeding low over the valley before turning and climbing to clear the mountain peaks. For a few minutes the bombers wheeled in a wide orbit as each successive aircraft joined up, then the whole formation set course northwards. Behind them, they left the mountain slopes shrouded in acrid, yellow-grey smoke that boiled and eddied in the evening air.

The artillery restarted its barrage almost at once, and Douglas had to raise his voice to make himself heard by Brough.

‘Looks as though we’ve caught up with the Partisans, Stan. Getting to them through that lot is going to be a problem, though. I wonder exactly what the

situation is?'

Brough studied the distant slopes through Douglas's binoculars. 'Seems to me that this is part of a pincer movement, aimed at trapping the Partisans in those hills,' he said. 'One thing's for sure — judging by the amount of equipment down there, and the size of that air attack, it's a pretty big push.'

'So,' Douglas muttered, half to himself, 'let's draw ourselves a little picture, just to help get things into perspective. Down there' — he indicated the road with a sweep of his hand — 'we have what looks like the best part of a Panzer Division, with lots of supporting artillery. As it would obviously be quite impossible for tanks to operate with any hope of success in the mountains, it's my guess that they are forming a cordon along the southern perimeter to prevent the Partisans from crossing the Drina and moving back into Montenegro.' He squinted at his map. 'I'm prepared to bet that there are other divisions on these roads here, and here, to east and west. What Jerry's trying to do is box the Partisans in and possibly starve them into submission. If they go on the march again, then they'll be vulnerable and the Huns will hit them with everything they've got. In any case, if all this speculation is correct, there's only one way out of these mountains, and that's to the north, into Bosnia.'

'Away from us,' Brough said. Douglas nodded.

'Unfortunately, yes. Our orders are to make contact with Tito, and that we're going to do, even if it means chasing him over half of Yugoslavia. But before we do anything else we've got to get across that damned river, and that isn't going to be easy, even if we manage to find a bridge.'

'There is a bridge.' The speaker was Mila, who had crept up unnoticed to see what was going on. Douglas looked at her questioningly.

'You see where the road disappears behind the mountain?' She pointed to the east. 'The Drina curves round in a big loop there, near a place called

Ustiprača, and there is a bridge, although I don't know if it still intact. At any rate, it's the nearest one to us.'

'Then that's the one we'll try for,' Douglas said. 'How far is it? I can't find the place on my map.'

'About two miles, maybe. Certainly not much more.'

Douglas glanced at his watch. 'Right. Stan, get everyone together. Let's go and take a look.'

Mila led the way down the mountainside in the gathering dusk, following a goat track whose course kept them out of view of the road. As the darkness deepened the going got tougher, so that it was nearly midnight by the time they reached the foothills. Douglas ordered the rest to take shelter behind some large boulders, while he and Brough went forward to make a reconnaissance. Enzo, without being asked, had tied strips of rag around the muzzles of his mules to prevent them from braying; the protesting animals were reduced to making subdued snorting noises. Douglas had not yet had the heart to tell the young Italian that the mules might soon have to be left behind.

Douglas and Brough crept forward until they were overlooking the loop in the river mentioned by Mila. From positions farther up the road, the enemy artillery was still hurling shells into the forest beyond the river; the flash of shell-bursts, together with the glow of fires among the trees and the more brilliant magnesium glare of flares that arced across the Drina from time to time, provided enough light for the two SAS men to take in the scene that lay in front of them.

There was indeed a bridge, but Douglas saw at once that it had been blown up, its central arches collapsed into the river in a tangle of iron girders. He saw too that the river at this point, although broad, was not particularly fast-flowing, which meant that swimming would present no problem for his men

if they were forced to take to the water. Even the mules could probably make it. As for the women, he would have to worry about their swimming prowess when the time came.

On the other side of the river, the road leading away from the bridge disappeared amid a jumble of fallen timber and what looked like the ruins of some houses. On the nearer side the road appeared to be deserted, with none of the concentrations of armour and other vehicles he had seen a few miles downstream. There must be enemy troops somewhere, he reasoned, and wished that he could see more of the ground that lay between the road and his present position, but the convex curve of the slope on which he and Brough were lying hid that area from view.

He was about to crawl on to get a closer look when suddenly a machine-gun stuttered from an unseen position across the water. Bullets raked the lower part of the slope, a few hundred feet from where Brough and Douglas lay, and ricochets whined away into the night. Almost immediately, the fire was returned from three separate points on this side of the river. Tracer lanced out, converging on the tangled trees on the far side of the bridge. Instinctively, Brough and Douglas both took rough bearings on each point of origin. The machine-gun on the far side fell silent, and Douglas knew at once what was happening.

‘Keep your head down, Stan,’ he muttered into Brough’s ear.

Seconds later, half a dozen mortar bombs came whooshing across to explode half-way between the road and the machine-gun posts. None of the mortar rounds appeared to have hit anything, and as the dust settled someone bawled out what Douglas suspected was a jibing insult. A faint reply came from the other bank.

‘Must be Četniks on this side,’ Douglas whispered. ‘Sounded like Yugoslavian to me. Looks as though the Partisans over there tickle them up

from time to time, just to keep them on their toes. Probably a small party, fighting a rearguard action while the others get further away.'

Well, he thought, at least we know now where the enemy guns are. He was certain that his men could deal with them without too much trouble, and would be able to negotiate the river afterwards. The real problem lay in not getting themselves shot by the Partisans during the crossing. The other big question-mark was whether enemy reinforcements might come down the road at any moment — worse still, while his party was half-way across the Drina, trapped between the opposing sides. There was little he could do if that happened except to keep going and hope that some of his party would escape. The faster they got across the river, the better for all concerned.

Slipping back to where the others were waiting, he told them his intentions. He and Olds would tackle the first machine-gun post, Mila and Conolly the second, Brough and Lumsden the third. 'I have no idea how many enemy troops are down there,' he told them, 'so we may need help quickly. Mila, I want you to divide your women into three parties. Lieutenant Mason will lead the first, Barber and Mitchell the second and third. Forbes, stay here with the Italian and the mules and head for the bridge as soon as you hear us go in. As soon as each party has dealt with its assigned target, make for the bridge too; the first there goes across, no messing about. It looks as though we'll have to swim across the middle bit. Conolly, tell Enzo that if his mules can't swim, he'll have to leave them.'

Conolly spoke to the Italian, who said that he would make the mules swim. Douglas nodded.

'Good. Mila, I want you out in front with the first crossing party so that you can parley with whoever is on the other side, if necessary. I don't want them opening fire on us. Now let's get on with it.'

Silently, their movements masked by the activity of the artillery barrage

that was still in progress farther up the road, the three groups made their way towards the enemy machine-gun posts. They were not hard to locate, for as they drew nearer the attacking groups could hear the defenders chattering away to one another.

The left-hand post was cleverly concealed among some tumbled rocks, the gun-pit surrounded by a wall of sandbags and earth which made it proof against anything except a direct hit from a mortar bomb — or a surprise grenade attack out of the darkness. Douglas waited until all the groups were in position — he had allowed several minutes for them to make their approach — and then he and Olds each lobbed a grenade into the pit. The double flash and crack produced a single cry of shock and pain, then the SAS men were up on the sandbagged parapet, pumping bursts of MP-40 bullets into the pit. Nothing moved inside.

Douglas could hear the explosions and gun-fire as the other two groups made their attack. He glanced up the road, but all seemed quiet in that direction.

‘Olds, get this lot to the bridge,’ he ordered. Turning, he cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed into the darkness: ‘Forbes, bring the mules down, as fast as you can! We’re going across.’ An answering shout told him that he had been understood. Jumping down from the sandbagged parapet, he ran after Olds and the women, who were being shepherded by Mason.

More figures came running out of the night as the other groups headed for the bridge after dealing with their respective targets. Douglas led the way on to the structure, closely followed by Mila and Olds; their boots made a hollow drumming sound on the wooden planking. The bridge was built rather like a pier, although the planking was much stronger, apparently consisting of railway sleepers laid between iron upright girders to form a solid roadway.

They were almost a third of the way across, close to the spot where the

bridge collapsed into the water, when the first burst of gun-fire lanced at them from the opposite bank. Douglas yelled at them to take cover, an order that was repeated by Mila for the benefit of the women, and they threw themselves down behind the girders. Slivers of wood bounced up from the planking as bullets furrowed along the length of the bridge.

'Mila, for Christ's sake do your stuff!' Douglas shouted breathlessly, for a painful collision with a girder had all but winded him. From somewhere below the bridge came a confused sound of splashing and snorting, mingled with muttered curses in Italian and English, indicating that Forbes and Enzo were driving the mules into the water. Douglas hoped that the animals were sheltered from the gun-fire by the bridge structure.

Close by, Mila was shouting something at the top of her voice, repeating the words over and over again. A yard or two to the rear, Pussy Mason was wondering what the hell he was doing here at all, miles away from the coastline he was supposed to be reconnoitring, when he happened to glance back along the road that led to the bridge. What he saw sent a shiver through him.

Coming round the bend in the road, where it followed the loop of the river, were two armoured cars, their silhouettes etched against the glare of the burning forest. Mason saw their dark outlines only briefly before the curving road took the armoured vehicles past the fringes of the ruddy backdrop and into the darker areas below the mountain slope, but there was no mistaking their identity. He shouted a warning to Douglas, who was still preoccupied with the MG fire coming from the opposite bank. Whoever was over there was taking no notice of Mila's shouted pleas to cease fire.

Douglas looked back, but was unable to make out the armoured cars against the mountain. Nevertheless, he had no reason to doubt Mason. What was about to happen was exactly what he had feared.

‘How far?’ he called.

‘About half a mile, no more.’

‘That’s torn it.’ Douglas turned to Mila.

‘Fancy going for a swim?’ he shouted. ‘D’you think you can make it, with your gun and all?’

‘Try me!’ she yelled. ‘It’s the only way. We might be able to pull ourselves along by the fallen girders.’

‘Come on, then!’

Douglas and Mila rolled to the side of the planking and looked down over the edge. Water rushed beneath them, perhaps twenty feet below. In the darkness, it was impossible to tell whether any obstacles lay in the path of their fall. It was a risk they would have to take.

They swung themselves over the bridge, hung by their hands for a second, then let go. As they fell, bullets blasted chunks out of the planking at the spot their bodies had just occupied.

Douglas struck the water feet first. His first impression was one of thankfulness that he had not struck a girder, followed by one of numbing shock. Even in the middle of summer, the mountain water was bitterly cold.

He sank for an age, wrapped in dark iciness, his slung MP-40 weighing him down. There was a deep roaring in his ears, and it seemed that a huge weight was pressing him down, crushing him from all sides. He kicked out frantically, feeling bubbles of air burst from his lungs.

Something struck him violently on the right shoulder and he grabbed at it, his hands grasping cold metal festooned with river weed. He dragged himself up, pushing with all his strength. More metal scraped the side of his face painfully. Then, with a suddenness that took him completely by surprise, because he thought that he was still a long way below the surface, his head broke water and he was gulping in life-giving air.

A few feet away, Mila's head bobbed to the surface too. He felt a surge of fondness completely at odds with his earlier feelings about the woman. He spat out water and asked if she was all right.

'I … I think so,' came the breathless answer. 'Let's get under cover.'

They began to pull themselves along, using the girder. A few yards behind the mules were also floundering along, under cover of the bridge, the two men driving them unaware of the new peril approaching along the road.

The girder suddenly sloped at a sharp angle and disappeared under the water. Douglas and Mila abandoned it and struck out towards the next section of bridge, fighting against the current. At one point a surge of water almost swept them downstream, but they struggled back on course and, after a minute-long battle, reached the next tangle of girders. Once again, they began to pull themselves laboriously along.

The river-bank drew closer, and the helping girder began to slope upwards again until it was no longer possible to hold on to it and still remain in the water. Douglas and Mila let go, reconciled to another fight against the current.

To his surprise and relief, Douglas felt his feet make contact with the river bed. The water came up to his chest and he immediately turned to give Mila a hand. She was several inches shorter than he, and not out of trouble yet. He seized her by the hand and began to wade, pulling her towards him until she too had a firm foothold. A few seconds later the pair of them clawed their way on to the river-bank, still in the lee of the bridge, and lay prone for a few moments to get their breath back.

Somewhere ahead of them, up the slope, the Partisan MG was still hammering away in short bursts. While Douglas was wondering what to do next, a new and deadlier sound intervened: the echoing drum-roll of a 20-mm cannon. It was a sound Douglas knew well, and was made by the main

armament of a German Kfz-222 light armoured car. Immediately, the iron girders of the bridge rattled and shook to a series of staccato explosions. Shell fragments whined through the air. Someone gave a spine-chilling shriek, then fell silent.

Douglas scrambled up. ‘We’ve got to get them off the bridge,’ he said urgently. ‘They’re sitting ducks up there!’

Mila placed a restraining hand on his arm. ‘Let me do it. Stay here, and help with the mules. I’ll go up there and make contact with the Partisans. Trust me — they are my people, after all.’

Before he could argue she was gone, scaling the slope rapidly. He opened his mouth to call after her, then thought better of it. He knew full well that she was their only hope. There was one thing he could do, however, to strip away the dreadful feeling of helplessness. Slipping back into the water, he splashed his way to where Forbes and the Italian had brought the mules to a temporary halt in the lee of the bridge, out of the line of fire from either bank. Floundering to one of the animals, he began to unstrap a captured Breda machine-gun from its back.

‘I’m going to try and draw their fire from those rocks along the bank,’ he told Forbes. ‘Get the ammo box and follow me.’

Blessing the fact that he had ordered one of the captured Italian MGs to be transported in one piece in case it was needed for instant action, he cradled the weapon in his arms and waded waist-deep towards the tumbled rocks that had caught his eye earlier, keeping close to the river-bank as he went. Reaching his objective, he unfolded the Breda’s tripod, which he placed on the slippery surface of a boulder. Forbes came alongside and, without needing to be told what to do, fed the end of the ammunition belt into its slot. Douglas cocked the weapon and loosed off a burst at the armoured cars; he knew that he could not hope to inflict any damage on them, but his tracer

might just distract the enemy gunners for long enough to allow his party to get off the bridge. Without immediately registering the significance of it, he noticed that the Partisan fire from this side of the river had ceased.

The river swirled around his lower half as he kept up a brisk fire. An answering burst of explosive 20-mm spat across the water to splatter the river-bank; it was wide of the mark, but Douglas knew that there would be a hornet's nest around their ears before long.

'Are you all right, sir?' He recognized Brough's voice, calling from the bridge.

'Okay, Stan,' he shouted. 'Get everybody off the bridge while you can. Jump for it. If any of the women don't feel like going, give 'em a shove!'

Brough made no reply, but a few moments later Douglas heard a series of splashes as the first bodies dropped off the crippled bridge. Another long burst of 20-mm sliced into the bank, much closer this time. Douglas fired off the remainder of the ammunition belt, then hauled the Breda off the rocks, taking care not to touch the red-hot barrel. He gave Forbes a shove in the direction of the bridge. The two men waded as fast as they could towards the shelter of the girders; behind them, shells churned up the water and sent slivers of rock whining through the air.

Suddenly, the river-bank seemed filled with dark figures, cascading down from the trees and plunging into the water. Someone gave a shout of alarm, and there was momentary confusion. Then Mila's voice cut through the hubbub.

'It's all right! They're Partisans, and they know who we are. Let them help you!'

Spurred on by the threat across the river, and by the cannon shells that were once more raking the superstructure of the bridge, the Partisans began dragging mules and humans alike from the swirling water. Douglas, still

carrying the Breda, found himself seized under the armpits by two enormous men and lifted bodily ashore. Unceremoniously, they propelled him up the bank and into the shelter of the fallen trees, where he was soon surrounded by a mass of sodden bodies. From somewhere up the slope a machine-gun once again began to stutter, firing at the enemy armoured cars.

Brough and Conolly flopped down beside him, panting hard. Brough caught his breath and coughed up some water.

‘We lost Lumsden,’ he said, ‘and one of the women.’

Douglas swore. ‘How did it happen?’

‘The woman was hit,’ the sergeant-major told him, ‘and Lumsden ran out to bring her in. He just about made it, too. Then the next burst blew them both clean off the bridge.’

Douglas said nothing; there was nothing he could say. But Conolly commented bitterly that he never wanted to see another bridge for the rest of his life.

‘Which won’t be long, if you don’t keep your head down,’ Brough said as another burst of enemy fire slammed into the fallen trunks behind which they were sheltering.

Mila crawled up, and Douglas patted her on the shoulder. ‘Thanks,’ he said, and the word was heartfelt. ‘Don’t know what we’d have done without you.’

‘Never mind about that,’ she said briskly. ‘We have to get further back. The Partisans are pulling out at dawn. It’s part of a general withdrawal north-west, into Bosnia. There are four Proletarian Divisions in these mountains, as well as the General Staff. It looks as though you will get your chance to meet Tito, after all — if we can catch up with him.’

She paused, then added: ‘Or if the Germans don’t get to him first. I have a feeling that the trap is about to close.’

Chapter Eight

At Ustikolina, a few miles south-west of Goražde, they were shooting prisoners.

In the small stone hut he had turned into a temporary office, a German Hauptmann stared out of the window at the rising sun and heard the crash of the third volley. The SS officer who was supervising the executions, the Hauptmann knew, did not care whether the people he was murdering were Partisans or innocent civilians; his orders were to make an example of them, and that was what he was doing.

The Hauptmann's left hand came up and, as though without volition, gently stroked a livid burn mark on his face, a legacy of burning petrol spewing from a booby-trapped half-track in a Tunisian olive grove.

Outside, the shooting had stopped; there were no more screams, no more barked commands or defiant shouts. The SS must have run out of prisoners.

The Hauptmann turned from the window as a shadow fell across the threshold of the open door. A younger man, a lieutenant, stepped into the small room and saluted briskly. The Hauptmann looked at him questioningly.

'Well, Franz?'

Leutnant Franz Warsitz shook his head. 'Definitely not a Partisan, sir.' He was referring to the body that had been fished out of the river a short time earlier. 'The man was wearing British-type battledress, and we found these on him.' He held out two objects, which the Hauptmann examined carefully. The first was a circular identity disc, which was stamped with the name 'LUMSDEN, A.F.' and a number. The second was much more revealing. A sodden beret, it had been found tucked into the dead man's pocket. The cloth

badge sewn on it bore a representation of what looked like a winged dagger, with three words beneath it.

‘Who Dares Wins,’ the Hauptmann said slowly. ‘What does that mean, Franz?’

Warsitz translated, and added: ‘It is the badge of the British Special Air Service, Herr Hauptmann.’

Hauptmann Helmut Winter nodded and gave a thin, mirthless smile. ‘So it is, Franz, so it is. The last time I saw this emblem at such close quarters was in an hotel room in Cairo on that damned silly mission they sent us on, just before the end in Tunisia.’

Warsitz made no comment. He recalled that particular episode all too vividly. Together with Winter, his commanding officer, he had been dropped into Egypt at the head of a team of special commandos, their task to assassinate key Allied officers in an attempt to take some of the pressure off the faltering German defences in Tunisia. The operation had gone badly wrong; Winter and his lieutenant had escaped with their lives, though barely, but most of their men had not. They had cause to be grateful for only one thing — that neither of them had been sent back to the Russian Front as a result of their failure.

Their ventures had been thwarted, both in Tunisia and Egypt, by the soldiers who wore berets identical to that which Winter now held in his hands — the SAS. In an ironic sort of way it was appropriate, for Winter and Warsitz were officers in Germany’s closest counterpart to the SAS — the elite Brandenburg Division. Its task was to carry out missions of extreme danger, missions that no other unit would touch, often operating deep behind the enemy lines. Admiral Canaris, the head of German Military Intelligence — the Abwehr — was its master and it was answerable only to him and to the Führer, although Winter privately suspected that the Führer was kept in

ignorance of many of its activities.

The unofficial motto of the Brandenburgers was *Siegen oder Sterben* — Win or Die. Not so very different from the SAS motto, Winter thought suddenly, although maybe ours is a little on the fatalistic side. So far, there had not been a great deal of winning — except perhaps in the early days, in France and Norway — but there had certainly been a great deal of dying. Especially in Russia. Winter shivered slightly at the memory.

'Well, Franz, now we know whom we are up against,' Winter said. 'We knew that the British had landed a commando party of some sort, but now we know the true nature of the beast. It makes our task a little more interesting.'

Again, he caressed the burn scar on his face. 'I wonder if it's the same … but no, no, it couldn't possibly be,' he said thoughtfully.

A wave of bombers thundered overhead, on their way to harry the retreating Partisan columns in the mountains, and the noise of their passage brought an end to conversation for a few moments.

'Why do you think the SAS have been sent here, Franz?' Winter asked after the bombers had droned away. His lieutenant shrugged.

'Who knows, sir? Perhaps to form a personal bodyguard for Tito, perhaps to teach the Partisans more about sabotage — there could be any number of reasons. One thing seems certain now, though; the British have realized that the Četniks are fighting for us, and Churchill is putting his eggs in Tito's basket.'

Winter gave a grunt. 'Let's hope it's too late for Tito,' he commented. 'General von Löhr believes that this new offensive will wipe out the Partisans once and for all.' He looked sideways at Warsitz, and saw immediately that his deputy did not share the German C-in-C's optimism, either.

This was the fifth offensive launched against the Partisans in eighteen months. It was also the biggest, with four German and Italian divisions, plus

Četnik and Bulgarian forces — a total of a hundred and twenty thousand men, heavily supported by aircraft and artillery — pitted against an estimated sixteen thousand Partisans in the mountains of northern Montenegro.

According to German Intelligence, based on information extracted from luckless civilians and Partisans who had fallen into Četnik hands, the Partisan forces comprised four Divisions, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 7th. It was the 3rd Division which was now fighting a desperate rearguard action on the other side of the Drina, buying time while the others fought their way through the valleys to the north-west.

Winter knew, however, that the Axis plans were already going adrift. In the crucial northern sector, Partisan forces had already succeeded in forcing a crossing of the Neretva River. But the main body still had a long way to travel; encumbered with wounded, and without adequate transport, the Partisan columns were strung out for miles, battling their way through gorges whose surrounding heights were dominated by Axis artillery.

Winter smiled suddenly. ‘All right, Franz. You and I both know that the Wehrmacht and the spaghetti-munchers and all the rest of ’em have made a balls of it. That’s why we’re here. We’re the only outfit with a fighting chance of knocking off Tito, and von Löhr knows it. We can do with fifty men what the army can’t manage with over a hundred thousand.’

‘I’m not exactly looking forward to this operation, sir,’ Warsitz admitted. ‘This business of jumping from Junkers 52s at low altitude into a valley that may or may not be full of Partisans, miles ahead of any of our ground forces, and then raiding Tito’s headquarters — well, it doesn’t sound like the kind of thing I’m going to have the chance to tell my grandchildren about, always assuming I have any.’

Winter smiled, opened his mouth to reply, and was interrupted by the urgent clamour of a field telephone that stood on a small trestle table. He

picked up the handset, listened intently for a few moments, then acknowledged the call and hung up.

‘Do you really think we have a chance of pulling this off, sir?’ Warsitz asked quietly. He and Winter had served together for too long, shared too many hardships, for there to be any pretence between them.

Winter looked at him long and hard, then said, ‘I hope so, Franz. If we can dispose of Tito, the Partisan organization might fall apart. If that happens, we can release thousands of troops for service elsewhere.’

‘Russia, you mean?’

Winter shook his head. ‘No, Franz, not Russia. Warmer climes. You see, that phone call was to say that the Allies have gone ashore in Sicily.’

*

High in the mountains beyond the Drina, the news of the Allied invasion of Sicily, picked up on Mitchell’s radio and relayed to the Partisans by Mila, was received with less fervour than Douglas might have expected. It was Forbes who provided an explanation.

‘It’s all to do with Russian propaganda,’ he told the SAS officer. ‘These people have been virtually brought up on the achievements of the Soviet Union — they know what the Russians are doing on the Eastern Front, but they know very little about what’s happening elsewhere. It’s not their fault — it’s just that they’ve never had any contact with us.’

Nevertheless, a few moments later a huge, bearded Partisan — one of the men who had pulled Douglas out of the river — came swaggering up and seized the Scot in a bear hug, crushing Douglas against the ammunition bandoliers draped across his chest.

‘Good, good!’ he roared in Douglas’s ear. ‘*Dobro, engleski general*! *Italijanski kaput, nemacki kaput*! Ooop yourr piipe! Boogairr off!’

He released his grip and Douglas subsided, fighting for breath. ‘What the

hell was all that about?' he asked.

Mila, who had come up unnoticed, chuckled. 'I think he was congratulating you,' she said. 'As for his somewhat bizarre brand of English, I understand he worked for an English construction company, building bridges here before the war. Incidentally, he thinks you're a general.'

'For God's sake don't disillusion him,' Douglas commented ruefully, massaging his ribs. 'He'd probably tear me limb from limb.'

All night long, the Partisan groups that had been fighting the rearguard action along the Drina had been filtering through the forest to the mountain valley which, Douglas was told, had been designated as a rendezvous before the trek north started. The first glimmer of waxing daylight revealed a startling scene. At Douglas's estimate there must have been close on two thousand men and women in the valley, sorting themselves into orderly groups. From what Douglas could see the Partisans were mostly young, dressed in a motley assortment of civilian clothes and items of captured enemy uniforms and equipment. The only thing common to all of them was the red star stitched to their caps.

There was a sudden stir of movement at the far end of the valley. A moment later, the quavering notes of a bugle call floated through the morning air. Douglas looked enquiringly at Mila.

'I think it's the signal to get moving,' she told him. He nodded, casting an anxious glance at the brightening sky.

'Not before time. We need to be out of this valley before full daylight, or we'll be sitting targets for the Luftwaffe. Hello, who's this?'

Mila turned and looked in the direction of Douglas's pointing finger. Two mounted men were approaching at a canter, their horses' hooves kicking up spurts of dew. They reined sharply as they came up to Douglas's group; one of them swung easily from the saddle and strode towards Douglas, who

appraised him as he got closer. The man was young and tall, and, unlike the other Partisans, he wore a well-cut uniform, with polished calf-length jackboots. A pistol butt protruded from the holster at his belt.

Mila drew herself up and saluted, and Douglas, realizing that this man must be a person of some importance, followed her example. The newcomer touched a finger to the forage cap, which he wore at a rakish angle on the side of his head, and rapped out a few crisp sentences. Mila replied, standing stiffly to attention, then turned to the SAS officer.

‘Permit me to introduce Major Seferović,’ she said formally, ‘commander of the Fifth Proletarian Brigade and deputy commander of the 3rd Division. I have told him who you are. He wishes to know, exactly, why you are here.’

Douglas stepped forward and shook hands with Seferović, who looked at him coolly. His grasp, however, was warm enough. Douglas had the overall impression of a man who constantly needed to assert himself — which was probably the case, as he had to preside over the fortunes of part of what was essentially a makeshift irregular army.

Concisely, Douglas explained his mission in Yugoslavia — or at least that part of it involving establishing contact with Tito. He also introduced Lieutenant Mason, outlining the naval officer’s task of selecting suitable coastal sites where supplies might be landed by submarine. Seferović continued to regard him levelly as he spoke, then addressed more remarks to Mila. Douglas saw that Forbes was listening intently, and knew that the SOE man would let him know if there were any inaccuracies in the subsequent translation.

‘The major says that you are welcome,’ Mila said. ‘In due course you will be taken to a meeting with Tito. He also says that he hopes your arrival will mean that the Partisans will begin to receive British supplies, which up to now have been falling into enemy hands. Do you realize, he asks, that the

Partisans have been fighting desperately for two years with no weapons or equipment except what they have been able to capture from the enemy?'

Douglas nodded, feeling uncomfortable, as though he were personally on trial. 'Tell the major that I understand and appreciate all this,' he told the woman. 'Tell him also that everything depends on how soon a meeting can be arranged with Tito. I would like to know when that is likely to be.'

A few moments later, having conferred with Seferović, Mila said: 'He cannot tell with any certainty. Tito is not here, but a long way up ahead, with his headquarters. All Partisan forces are to rendezvous in Bosnia. But first we must get through these mountains, and we shall undoubtedly have to fight our way out. The major wants you and your men to move up to the head of the valley, to form part of the spearhead force. I am to come too, with the women,' she added proudly.

Seferović gave an unexpected grin, revealing a set of white teeth marred slightly by a gap in the middle of the top set, and saluted briskly before striding back to his horse and vaulting into the saddle. Together with the other man, who had remained on his horse throughout the meeting, he whirled away in a shower of earth and wet grass.

'Very well, then, let's go,' Douglas said crisply, shouldering his pack and slinging his MP-40 over his shoulder. As he did so, he noticed one of the women — the wild-eyed, raven-haired one — take a few steps in Conolly's direction and then stumble quite deliberately. Even the Irishman was taken aback by the totally blatant nature of her act, but of course, he reached out a hand to steady her. Somehow, she contrived to twist herself so that his outstretched palm made contact with her left breast. He allowed it to linger there for a second or two before pushing her upright, grinning. Her eyes flashed and she pouted at him.

The next instant she was reeling backwards, her face already beginning to

redden under the savage blow Mila had just dealt her. The Partisan woman hissed something at her and she retreated dumbly, her head lowered. One of her companions sniggered, but fell silent when Mila glared at her.

‘We Partisans pride ourselves on our high moral standards,’ she snapped. ‘There can be no room for that kind of behaviour. I will deal with her later.’

‘Morals be buggered,’ Conolly said, still grinning. ‘She’s on heat. Female over-sexed plus Conolly over-sexed equals Conolly over female equals female over-joyed. Simple equation.’

‘Shut up, corporal,’ Douglas said sharply, ‘and get moving! And you, Mila, keep those damned women away from my men, or there’s bound to be trouble.’

In the gathering daylight they moved off along the valley, the SAS men in front, followed by Enzo and his mules and then the women. Douglas found himself smiling; Mila might not take kindly to staring at a mule’s backside as she marched, but that was the way it was going to be.

They marched steadily on past the other groups of Partisans, who gazed at them with only mild curiosity as they got their horses and mules ready for the trek. Douglas was astonished by the number of draught animals used by the Partisans — very necessary, he supposed, for transporting equipment in this difficult terrain, and also for pulling the farm carts requisitioned to carry the wounded. The latter were divided into three groups — those who could walk, those who were able to ride, and those who had to be carried. The Partisans would not leave any of their wounded behind, for if they were abandoned they were certain to meet a terrible fate at the hands of the enemy.

It was, Douglas knew, more than a simple humanitarian gesture. It was also an important factor in keeping morale high. Every Partisan knew that he would under no circumstances be left behind if he were wounded, and so he was ready to fight tooth and claw in defence of those who were already

suffering. Douglas also noted that all the wounded, except the very serious cases, retained their weapons. They were still capable of taking their toll of the enemy, if the latter overran the column.

As the long snake of men, women and animals wound its way up out of the valley and into the mountains, Douglas heard the sound of gun-fire, a long way off, and put a question to Major Seferović by way of Forbes. The Partisan officer replied that small groups of his men had stayed behind in the forest to act as skirmishers, their task to slow down the enemy's advance by using hit and run tactics. All expert woodsmen, they stood an excellent chance of escaping after their job was done. The firing, Seferović explained, probably meant that enemy assault groups had crossed the Drina and were now advancing up the northern slopes. 'We can expect air attack soon,' he added grimly, and Douglas noticed that many of the Partisans were already glancing apprehensively at the sky.

They did not have long to wait. The column had been on the march for barely two hours when the first wave of enemy aircraft appeared. It consisted of twelve twin-engined Messerschmitt 110 fighter-bombers, cruising over the mountains in three flights of four.

The groups that made up the Partisan column were widely separated, with the wounded and their escort bringing up the rear. It was this rear echelon that the German pilots spotted first. While the rest of the column scattered for cover among the rocks, the Partisans escorting the wounded worked frantically to get them under shelter, clearing the carts as fast as they could. They were not fast enough.

The leading flight of Messerschmitts came arrowing down in line astern, their starboard wingtips almost brushing the mountain wall as they lined up their sights on the winding track and the struggling human targets. Douglas heard the thud of their cannon, mingled with the harsher chatter of machine-

guns. Desperately, the Partisans among the rocks blazed away at the aircraft as they continued their strafing run. Out of the corner of his eye, Douglas saw Mitchell raise his MP-40 and bellowed at him.

‘Save your ammo and keep your head down!’

Mitchell did as he was told, and disappeared from sight as the Messerschmitts swept past in a thunder of engines, climbing steeply away while the second flight took their place.

For five minutes, the air above the mountain track was filled with murderous shell and rock fragments as each aircraft made two attacks. Douglas found himself involuntarily clawing at the hard earth, trying to dig himself in. One aircraft passed so close overhead that he fancied he could smell the hot, oily breath of its passage.

A body wormed up alongside him and snuggled hard into his, whimpering. It was Mila. He put an arm round her shoulders and held her fast, not conscious of her as a woman but as a terrified human being who needed something, someone, to cling to.

The sound of engines receded and Douglas raised his head cautiously, blinking dust from his eyes. The Messerschmitts were already specks, dwindling into the distance.

Douglas helped Mila to her feet and asked her if she was all right. She looked at him shamefacedly.

‘Thank you, yes. I’m sorry. That will not happen again.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he told her sympathetically. ‘We all have moments like that.’

The Partisans were emerging from their places of refuge and the column was once again getting ready to move. Despite the ferocity of the attack there had been relatively few casualties, at least not among the leading echelons of the column. Farther back, the group of wounded had been badly hit. Some of

the animals had suffered, too; among them was one of Enzo's mules, which had taken a cannon shell in its belly and had to be shot to put it out of its misery. The little Italian, unable to do it himself, looked on and wept.

The march got under way again, the Partisans spurred on to greater efforts by the exhortations of their officers and political commissars. Douglas wanted to know what would happen to the wounded at the rear of the column, and Mila told him that they would continue as before, still under strong escort, and would catch up with the rest of the column when it eventually halted.

Mason came up alongside Douglas as they trudged on.

'It's a good job that wasn't a bombing attack,' he observed, 'or we'd have been really sunk.'

'I don't suppose they could hit the track with bombs,' Douglas commented. 'Too close to the mountainside — not enough room to aim. Even so, one bomb lobbed in the right place could bring a lot of earth and rock down on our heads. Doesn't bear thinking about.'

'They will bomb the villages ahead of us,' Mila said bitterly. She had forsaken her place with the women for the time being, and was now marching just behind Douglas. 'They'll bomb anywhere that might give us food and shelter. You'll see.'

And see they did, as the long march through the mountains continued. After a couple of days the Partisan column was joined by growing numbers of civilians, some carrying provisions but most with nothing but the clothes they stood up in. They told a tearful, tragic story of picturesque villages bombed to destruction by Stukas, or — where the villages lay close to main roads — burned to the ground by columns of Germans and Četniks, who swept through the mountains massacring all the civilians they could find.

'If only we could catch those pilots alive,' sobbed one woman, whose two

children had been mown down by bomb fragments as they stood terror-stricken by her side. ‘We’d do the same to them as a man in our village did to a fox he had caught. He skinned it alive and then let it go. It kept going for nearly a mile …’

Major Seferović accepted the influx of civilians with open arms, even though their coming meant a fearful drain on his column’s already scant resources.

‘These people are like water, and we Partisans are like fish. Fish cannot live without water,’ he said simply.

And so it was. Without the support of the population, the efforts of the Partisans were doomed to failure. If the Partisans needed to requisition supplies or transport from the people, they paid for them; if any Partisan was found guilty of looting, he paid for his act with his life, even if his booty was only a handful of potatoes or a few onions.

It was one such pitiful band of civilian refugees which, two days later, brought some intelligence that caused Major Seferović to halt the column and call an immediate council of war. The column, now moving mostly at night to escape air attack, had reached a point high in the mountains west of Sarajevo, in Bosnian territory.

Seferović held his council in a small mountain cavern, its interior lit by a flickering paraffin lamp. He sat cross-legged on the stone floor, surrounded by a small group of half a dozen officers. Douglas was there too, at his invitation, with Mila to act as interpreter.

Prompted by the major, the leader of the peasant group — a stooped, elderly man whose wrinkled mahogany features and knotted hands betokened a life of outdoor hardship — explained what he had seen. As he spoke, Seferović pointed out features on a map, for the benefit of the others.

With about twenty other refugees, men, women and children, the elderly

peasant had fled into the mountains from the village of Mrkalji, which lay close to the Sarajevo-Vlasenica road, at the approach of a large column of enemy troops.

‘We watched from our hiding-place,’ he said. ‘The enemy column stretched as far as the eye could see, and did not go anywhere. Sir, we were very frightened, and we had little to eat. We saw the enemy turn our little village into a fortress. They had many trucks and tanks. All along the road they were doing the same. It was very hard for us, with little to eat, for we could see the enemy taking food from their trucks and eating well.’

Seferović pricked up his ears. ‘Food, you say? Were there many trucks with food in them?’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, sir, very many. They were taking food from them, sacks of it, and carrying it along the road to other enemy positions. The sight of their cooking fires every morning made our bellies ache with pain. It was terrible to hear the children crying.’

There were tears in the old man’s eyes. Suddenly, he reached out and seized the major’s hand impulsively. ‘Thank God we have found you,’ he quavered. ‘A young boy, a goatherd, came to us and told us that you were approaching from the south, so we set off to meet you. Without you, we would have starved.’

Seferović looked at him in sympathy, conscious that all he had been able to offer these poor people by way of sustenance had been a few crusts of hard black bread and some dregs of plum brandy — the last there was. He had been on the point of ordering some of the mules and horses to be slaughtered for food, although heaven knew they needed every one. Now, with luck and careful planning, that might not be necessary. He leaned forward and peered intently at the old man.

‘Try to remember,’ he said gently. ‘Were the enemy in your village

Germans?’

The man shook his head emphatically, turned aside and spat on the floor.

‘No, sir. Bearded bastards. Četniks. Of that I am quite certain. Maybe a few Germans, but mostly Četniks.’

Seferović rose to his feet and began to pace up and down, his hands clasped behind his back. Douglas, who had been listening intently to Mila’s whispered translation throughout, was struck by the thought that the Partisan officer looked every inch a professional military commander.

‘So, comrades,’ Seferović remarked, ‘the picture becomes clear. The trap has closed. It appears that the main body of our comrades has escaped, as we hoped, but that we are going to have to fight our way through.’

He grinned suddenly. ‘We could certainly use those supplies,’ he said. ‘What we need is a plan, a plan that will enable us not only to break through the enemy cordon, but also to seize some of those provisions as we go.’

Douglas raised a finger for attention. The Partisan major looked at him enquiringly, his eyebrows raised. Through Mila, Douglas said: ‘With due respect, major, what you need first of all is a detailed reconnaissance. As yet, you have no real idea of how many enemy troops are holding that particular stretch of road, nor do you know the depth of their defences. You also need to know the periods when they are on full alert, and the times when their vigilance is not so acute.’

‘What is your suggestion?’ Seferović asked.

‘Let me take some of my men forward to see how the land lies,’ Douglas said. ‘After all, it’s what we are trained to do. Looking at the map, the road is only about a day’s march away; we can make it in less, if we push ourselves. You’ll naturally keep the column moving while we’re gone, so we’ll probably be able to meet up with you and give you the information you need very early the day after tomorrow.’

Seferović stood there without speaking for a few moments, his lips pursed as he considered the proposition. One of his officers, a political commissar, or so Douglas had been led to believe, approached the major and whispered something in his ear. The Partisan officer looked searchingly at Douglas.

‘How do we know you can be trusted?’ he asked suddenly. ‘We noticed that you did not open fire on those German aircraft when they attacked us.’

Douglas smiled and stared at the commissar, a small, foxy-faced man with a lip that curled perpetually. So that’s it, he thought. Our friend here is doing his best to discredit us, for reasons only he knows. Very well, then; this was between him and Seferović, man to man, soldier to soldier.

‘As for not firing at the enemy aircraft, the idea was to conserve ammunition. We have little enough as it is. And the answer to knowing whether you can trust us or not is that you don’t.’

Mila looked hard at Douglas before translating his blunt comments. Douglas hoped she had not modified them, but in the absence of Forbes he had no way of knowing.

Suddenly, the tension broke as Seferović stepped forward and slapped him on the shoulder. The Partisan spoke, and Mila translated his words.

‘The major says that he does indeed trust you, and wishes you luck. He will show you where to rendezvous with the column on the way back.’

Douglas saw that the others in the cave were smiling. There was one exception. The commissar had a savage scowl on his face, and it was directed not against Douglas, but against Seferović.

Chapter Nine

Leutnant-General von Löhr, the German commander in Yugoslavia, was in a towering rage. Only a few weeks earlier he had been summoned to Hitler's HQ on the Eastern Front, where the Führer had ordered him to bring operations against the Partisans to a successful conclusion with a final big summer offensive. Now the bulk of the Partisan forces appeared to be slipping through his fingers, a fact that he would somehow have to justify to the Supreme Commander.

The result, inevitably, would be a loss of honour, perhaps even disgrace — or worse. Von Löhr was under no illusion about the degree of power wielded over the army by Hitler and his SS lackeys.

As to the present lamentable situation, he blamed that fairly and squarely on the lackadaisical attitude of the Italians and the inefficiency of the Četniks. If only he had been allocated more men, stalwart German troops, the outcome would have been very different.

The Italian commander, General Roatta, squirmed under von Löhr's stony gaze. The two senior officers faced each other across a table in Sarajevo's nineteenth-century town hall, a hideous pseudo-Moorish monstrosity built by the Austrians, which von Löhr had turned into his temporary headquarters. Still staring malevolently at Roatta, the German listened as his senior Intelligence officer read out a summary of operations so far.

The IO was nervous, and kept on coughing as he read out the report, a fact that increased von Löhr's annoyance even further.

'Stop that damned noise, man, and get on with it,' he snapped. The IO reddened.

‘Yes, sir … I humbly beg the general’s pardon.’ He lost his place briefly, then found it again. ‘The 7th SS Division reports heavy fighting at Suha. The 7th SS has now been joined by advance units of 369th Division, pushing along the Drina from Foča. The 118th Division, advancing southwards from the Kalinovik-Foča highway, will shortly be in a position to meet and throw back any Partisan units that succeed in crossing the river.’

He jumped as von Löhr’s fist crashed down on the table, his steel-rimmed spectacles coming within a fraction of an inch of falling off the end of his nose.

‘Damn and blast it to hell, man!’ the general roared. ‘The Partisans are *already* across the river! At least, most of them are. I want an up-to-date report, not one that was compiled forty-eight hours ago. Do you understand? *Up to the minute*!’

The Intelligence officer had just about had enough. After all, it was not his fault that things were going wrong. Summoning all his courage, he met his commanding officer’s gaze.

‘Sir,’ he pointed out, ‘the fighting has been exceptionally heavy. All commanders involved agree that their forces are engaged in the most bitter struggle of the war. A particularly ferocious attack against the 2nd Battalion of the 369th Division on the Kalinovik-Foča front by overwhelming numbers of Partisans has enabled the bulk of them to break through the resulting gap and disappear into the mountains to the north. Quite simply, our troops were too exhausted to stop them, and there were no reserves.’

Von Löhr gave a sudden deep sigh and sat back in his chair. ‘So, what is done is done. Yet again, this damned Tito has evaded us. The man is the devil incarnate.’ He paused, then turned to Roatta, who had been following the course of the conversation with what appeared to be an almost passing interest. Roatta spoke good German, and was secretly pleased by von Löhr’s

apparent discomfiture.

‘And what about the situation to the east,’ von Löhr asked him, ‘where your forces and the Četniks are holding the Sarajevo-Vlasenica highway?’

Before answering that question, the Italian general was determined to make a point. Spreading his hands expressively, he said:

‘General von Löhr, the question of no reserves has been mentioned. I have to point out that if my forces had not been split up piecemeal on your orders, the Partisans might have been prevented from breaking out. As it is —’

Von Löhr interrupted him with a wave of his hand. ‘Yes, yes, never mind that now,’ he said testily. ‘I asked about the situation in your sector. Perhaps you will be good enough to advise me.’ He made no attempt to disguise the sarcasm in his voice.

There was a smug gleam in Roatta’s eye as he replied. ‘My sector is completely sealed,’ he stated. ‘According to the latest estimates, a Partisan division is trapped in the mountains to the south. My forces are on full alert for a possible breakthrough attempt. If the Partisans try, they will be flung back.’

Like you flung the British back in North Africa in the early days, von Löhr thought, and had to resist the temptation to voice the insult out loud. Instead, he asked, ‘How many Partisans?’

‘Air reconnaissance estimates some two to three thousand,’ Roatta told him. ‘The total includes a large number of wounded. The Partisans do not appear to favour leaving any of them behind, so their progress is slow.’

Von Löhr drummed his fingers on the table-top, pondering. At length, he said: ‘General Roatta, I do not propose to take any chances. We have some hope here of ensnaring several thousand Partisans, and retrieving something out of an otherwise sorry situation. I am therefore diverting part of the 118th Division to assist your men in holding the Sarajevo-Vlasenica sector.’

Roatta half rose, his eyes glittering. ‘General von Löhr, I must protest! My forces are quite capable of carrying out their assigned task without assistance from the Wehrmacht. It is a matter of honour that …’

Von Löhr silenced the Italian with another wave of his hand. ‘Honour be damned, General,’ he snapped. ‘I am not interested in honour, but in results. Which reminds me.’

He turned to the Intelligence officer. ‘Is there any news about the Brandenburg detachment?’

The IO nodded. ‘They were dropped last night, sir, just here.’ He pointed to the wall map, indicating a valley in the mountains some miles north of Sarajevo. ‘The returning transport crews report that the drop was successful, and a radio signal has since been received from the paratroops. But as far as we know, no contact has yet been made with the enemy.’

Roatta looked puzzled. ‘What is this — this Brandenburg detachment?’ he wanted to know. Von Löhr smiled.

‘A force of what the British would call commandos, General. The very best. We hope that they will shortly give our friend Tito a nasty surprise.’

He changed the subject abruptly, not wishing to give too much away to the Italian. If the Brandenburgers carried out their mission successfully, the credit would be von Löhr’s, for it was he who had requested their assistance and formulated the plan on which they were now acting. Nevertheless, he felt a niggling worry; there was one unknown quantity that might place the whole scheme in jeopardy. Again, von Löhr addressed the Intelligence officer.

‘Major, there was a report that the body of a British Special Air Service soldier had been recovered from the Drina. Have there since been other indications that these troops are operating in support of the Partisans?’ The major shook his head. ‘None, sir. I feel confident that the presence of more SAS commandos would have come to our knowledge. However we are

continuing to interrogate captured Partisans who might reveal the whereabouts of any British commandos. So far we have met with no success. They remain stubbornly silent even under the most extreme pressure.'

Von Löhr nodded. He knew exactly the kind of pressure the major meant. Dismissing the question for the moment he reached for a telephone to give the necessary orders for the movement of the 118th Division. Within a day or two, he felt confident that he would be able to report the elimination of several thousand Partisans. And with any luck, the Brandenburgers would by that time have cut off the enemy's leadership at the neck.

*

Leutnant-General von Löhr might have felt a little less confident had he been able to see what was going on in the mountains overlooking Mrkalji at dawn the following morning. Douglas, having already spied out the lie of the land, had now returned with the spearhead of the Partisan column and was pointing out the obstacles to Major Seferović, who examined the scene in detail with the aid of Douglas's binoculars.

The village lay in a narrow, green valley that ran north-south, its northern end climbing steadily until it once more merged with the mountains. The main road, some distance beyond, curved down from the western hills and ran across the valley floor before rising in the long, twisting climb towards Vlasenica. The village was on the north side of the road.

Through his binoculars, Douglas was able to make out several strong-points, apparently constructed of earth and logs, commanding the southern approach to the road along the valley. On the hillsides beyond, on either flank of the valley, were what appeared to be gun-pits, surrounded by circles of freshly-turned soil. Douglas studied the nearest one carefully and thought that it was likely to contain a heavy mortar, probably supported by a machine-gun. So, if anyone succeeded in crossing the road and breaking through the

defences around the village, they would have to run the gauntlet of withering fire as they proceeded up the northern valley.

Douglas was grateful for one thing. During the night a thick blanket of cloud had crept across the mountains and now hung low over the peaks, forming an effective shield against air reconnaissance. The plan that was forming in his mind depended on achieving a rapid breakthrough followed by a dash along the northern valley, and that in turn depended on the remainder of the Partisan column — still a couple of miles behind — being able to catch up with the spearhead troops as the assault developed. It would, perhaps, be another three or four hours, maybe more, before the main body of the column arrived; it would then have to stay out of sight around the curve of the mountain.

As he watched the village, Douglas noticed something else that encouraged him. A number of men had climbed out of the strongpoints and were strolling about, flexing their limbs and clearly waiting for breakfast. More men came into sight from the houses and there was a good deal of activity around the vehicles which, he assumed, were the supply trucks. To him, this meant only one thing: the enemy were anticipating a night attack from the Partisan rearguard column, and consequently relaxed their vigilance during the daytime.

So much the better, he thought. At noon they'll probably all be taking a siesta. That's when we'll go in.

He knew that he was taking a risk. He had no means of knowing whether enemy reinforcements were on the way; neither did he know if the spearhead force at his disposal — numbering a hundred men and women, including his own SAS troopers — would escape detection as they lay in wait for H-hour.

Douglas was certain that his force could get to within yards of the enemy defences without being spotted. The terrain between their present position

was lined with dried-up stream beds, mostly running downhill towards the road. They were deep enough to afford shelter to a crawling man. It would be a long crawl, for the road was over a mile away, but there was no other alternative.

Major Seferović, recognizing Douglas's military skills, had given the SAS officer a free hand in planning the operation that lay ahead. Douglas, having seen enough, now took the Partisan to one side in the shelter of some rocks and, with Mila's help, outlined his scheme.

'Surprise is the thing,' he said. 'We need to hit their defences when they're least expecting it and secure the immediate area of the village. So we'll get as close as we can and attack at noon, when they will probably be off their guard and by which time the rest of the column will have caught up with us. Then we need to hold the village until the column, wounded and all, passes through the gap we've created and gets away into the hills on the other side. Which brings me to the next problem.' He looked at Mila. 'I want you to translate this very, very accurately,' he told her. 'Everything depends on it.'

Then, turning back to the Partisan officer, he continued: 'The valley on the other side of the village is dominated by gun emplacements. I counted six; there could be more. They may contain heavy mortars. On the other hand, they may contain howitzers. Either way, they can lay down an awful lot of fire on the valley floor. The column would undoubtedly suffer very severe casualties as it went through.'

He paused while Mila completed her translation of that part. Seferović nodded slowly, and Douglas had the feeling that the Partisan major knew what was coming next.

'The guns are unlikely to fire on the village for fear of hitting their own people,' he pointed out, 'so there'll be a short breathing space while the gunners are making their minds up what to do. In that time, we have to

silence the guns somehow.'

Seferović suddenly interrupted him. 'You are asking for volunteers,' he said quietly.

Douglas nodded. 'Yes. And since the spearhead troops will have their hands full in holding the village, the volunteers will have to come from the main column.'

Seferović regarded him steadily. 'There will be no shortage of volunteers,' he said. 'It shall be done.' He beckoned to a Partisan officer who was standing nearby and issued some orders. Pausing only to pick up his sub-machine-gun, the man trotted away along the mountain track.

'He is a good officer,' Seferović said. 'He will raise the necessary men and bring them back here ahead of the column. He knows exactly what to do.'

The next couple of hours were spent in preparation, well out of sight and earshot of the enemy in the village. Douglas, acting through Mila and Forbes, briefed the Partisans of the spearhead force thoroughly on what he expected them to do and split them into three groups, each of which would advance separately towards the village. He would lead the left-hand group, Major Seferović the centre, and Brough the right. He had chosen to lead the left-hand group because that was the one which would seize the all-important supply trucks and also secure the flank of the assault against intervention from enemy positions further up the road towards Sarajevo. Mason and Forbes were to stay put and go through with the main column when it arrived.

Two hours before noon, after a long and hungry wait — no one had eaten anything but a few strips of dried meat for the best part of three days — the assault groups began to move forward, working their way slowly and steadily down the gullies that furrowed their way into the valley. As he crawled at the head of his thirty-strong column, Douglas felt himself losing all sense of time; it was a matter of putting one elbow in front of the other and dragging

his body along in a purely mechanical movement. He tried ticking off the yards mentally as he went along, but lost count after five hundred and gave up, feeling annoyed with himself.

The day was hot and humid under the blanket of cloud and sweat poured from him as he crawled on, covered by now with a fine layer of dust from the sandy floor of the gully. Like the others, he had taken the precaution of tying makeshift pads around his elbows and knees; he was grateful for them now, for the stones in the bed of the dried-up watercourse became — or seemed to become — sharper as he progressed.

After a time the gully veered sharply away to the right. Where it angled off, a clump of coarse grass screened its rim. He glanced back into Barber's dust-streaked, sweaty face, and made a stay-put motion with the palm of his hand. Barber half turned and did the same to the man behind him.

Douglas rose cautiously and peered through the fringe of grass, expecting to see the village and its defences at close quarters. Instead, to his amazement, he found that the ground ahead sloped steadily up towards the road, its contours hiding the village from view. This rise in the terrain had not been apparent from his earlier vantage point; it was something that he would now be able to use to advantage.

He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes to noon; they would have to move quickly. Taking a last look round to make sure that the coast was clear on either side, he heaved himself out of the gully and crouched down on one knee, his MP-40 now held across his chest. One by one, the others scrambled out and fanned out to left and right, following his directions. Not for the first time, he found himself impressed by the efficiency of the Partisans; even though he had no means of communicating with them other than by sign language, each one appeared to know exactly what was expected of him.

There was a sudden movement off to the right, and Douglas felt a brief gut-

twist of alarm before he realized that it was Seferović's centre assault group, also emerging into the open. The Partisan officer spotted Douglas and raised a hand in salute. Douglas answered with a wave of his own hand, motioning forwards towards the road. Steadily, alert for any sudden appearance of enemy troops on the skyline, the lines of attackers moved up the slope. With a few yards to go, another wave of Douglas's hand sent them down on their bellies, to lie prone as he crept forward to assess the situation. Using a small bush as cover, he crawled up to the very edge of the road and looked cautiously across.

Immediately in front of him, and about fifty yards away, was a sandbagged machine-gun emplacement. There were others, positioned at intervals along the front of the village. Two men were sitting on the ground by the nearest emplacement, their backs against the sandbags. From their dress and heavy growths of beard, Douglas deduced that they were Četniks. Other men, all armed, were either moving about their business among the village houses or sitting in small groups, eating their midday meal. Others were bunched close to a half-circle of vehicles drawn up in the centre of the village.

Douglas turned and made a signal. The remainder of his group crawled up and joined him at the edge of the road, waiting as the last seconds ticked away towards H-hour. By now, the assault teams which had the task of dealing with the gun positions beyond the village should be moving down the gullies, and the rest of the column should be in position on the mountain. Douglas hoped fervently that everything was going to plan, and that there had been no unexpected hitches.

From the village came a sudden snatch of song, followed by a burst of laughter. Douglas's mouth felt terribly dry. Irrationally, he wondered what the song was about, and why the Četniks were laughing. It was something he would never know.

It was time. Douglas looked across at Seferović, who raised a clenched fist. The SAS officer jumped up and swung his arm in a circle, pointing forward.

A hundred figures erupted from the grass and stormed on to the road. Apart from the rasping of their breath and the pounding of their feet the line of Partisans went forward in utter silence, a previously-agreed tactic that was planned to unnerve the enemy far more than any shouted battle cries. The silence, Douglas hoped, would also give the attackers vital extra seconds before the enemy realized what was happening.

As he pounded across the road, he saw the two Četniks by the sandbagged MG emplacement rise slowly to their feet, mouths open in apparent disbelief at the sight of what was descending on them. Suddenly, one of them let out a wild cry and made a dive for the machine-gun. Douglas's MP-40 chattered and the man crumpled, thudding into the sandbags. Barber shot the other Četnik, who staggered for a few paces before collapsing face down in the dust.

A storm of fire erupted along the whole length of the Partisan line as the headlong charge plunged on, and now blood — curdling yells split the silence as the communist guerrillas stormed down on their hated enemies. From the far right came a shrill ululation that sounded above the roar of gunfire and sent a shiver along Douglas's spine; some of Mila's women formed part of the right-hand group of attackers, and heaven help any Četnik unfortunate enough to fall into their hands.

Two Partisans vaulted over the bodies of the Četniks shot by Douglas and Barber and dropped into the gun-pit, their task to train the MG on the road and deal with any threat from that direction. Douglas, with Barber at his side, raced for the cover of a house, snapping off a burst at some Četniks who appeared around its side. One of them dropped and the rest vanished, pursued by fire from Partisans further along the line.

Douglas and Barber, together with half a dozen other men of their group, threw themselves panting into the shelter of the house wall. Confused, startled shouting came from inside the building; the Partisans threw a pair of grenades into the interior and the yelling stopped abruptly. Smoke and dust billowed out into the open air.

Douglas took stock of the situation. Along the front of the village, Partisans were swarming over the enemy's defensive positions, seizing the machine-gun posts before the startled Četniks had time to react. Over on the right, one gun crew, more alert than the rest, managed to bring their MG into action and pinned down the Partisan advance, causing some casualties before they were wiped out by grenades thrown by a unit from the centre group, going rapidly to the assistance of their comrades.

The initial, co-ordinated attack in extended line was now becoming fragmented as the Partisan groups dealt with their primary objectives, some of which were overwhelmed faster than others. From now on, the battle would be an increasingly savage, house-to-house struggle, if Douglas's experience was an indication of anything. There was no time for delay; strong reinforcements might appear along the road at any moment, although looking back, he was heartened to see the main body of the Partisan column winding slowly down the mountainside. That part of the plan, at least, seemed to be in order.

Douglas scrambled to his feet. He swung round, motioning to the others to follow him, and burst into the house. The once neat interior was a shambles; furniture and crockery were strewn everywhere, testifying to the excesses of its latest occupants. Three of the latter, riddled with grenade fragments, lay sprawled among the wreckage. One of them, badly wounded in the chest, tried to rise as the men stormed in and was promptly shot through the head by a Partisan.

The room in which the Četniks lay appeared to have served as both living room and bedroom. Beyond it, an open doorway — little more than a roughly-hewn hole in the wall — led to a small, rectangular kitchen-cum-storehouse. In the rear wall, a split stable-type door gave access to the open. The top half swung open on its hinges and Douglas, flattening himself against the wall, peered cautiously through it. Two Četniks ran across his field of view, their boots kicking up spurts of dust, and he snapped off a burst at them. One dropped but the other increased his speed, arms flailing and legs pounding, and disappeared behind another house.

From his new vantage point, Douglas had a clear view of the enemy supply trucks, which were parked some distance away. A force of Četniks — it was impossible to estimate their numbers — had hastily thrown up a makeshift barricade in front of the vehicles and were blazing away in the direction of Seferović's group of Partisans. The Četniks did not seem to have noticed that the house overlooking their position had been occupied and were oblivious of any threat from that direction.

Keeping well under cover, Douglas allowed himself a few seconds to make a thorough scan of the surrounding area. Somehow he had to find a way of outflanking the enemy group. He saw that the Četniks had now brought another machine-gun into action and had set up a brisk rate of fire, still concentrating on the central group of Partisans. Douglas knew that it was imperative to act quickly; the Partisan temperament was such that, if Seferović ordered a frontal assault, his men would obey him without question, charging into the machine-gun fire regardless of losses. That was something Douglas wanted to avoid at all costs, together with any possible damage to the enemy vehicles and their all-important supplies.

Suddenly, he thought he had the answer. A few yards away, sited well-clear of the houses, rose the mound of the traditional village midden, the usual

mixture of straw and kitchen refuse. Since there had been no rain for some weeks, the heap was almost certain to be bone dry, and would ignite immediately. The light wind blowing from the east would take a curtain of smoke across the front of the Četnik positions. He knew that it was a gamble, but the odds were reasonably high in favour of success. Turning, he asked Barber if he had a light. The soldier looked at him in astonishment and Douglas realized how incongruous the sudden request must have sounded.

'I want to set fire to the midden,' he explained. 'Have you got a light?'

Barber looked at him and shook his head. 'No, sir. Sorry. The only thing I've got is a burning glass.'

'Oh, Christ! Has anybody got a bloody light?'

The Partisans looked at him, not understanding, and he made the motions of lighting a cigarette. One of the men smiled, nodded, brought out a crumpled packet. Douglas groaned and went through the mime again. After wasted precious seconds, one of the Partisans got the message and produced a battered lighter, a home-made affair constructed from a bullet casing. Douglas looked at it doubtfully and gave it an experimental flick with his thumb. To his surprise, it worked. He patted the Partisan on the shoulder and turned back to the door, explaining his intentions to Barber.

'I'm going to make a dash for the midden,' he said. 'Don't shoot unless you think I've been spotted, in which case, give me as much covering fire as you can. Once I get the smoke going really well, come and join me under cover of the midden. It should be soiled enough to stop bullets as effectively as sandbags.'

As he turned to put his plan into action, Douglas felt Barber's restraining hand on his arm.

'Hold on, sir!' Barber said, 'There's something that might be useful.'

Hurrying into the front room, he came back with a paraffin lamp; it was

three-quarters full.

Douglas nodded at him. ‘Good man! Just the job. That should get it going all right.’

Douglas eased back the bolt that held the lower half of the kitchen door in place then, putting the Partisan’s lighter in his pocket and grasping his MP-40 and the paraffin lamp in either hand, he took a deep breath and launched himself out into the open.

Outside, the noise of firing was deafening. The Četniks had at least two heavy machine-guns in action and were laying down almost continuous fire on the Partisan positions. The Partisans, having made some initial headway on the centre and on the right, were now completely pinned down, with little hope of movement other than by means of what would amount to a suicide attack. Douglas’s group was the only one that appeared to have secured one of the buildings.

Bent almost double, he pounded across the dry ground towards the midden. As he did so, a huge Četnik came at him from somewhere on his left, brandishing what appeared to be a sword. Douglas threw everything he had into a final sprint and, flinging himself down into the shelter of the midden, abandoned both the oil lamp and MP-40 in favour of his commando knife, which he now tugged free of its sheath in a smooth movement.

The Četnik swung the sword blade at him in a vicious swipe and Douglas felt it sing past his ear as he rolled away desperately. The force of the swing threw the Četnik off balance and he stumbled forward, frantically trying to recover his equilibrium for a second attempt. Douglas, twisting his body like a snake, came upright in a single, fluid movement and kicked the enemy soldier sharply in the groin. The man let out a scream and doubled forward, clutching at himself. The point of Douglas’s knife slid between the matted strands of his beard and the man gave a choking cry that was sliced off

abruptly as Douglas gave the blade a savage twist before pulling it clear. The Četnik crashed face down in the dust, quivering as his life-blood spurted away. A hideous whistling noise came from the gash in his throat.

Quickly, Douglas turned back to his immediate task and splashed paraffin over the straw of the midden, spreading it uniformly along the edge of the heap. Behind him, he heard his colleagues in the house suddenly open fire, presumably in response to some unseen threat coming at him from the direction of the supply trucks. With hands that shook slightly, he took out the Partisan's lighter and touched its flame to the paraffin-sodden straw. He had not expected an immediate conflagration and reeled back, his eyebrows singed, when the whole midden on his side suddenly erupted with a dull thud. Within seconds, the pile of refuse had become a mass of flames, spewing out dense columns of acrid smoke that drifted slowly across the village. It was a far better result than he had dared to hope for.

Barber came running up and threw himself down beside Douglas, shoving the dead Četnik to one side with a curse.

'I told the Partisans to stay where they were for the moment, sir,' he said. 'They should be able to hold the house all right if there's a counter-attack.'

Douglas nodded. 'Good! Something's bound to happen. They're firing blind through the smoke at the moment and it's my guess they'll try and make a break for it. See that house over on the left there? That's our next objective. If we can reach it before the Četniks do, we'll be able to divert their attention for long enough to allow Major Seferović to make a frontal attack. Are you ready?'

Barber nodded, wiping the sweat from his face. Both men checked the magazines of their MP-40s and rose to their feet, still hidden from the Četnik positions by the drifting smoke. In the house to the rear, the Partisans of Douglas's group saw what the two men were about to do and opened up brisk

fire, through the smoke, towards the Četnik barricade. The fire from the other Partisan groups also intensified and was matched by the Četniks so that the frontal sector of the village became a lethal no man's land of bullets.

Douglas and Barber launched themselves from behind the protective mound of the midden and sprinted for the house Douglas had indicated. Bullets kicked up spurts of dust at their heels as they ran and Douglas felt something pluck at the sleeve of his battledress, but his pace never slackened as he summoned every ounce of energy for a final burst of speed over the last few yards. With Barber alongside, he launched himself in a headlong dive behind the rear of the building, hitting the ground heavily and rolling over. A burst of enemy machine-gun fire chewed fragments of stone from the house walls and sent bullets whining into the distance.

Scrambling to their feet, and feeling more than a little winded, Douglas and Barber inched their way along the house wall towards the back door, which was open. Taking a chance, Douglas bounded across the opening and flattened himself against the opposite wall, glancing quickly into the interior as he went. At first sight, the house seemed to be deserted, but one could never be sure. Motioning to Barber to hold his present position, Douglas burst inside and crouched down, looking round, his MP-40 ready for action. Apart from a faint smell of unwashed bodies, there was nothing to indicate that the house had ever been occupied. It looked as if its owners had managed to take their possessions with them when they fled. Douglas gave a shout to Barber and dashed into the front room. The front door, he noted, was bolted from the inside, but the wooden shutters at the small window hung open and he found that he had a direct view of the enemy supply vehicles.

As he watched, a group of half a dozen Četniks bounded over the barricades that had hastily been thrown up around the trucks and charged towards the house, zig-zagging as they came. He poked the muzzle of his MP-40 through

the window and opened fire, bringing down three of the enemy immediately. The others came on, and Douglas saw that one of them was wielding a German stick grenade; the man's arm swept back in an arc as he prepared to throw and Douglas sighted his machine-pistol carefully, knowing that he could not afford to miss. He was too late. The Četnik suddenly faltered in mid-stride and fell over backwards, trapping the grenade beneath him. There was a muffled thud and his body was hurled into the air, turning over in a crazy somersault before crashing back to earth. The other two Četniks hesitated, then turned and ran as fast as they could for the shelter of the barricade. At the last minute, for a reason which Douglas did not understand, both men suddenly swerved and altered course towards the rear of the village, disappearing from view behind another house.

All at once, Douglas knew why they had fled. From beyond the smoke of the burning midden, there arose a wild and savage cry as Major Seferović threw his men into the assault. Dimly, through the murk, he made out groups of shadowy figures advancing on the Četnik position, crouching and firing as they ran. Then, more clearly, he saw Mila's Partisan women burst from between the houses on the far side of the village, howling like demons. He could not understand their war cry, but the Četniks understood it all right; the women were screaming for Četnik blood and they wanted it at their leisure. They were exhorting each other to take the enemy alive.

The next instant, the scene in front of Douglas's eyes dissolved into utter chaos. Some of the Četniks, terrified by the vengeance that was descending upon them, broke and ran, streaming away from the barricades only to be cut down in mid-flight. Others, determined to sell their lives dearly, sprang forward to meet their attackers and, for a few minutes, a vicious hand-to-hand battle swayed to and fro across the village square. Douglas and Barber stayed where they were, snapping off the occasional burst of fire at enemy soldiers

who appeared out of the dust of the melee.

Suddenly, it was all over. The firing and the shouting died away and the dust began to settle. The victorious Partisan forces advanced cautiously through the village, weapons levelled, stepping over the bodies of their enemies. Douglas and Barber came out to join them and were greeted by Seferović, his gap-toothed grin gleaming through the grime that streaked his face. Wordlessly, the Partisan leader reached out and grasped Douglas's hand.

The assault on the village had lasted about fifteen minutes from start to finish, but Douglas, always alert to danger, knew that the action was not over yet; there were still the gun emplacements on the hillside to be dealt with. He spotted Sergeant-Major Brough on the other side of the compound and waved an arm to attract his attention. Brough confirmed that the assault teams had successfully passed through the gap his Partisan group had created on the right of the village and were now on their way to deal with the guns. The main Partisan column was also approaching the village and would arrive in a few minutes.

Casualties among the Partisans had been surprisingly light and most of them had been sustained during the hand-to-hand fight in the village. While Mila's women set about tending the wounded, the men descended on the supply trucks and stripped them of their contents, ready to distribute the booty among the column when it reached the village. Amid scenes of mouth-watering jubilation, the Partisans unloaded substantial quantities of flour, maize, beans, and bacon, as well as some oil, fruit, and honey. Seferović ordered some handfuls of maize to be distributed immediately among the members of the attacking force, it would help to assuage their hunger until they were able to take advantage of a fuller meal.

After a few minutes, the leading elements of the main Partisan column

entered the village to a mutual exchange of cheering. The provisions were parcelled out among the leaders of the various groups who stowed them away in carts or on pack mules. As soon as this was done, Seferović waved the column on again, conscious of the urgent need to get it away from the village, and out of the valley into the mountains, before enemy reinforcements closed in from the flanks. The original spearhead force would now close in to form the rearguard, fighting off any possible attacks.

As the column prepared to move out, Douglas trained his binoculars on one of the enemy gun positions on the distant hillside. As he watched, a puff of grey smoke burst from it and hung in the air for a few moments before beginning to disperse. At first he thought it was one of the assault groups launching its attack, but then his keen sense of hearing told him that he had made a mistake. The noise began as a coarse whisper which gradually swelled to a weird, banshee-like howl. Frantically, Douglas made signs to the Partisans, trying to make them understand that they must either disperse, or get under whatever cover was available. They looked at him, uncomprehendingly, then began to scatter in all directions as Seferović got the message and screamed orders at them. Douglas threw himself flat on his face, hands clasped behind his head, and most of the others followed his example. An instant later, with a crash and a concussion that totally knocked the breath from his body, a howitzer shell exploded on the outskirts of the village in a huge fountain of dust and smoke. Douglas jumped to his feet and looked at the cloud of smoke that hung over the far edge of the village. He swore out loud. High on the hillside, the enemy gunners must have seen the headlong flight of their comrades, as well as witnessing the arrival of the Partisan column, and had decided to turn their sights on the village itself.

He took a couple of steps forward, seized a recumbent Partisan by the scruff of the neck and hauled the figure up. There was no time to be lost; somehow,

he had to make the Partisans understand that their only chance of survival was to get out of the village as fast as possible, before the gunners got the range accurately.

The figure whirled round to face him, eyes blazing and fists clenched. To his surprise, Douglas saw that it was Mila. Blood was trickling from a small cut over her left eye, mingling with sweat that ran in rivulets down her cheeks. A large dewdrop of perspiration formed on her nose end and Douglas fell a sudden surge of pity — mingled with admiration — for her.

‘We’ve got to get out of here, and fast.’ he told her. ‘Round up everyone you can find and get the column on the move again. Either the assault teams haven’t managed to reach the enemy artillery yet, or they’ve run into problems. Our only chance is to make a dash for it.’

Mila ran off, shouting out orders as she went. Major Seferović, having reached the same conclusion as Douglas, was already trying to get the column into some semblance of order. It was no easy task, for the orders had to be relayed back through the two thousand-strong Partisan force, part of which still trailed to the south of the village.

As though to underline the urgency, a second howitzer shell came screaming across and exploded on the western side of the village, obliterating the machine-gun post that had been captured by the Partisans of Douglas’s group, together with its occupants. The next round, Douglas felt certain, would arrive slap in the centre of the village.

The head of the Partisan column was getting on the move at last, spurred on by the men of the assault force. Looking up at the hillside, Douglas noticed that only one of the enemy guns appeared to have opened fire, which was something that puzzled him greatly. One possible answer was that the village was out of range of the other howitzers, if indeed they were howitzers in the other gun emplacements. The gunners were most probably biding their time,

waiting for the Partisan column to enter the exposed terrain of the valley.

Assuming the worst case — that the assaults on the enemy guns had failed — something would have to be done to protect the flanks of the Partisan column as it moved through the valley until it reached the safety of the high ground at the northern end. Speculatively, Douglas eyed the enemy supply trucks, which had been stripped of their contents.

Now that the attack on the village had been completed, Douglas had been joined by his own small group of SAS men, together with Forbes and Mason; they now stood close by, waiting for his orders. Quickly, he made up his mind what had to be done.

‘Olds, I want you to check out those vehicles as fast as you can’, he instructed. ‘Some of them have taken a hammering, but a few look as though they might be serviceable.’

While Olds went off on his task, Douglas outlined his plan to the others.

‘I’m going to turn the trucks into fighting vehicles,’ he said; ‘with a couple of machine-guns mounted on each one and plenty of ammunition, we can move up and down the flanks of the column at speed and, with a bit of luck, keep the enemy gunners’ heads down until the assault teams have time to get in and finish their job. It’s not an ideal solution, but it’s the best one I can think of at the moment. Look out! Here comes another shell.’

They threw themselves into the dust as the anticipated third howitzer shell screeched across. It exploded to the rear of the village, ripping through the roof of a house and reducing the building to a pile of crumbled masonry and shattered timbers. Two Partisans, standing nearby, were killed outright and a number of others wounded by the blast.

Douglas sought out Seferović and Mila and also explained his scheme to them, asking the Partisan officer to provide the necessary machine-guns and ammunition. Seferović readily agreed, and also detailed a number of

Partisans to help crew the vehicles. Olds came up and reported that only four out of the original eight trucks were serviceable, the rest having unavoidably received severe damage during the battle in the village.

Douglas split up his small command between the vehicles. Quickly, with the help of the Partisans, they set about mounting a machine-gun on the back of each one; the weapons were to be operated by the SAS men, with a Partisan acting as driver. The men seemed grateful to have been given the task, treating it as a great honour.

Douglas, while issuing his orders, had been keeping a weather eye on the nearer of the enemy artillery positions. Now, as he raised his binoculars to check on what was happening, he saw three or four puffs of white smoke suddenly burst from the emplacement. A few seconds later, he heard a series of sharp cracks, like a firecracker exploding. Jubilantly, he turned to Sergeant-Major Brough.

‘Grenades!’ he exclaimed. ‘The attack’s gone in at last. That’s one gun crew less we’ll have to worry about.’

The stutter of small arms fire drifted across the valley as the Partisans completed their task of wiping out the gun post. As there had been no earlier sound of enemy machine-gun fire, Douglas thought that the Partisan group assaulting that particular gun must have achieved complete surprise. He wondered how the others were faring. The other enemy gun crews were likely to be on the alert now, so the Partisan assault teams would probably suffer casualties.

Douglas detailed two of the captured enemy trucks to head out on either flank of the Partisan column, which was now sprawling out into the valley. He and Brough would man the machine-gun in the lead vehicle, on the left-hand flank, followed by Conolly and Olds; Mason, Barber, Mitchell, and Forbes would protect the right of the column.

Mila, following Douglas's instructions, had briefed the Partisan drivers on what they had to do. The instructions they had to follow were simple enough: a single knock on the cab of the truck meant turn left, two knocks signified turn right, while three and four knocks were respective instructions to speed up or slow down. One knock followed by two more in succession was the signal for the driver to zig-zag.

Several vital minutes were lost as the trucks were made ready. As their crew scrambled aboard, more howitzer shells began to burst in the valley, stopping the column in its tracks as the Partisans went to ground. After the explosion of each shell, the straggling ranks of men and women struggled to their feet and went on, pausing only to pick up the freshly wounded; the dead were left lying where they were.

As the Partisan rearguard formed a protective screen around the carts bearing the wounded, the four trucks lurched out of the village, heading out into the valley and trailing clouds of dust behind them as they gathered speed. Douglas, in the rear of the leading vehicle, scanned the western slopes of the valley through his binoculars, studying the nearer of the enemy gun emplacements. Below it, looking like ants on the hillside, he could make out the men of one of the Partisan assault groups, crouching under cover as they traded shot for shot with the enemy machine-gunners.

The Partisan driver sent the truck careering head-on towards the gun emplacement. In the back, the two occupants clung on grimly as the vehicle bounded over the rutted floor of the valley. Douglas kept his eyes glued on the enemy gun post, estimating the narrowing distance as best he could; he had to make sure that he was well within range before opening fire or his bullets might hit the Partisans crouching on the hillside.

Howitzer shells were still crashing into the valley at intervals, causing more casualties among the Partisan column. One of the shells exploded between

Douglas's truck and the vehicle carrying Conolly and Olds. Douglas looked back apprehensively but, to his relief, he saw the second vehicle emerge, apparently unscathed, and zig-zagging through from the smoke and dust of the shell burst.

Then, a series of sharp cracks sounded over the roar of the truck's engine. Douglas, familiar with the whip-lash sound of bullets passing dangerously close, knew that the enemy machine-gunners had turned their attention to the speeding trucks. On the hillside, the Partisan assault team, taking advantage of the diversion, made another short dash forward to the cover of a rocky outcrop. They would soon be within grenade-throwing range of the enemy positions.

Douglas, judging that the range was right, warned Brough to stand by, then gave a sharp rap on the driver's cab before crouching down behind the Breda machine-gun whose tripod rested firmly on a packing case at one side of the truck. Sighting as accurately as he could — a difficult task because of the rolling, lurching motion of the truck — he loosed off an exploratory burst and was rewarded to see his bullets draw puffs of dust from the hillside, just above the enemy emplacement.

He fired again as the driver continued swinging the vehicle round to the right, loosing off a longer burst that peppered the area of the gun emplacement. Under cover of his fire, the Partisans made their final attack, dashing in close enough to lob their grenades over the sandbagged parapet. Douglas and Brough heard the staccato cracks of the explosions — and then, with a roar that shook the entire valley, a whole section of the hillside erupted in a terrific blast that sent an avalanche of rock and soil plunging down towards the valley floor. A few seconds later, Douglas and Brough felt their senses blasted by the terrific shock wave and crouched down in the rear of the truck as a hailstorm of pebbles and other debris rained down out of the

sky. The driver, reacting instinctively, slammed on the brakes and the vehicle slewed to a stop, hurling both SAS men in an untidy heap at the base of the driver's cab.

Groggily, Douglas picked himself up and gave a helping hand to Brough who shook himself like an old dog. Above them, smoke drifted lazily from a gaping crater on the hillside, which was all that remained of the gun emplacement and a large chunk of the surrounding area. Of the Partisan assault team, there was no sign.

'Poor bastards,' Brough muttered. 'Their grenades must have cooked off some howitzer shells.'

Douglas made no comment. Instead, he hammered on the cab telling the stunned driver to start moving again. Turning, he got a thumbs up from Conolly in the rear vehicle, and the two trucks picked up speed as they set off in the direction of the second emplacement, on the western side of the valley. On the far side of the valley, through the smoke that drifted from the explosions of more howitzer shells, Douglas caught a fleeting glimpse of the other pair of trucks, zig-zagging wildly as their occupants kept up a brisk fire on their respective targets. Then it was time to concentrate on his own next attack, on gunners who were already opening fire on the speeding vehicles.

As the range closed, Douglas once again warned Brough to stand by and the sergeant-major knelt by the Breda, ready to feed the ammunition belt. Douglas rapped on the cab and took a deep breath, his finger tightening around the trigger of the machine-gun.

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Someone was holding Douglas by the arms. He was being dragged along the ground, his body scraping painfully over the dry earth. He was conscious of other hands reaching down, lifting him bodily, of a face, a few inches away from his, mouthing words which he could not hear. The face belonged to

someone he knew; he couldn't think who it was. He struggled to sit up, but a hand on his chest pushed him down again. He closed his eyes. All he wanted to do was sleep. But sleep would not come to him; it was being brutally denied by an insistent hammering in his brain.

He opened his eyes again and realized that the hammering was coming from a machine-gun a few feet from his head. His immediate reaction was one of relief that he could hear anything at all; his second, one of dismay that he had no idea what had happened. Conolly, now crouched behind the machine-gun, had removed his restraining hand and this time Douglas succeeded in sitting upright. The world spun around him and he gasped, closing his eyes again. Then everything became stabilized and he looked around him, wincing at the pain that sliced through his head.

Conolly became aware of his movement and glanced down. 'You okay, sir?' he asked.

Douglas put a hand to his aching head. 'I think so,' he replied. 'What happened?'

Conolly fired another burst from his machine-gun before replying.

'Your truck took a howitzer shell. It exploded right under the front wheels. Blew the cab and the driver to kingdom come and turned the whole thing arse over tit. You and the sergeant-major were thrown out. God knows how you got away with it.'

'Stan … where is the sergeant-major?' Douglas asked, suddenly concerned.

Brough's reassuring voice answered him. 'Right here, sir! I'm all right.'

Douglas turned and saw Brough propped up against the tail-board of Conolly's jolting truck, looking pale and drawn, and massaging his left shoulder ruefully.

'Just a few bruises, that's all,' he said. 'Nothing to write home about. Pity about the Partisan, though.'

Douglas nodded, feeling sadness for the young volunteer. He hadn't even known the man's name.

Suddenly, a series of metallic clangs, like hammer blows on a metal drum, sounded from the front of the truck. The engine gave a despairing croak and its noise died away. The vehicle ground to a stop and its driver jumped from the cab, crouching down to inspect the damage. A moment later, he stood up, his sweating face showing anguish, his arms spread wide in a total gesture of defeat.

Olds, abandoning his position by the machine-gun, jumped down too and went forward to inspect the engine; it did not take him long to discover what had happened.

'It's a proper bloody mess!' he shouted, his Norfolk accent sounding even broader than usual. 'She's taken a burst right through the bloody radiator. There's water pissing out all over the place. Looks like we'll have to abandon ship!'

'You heard the man,' Conolly shouted. 'Everybody out before we get our heads blown off!'

They scrambled out of the truck, helping Douglas and Brough, and keeping the immobile vehicle between them and the enemy machine-gun fire. Conolly unshipped the Breda and handed it down, together with the case of ammunition, before jumping clear himself.

The four SAS men and the Partisan headed, as fast as they could, for a shallow dip in the ground. It would afford them some protection until they could join up with the head of the Partisan column which was making slow progress through the valley about half a mile away. On the far side of the valley, the other trucks also seemed to have run into difficulties. As far as Douglas could see, both were immobile, and a whisp of smoke seemed to be drifting from one of them. He hoped, fervently, that the crews had managed

to get clear.

Gasping for breath, his body aching in every fibre, he followed the others into the sheltering fold of the ground, his dulled sense of hearing once again beginning to register the crash of shells and the continual stutter of machine-gun fire. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he knew that they had lost. The assault teams were hopelessly bogged down. His plans had failed and he knew that the Partisan column was bound to suffer crippling losses as it struggled through the valley towards the far mountain slopes. He caught Stan Brough's eye and shook his head dejectedly. The sergeant-major managed a weak smile.

'We did our best, sir,' was all he said.

Suddenly, Douglas raised his head, alert to a new sound that had intervened amid the crashing of shell-fire and the staccato of the machine-guns. It was a dull, thudding noise, like an intermittent drum-roll, reverberating around the slopes of the valley.

He swivelled round, cautiously raising his head above the dip in the ground, peering up the hillside. As he watched, the firing from the enemy emplacement slackened and then died away altogether. Puffs of yellowish-white smoke burst around them.

'Mortars!' he exclaimed. 'Mortars, by God! Look!'

He flung out an arm, pointing to the nearest emplacement, the one that had nearly brought his own life and Brough's to an end. From the wooded slopes above it, a host of brown-clad figures emerged, streaming down the hillside, blasting the enemy positions with machine-gun fire as they followed up the mortar attack. All around the valley the scene was being repeated.

The Partisan driver let out a wild yell of exultation, a cry that was echoed by the approaching column. Douglas watched, fascinated, as the brown waves from the forest spilled over the enemy positions, and continued their

headlong rush down into the valley, joining forces as they reached level ground, and advancing towards the head of the column at a steady trot.

Minutes later, the men and women of Major Seferović's battered command, many of them weeping unashamedly, were embracing the crack assault troops of the 2nd Proletarian Division, dispatched to their rescue in the nick of time.

Douglas, full of emotion as he gazed at the scene of jubilation, was suddenly conscious of a figure beside him. He half turned and, before he had a chance to register surprise, found that Mila was in his arms, clinging tightly to him, sobbing wildly against his chest.

He supposed that she was shedding tears of joy at the column's sudden and unexpected deliverance. After all, he had no reason to suspect that she was crying because she had found him alive.

Chapter Ten

The stars glittered between the branches of the pine trees, bright and intense in the cold mountain air, infinitely remote.

Helmut Winter gazed at them for a while, wondering what the weather was going to be like in the morning, and then turned his attention back to the Partisan fires, which he could see glimmering across the valley.

The men who sprawled among the trees around him, most of them asleep, wore oddments of Partisan uniform and, to a casual observer, would have appeared indistinguishable from the Communist troops who were taking their ease — and probably enjoying a piping hot meal — a mile or so away.

The thought of food re-awakened the now familiar hunger pains in Winter's stomach. He and his men had been shadowing the Partisan column for days now, and during that time they had had very little to eat. The Brandenburgers were used to living off the land, but in these mountains game was far from plentiful.

Winter sat with his back against a tree trunk and hoped that the eventual outcome of his mission would be worth all the effort and privation. Strangely enough, those twinkling lights across the valley provided his one shred of inner comfort. If he stuck like a leech to the Partisan column, never losing sight of it, then, sooner or later, it was going to lead him to Tito's headquarters.

Nevertheless, the very act of shadowing the Partisan column had brought its share of attendant dangers. The column had been attacked frequently by the Luftwaffe during the past days and only the day before yesterday a stick of bombs, missing the Partisans by a considerable margin, had exploded among

the rearguard of Winter's own small force and killed five men outright. Three more, too badly wounded to be moved, had had to be shot to put them out of their misery; that was an unwritten code of the Brandenburg Division.

There was the soft pad of feet on the carpet of mould between the trees and a dark figure crouched down beside Winter. The soft voice of Franz Warsitz came out of the darkness.

'It's a cold night, Herr Hauptmann. Under different circumstances one could almost take pleasure in it. The stars and everything, I mean.'

'Yes, Franz. A cold night, and a hungry one too.'

'I overheard one or two of the men grumbling,' Warsitz said quietly. 'They're wondering when they'll get the chance to fill their bellies. It isn't easy for them, seeing the enemy supply carts day after day and knowing that the Partisans are eating each night, while they go hungry.'

Winter looked at the pale blur of his Lieutenant's face. 'Then those men need reminding that they are Brandenburgers!' he said sharply. 'You know that it's quite out of the question to attack the enemy supply train. It would give away our presence and then all would be completely lost. They'll get their chance to eat when we've completed our mission.'

Privately, Winter was beginning to feel a deep sense of frustration. Day after day he had searched the column with his binoculars, looking for the agreed signal from his contact, down there with the Partisans. So far, there had been nothing. Nothing to indicate that the column had reached the vicinity of Tito's headquarters.

Winter was a man of action. Playing a waiting game, particularly a cold and hungry one, was something that did not suit him at all. Yet he had no choice. All he could do was to go on waiting and shadowing, and hope that his contact would reveal himself soon.

In the meantime, over forty picked troops were depending on his

leadership, and it was clear that, in some areas, their morale was beginning to sag. He promised himself that he would speak to them in the morning.

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The tiny village stood bathed in sunlight in a fold in the Bosnian Hills, its wooden houses clustered round a tree-shaded square. Above them rose the minaret of a mosque, a testament to the area's Moslem inheritance. The column had arrived there shortly after dawn and Douglas, who had grown to be instinctively aware of any prevailing mood, had noticed a sudden air of expectancy ripple like a wave among the Partisans, as though they knew that they were nearing their goal.

Shortly after their arrival, Douglas, Mila, and Major Seferović — followed at a distance by the political commissar — were taken to meet the local Partisan commander, a young man who might have been a carbon copy of Seferović himself. The commander had established his headquarters in a local peasant's hut, the door of which was guarded by a grizzle-haired sentry, armed with a Russian sub-machine-gun. He moved aside to let them pass, saluting with a clenched fist as he did so. Douglas had asked Forbes if he wanted to join the party, but the SOE man had declined, saying that he preferred to go and look at the mosque. The architecture of the East, he explained, was a life-long passion of his.

As they entered the hut, a Partisan girl, her belt festooned with hand-grenades, came up to each of them in turn and poured water over their hands from a jug, afterwards drying them with a coarse towel. Then they sat down to breakfast which consisted of dry black bread, washed down with pink brandy. For more than an hour, at the end of which Douglas was beginning to feel decidedly light-headed, they discussed all manner of topics with the local commander, who kept returning again and again to the question of when the British were going to supply arms to the Partisans. Throughout the meeting,

messengers came in at frequent intervals; the commander listened to what they had to say, then rapped out curt orders and sent them on their way again.

The Partisan commander explained that enemy troops were suspected of being in the area and this, together with the fact that German reconnaissance aircraft were putting in increasingly frequent appearances overhead, made it dangerous to move by daylight. He said that one of his officers would take them to Tito's headquarters at sunset. In the meantime, they could wash away the dirt of their travels and spend the remainder of the day resting in the shade of a plum orchard that grew beside the village.

Douglas and the other men enjoyed the luxury of a bathe in a stream that flowed through the orchard, then threw in their soiled uniforms and pounded them free of dirt as best they could, afterwards hanging them to dry on the branches of the plum trees. Mila and her women bathed in private, afterwards appearing in fresh clothing which the Partisan women in the village had found for them. Douglas, feeling better than he had done for a long time, stretched out in the shadow of a plum tree and, aided by the soporific effect of the brandy, was soon fast asleep.

He slept like a log until dusk when he awoke to find Mila shaking him. The other members of his team had already been roused and he felt mildly annoyed.

'Hell, Stan!' he said as Brough came up. 'I should have been awake hours ago!'

'So should I, sir,' the sergeant-major agreed, 'but I reckon we all needed the rest. It's the first proper sleep we've had for ages.'

Douglas, accompanied by Brough, Mila, Seferović, and Forbes, followed a Partisan officer down into the village square where a battered truck was waiting for them. It was a captured German vehicle, riddled with bullet holes, but apparently still in working condition. Its driver grinned at them through

the side window as they approached and, to his surprise, Douglas saw that it was Enzo, their young Italian prisoner.

‘I found out he drives trucks as well as mules,’ Mila explained, ‘and I thought he deserved a bit of promotion. After all, he has stuck with us all the way and has turned out to be a pretty good sort. He’s convinced that Italy will be out of the War soon and is over the moon about the idea.’

They clambered into the back of the truck and, waved off by a crowd of Partisans, including a surprising number of small children, set off along the track that led out of the village. The route ran along the shore of a lake with hills sloping down to it steeply on all sides. In the gathering darkness, Douglas noticed that the valley was growing progressively narrower but he was taking only half an interest in his surroundings. Hammering continually through his mind were the parting words of Brigadier Masters in Malta: if Douglas found that Tito was playing some sort of double-game, he was to kill the Partisan leader. Well, he consoled himself, there seemed to be nothing devious about the game the Partisans were playing so far.

After a journey of several miles, climbing steadily all the way, the truck lurched round a sharp bend and its occupants found themselves looking up at a ruined castle, perched high above the road. There were some houses clustered around it and the lights of others showed from the other side of a mountain stream. From somewhere nearby there came the roar of an unseen waterfall. Enzo, directed by the Partisan officer, drove the truck over a shaky wooden bridge and braked sharply to a stop at the other side of the stream.

‘Where is this place?’ Douglas wanted to know.

‘Jajce,’ Mila explained, and was about to add something further when the Partisan officer jumped down from the cab and said a few words to her. ‘He wants us to leave our kit in that house over there,’ she told Douglas. ‘He’s going to find Tito and tell him that we’re here. In the meantime, we’re to stay

put.’

Some time later, the Partisan officer returned with the news that Tito had invited Douglas and the others to join him at supper. He explained that they were to bring their weapons with them. Out of necessity, everybody went about his business armed.

With the Partisan leading the way, the small party re-crossed the river and followed a winding road up to the ruined castle which Douglas had noticed earlier. As they picked their way through a grove, a Partisan sentry stepped out of the shadows and challenged them, allowing them to pass when the Partisan officer gave the appropriate password. The officer, sure of his ground, headed straight for a gap in the crumbling wall of the outer castle and stepped through, followed by the others. After a few more steps he halted, saluted respectfully, and announced himself to the man who was sitting under a tree, studying a map by the light of a flickering lamp.

Douglas studied the man carefully as he rose and came forward to meet them. So this, he thought, was the legend suddenly become reality. Josip Broz, the man they call Tito, supreme commander of the Partisan forces in Yugoslavia.

Douglas’s first impression was that Tito did not look like a Communist revolutionary. He was middle-aged, of medium height, clean shaven, with tanned features and iron-grey hair. He regarded Douglas levelly with alert blue eyes, and his firm mouth curved in a slight smile as he extended a hand of greeting. He was wearing a dark tunic, cut in military style but without any insignia, and grey riding breeches. A smart red and blue spotted tie provided the only touch of colour.

Tito invited them to sit down under the tree. After a few minutes of pleasantries, the conversation turned to more serious matters, aided by glasses of plum brandy brought by an armed sentry. With Mila translating,

Douglas explained the purpose of his mission, which was to find out the nature and extent of the Partisan movement, and to establish whether it would be possible to set up a regular flow of supplies from British bases in the Mediterranean. He took pains to explain all the difficulties such an operation would involve: shortage of aircraft, the lack of bases near North Africa that would be suitable for use by heavy supply aircraft, and the fact that the Allied occupation of Sicily — the news of which had been received over Mitchell's radio a few days earlier — was imposing an enormous strain on Allied resources. He also told Tito about Lieutenant Mason and the naval officer's mission to investigate the possibility of setting up secret bases on the coast for landing supplies from the sea. Tito nodded gravely throughout, interrupting only when he felt it necessary to clarify some point in detail.

An hour later, Douglas was in no doubt about Tito's sincerity. He had begun to perceive the iron will and strength of character which radiated from the Partisan leader, and to realize why, unlike the Četniks, the Partisans were prepared to fight to the bitter end. Whereas the Četniks had thrown in their lot with the Germans, ostensibly because they saw it as a means of ending the suffering of the civil population, the Partisans, under Tito's leadership, refused to let themselves be deterred by any setbacks or reprisals. As far as they were concerned, the whole population of Yugoslavia was in the front line. The more civilians the Germans shot, the more villages they burned, the more enemy convoys the Partisans ambushed, and the more bridges they destroyed. It was a policy that required harsh discipline because often Partisan groups were compelled to attack objectives in their own part of the country with the full knowledge that the villages in which they had grown up would be raised to the ground and their occupants murdered.

Of one thing Douglas was absolutely certain; this man was nobody's pawn. The sacrifices which the Yugoslav people were making in their struggle

against the enemy, the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians who had suffered torture and death, the vast areas of countryside which had been devastated — all added up to an account which, when settled in full, would not be lightly transferred to another man. The fears of Brigadier Masters and his colleagues were unfounded.

Eventually Tito rose to his feet, indicating that the meeting was at an end but assuring Douglas that he would be pleased to hold further talks on the following morning. Douglas thanked him courteously, regretting that the meeting had come to an end, and feeling that he could have gone on talking with the Partisan leader all night. Tito shook hands with each of them in turn, Forbes the last of all. The SOE man had seemed almost bored during the encounter and had frequently glanced at his watch. A queer fish, Douglas thought, half wishing that he had left Forbes behind.

Suddenly, as they turned to leave, the night air was split by the rattle of machine-gun fire from beyond the castle walls, startlingly close. Douglas gave an exclamation and turned back towards the Partisan leader, unslinging his MP-40, only to freeze in his tracks, his mouth dropping open in astonishment.

‘If I were you — all of you — I would stand very, very still.’

It was Forbes who spoke, and the muzzle of his submachine-gun was pressed against Tito’s throat.

Chapter Eleven

For Helmut Winter and his commando group, disguised as Partisans, the approach march to Tito's headquarters had been surprisingly easy. They had been challenged three times *en route*, and each time the Partisan sentry had died quickly and silently, without any fuss.

In the village itself, the group had not been challenged. Some Partisans had called out friendly greetings as the Brandenburgers marched boldly through; the greetings had been answered by two or three of Winter's men, who had a smattering of Serbo-Croat, and the group had marched on quickly before anyone could engage them in more lengthy conversation.

They crossed the wooden bridge and followed the track that led along the shore of the lake, the route to Tito's headquarters which Douglas's party had taken some time earlier. With the village well behind them, Winter ordered his men to increase their pace to a steady trot, the commando force spaced out in two lines on either side of the road. From the coded signal flashed to him by mirror earlier in the day, Winter knew the exact location of the Partisan HQ. His sole purpose now was to hit the headquarters as hard as he could, capturing Tito and killing his immediate staff, and then get his men out quickly to rendezvous on a plateau, some miles away in the mountains, where a Junkers 52 transport aircraft would land to pick them up. As they approached to within a mile of the ruined castle, they advanced more stealthily, keeping to the shadows on either side of the road. Winter found himself surprised, and vaguely uneasy, at the lack of Partisan guards along this stretch of the road. He would have thought that the defences here, of all places, would have been much stronger than they appeared to be.

The two lines of commandos had adopted the march formation that was standard throughout the German Army; a senior NCO leading, and the officer somewhere in the middle of the file. Winter knew that the British scorned such tactics, preferring their officers to lead at all times, yet there was no escaping the fact that the German tactic resulted in far fewer officer casualties among the German forces. Warsitz, on the right-hand side of the road, was in a similar position.

When the first bursts of machine-gun fire lanced at them out of the darkness from concealed posts ahead and on both sides of the road, both officers escaped with their lives, while the men in front of them were chopped down. Frantically, Winter screamed orders at his men, telling them to get under whatever cover was available. The next instant, a flare arced up into the darkness, bathing the scene in lurid light. More guns opened up on them and now, from the rocks above, grenades began to tumble down, exploding with savage cracks among the sheltering men. Already, a third of Winter's force had become casualties and the Brandenburg commander knew, with deathly certainty, that his mission was doomed to failure.

'Franz!' he called out into the darkness. 'Franz, are you there?'

His Lieutenant's anxious voice answered him out of the darkness.

Relieved, Winter yelled: 'Franz, we can't hold on here. Tell your men to fall back. We'll cover you from this side of the road. Withdraw a hundred metres, then cover us. Got it?'

'Yes, sir! Withdraw one hundred metres. We're going now.'

Overhead, the sputtering flare was replaced by another. Winter and his surviving men opened up with their sub-machine-guns, spraying the road and the rocks ahead at random, hoping to find a target among the invisible enemy. The Partisan fire was now becoming intense; next to Winter, one of his men — a corporal who'd been with him since the days in Russia — took a bullet

between the eyes and fell sprawling sideways into the road.

Out of the darkness Winter heard Warsitz's voice. 'All right, sir! Come on back! We're in position.'

'Fall back two hundred metres!' Winter roared. 'Keep your heads down!'

The intense Partisan fire pursued them as they zig-zagged back down the road, jumping from cover to cover. Three more men fell in the two-hundred-metre dash before they at last threw themselves panting under cover, ready to give covering fire to Warsitz's group as they withdrew in turn.

Beyond the fighting, on the other side of the castle walls, Douglas and the others stood in stark tableau, their shadows etched by the drifting flares overhead. Douglas let his MP-40 hang loosely, knowing that to raise it would mean certain death for the Partisan leader.

'Just what the hell is this?' he asked, softly.

Forbes smiled at him, a rather tired smile.

'I had rather hoped that my friends would explain that to you,' he said, 'before they killed you. However, it looks as though our plans have gone astray. A pity! Had things turned out otherwise, our friend Tito here would have been safely trussed up and on his way to Germany in a few hours' time. Think of the propaganda we could have made of that!'

'"We"?' Douglas asked. 'What do you mean, "We"?'

Forbes shook his head. 'Never mind. It's too late. All I have to do now is finish the job.'

Helplessly, Douglas watched as Forbes pushed the muzzle of his MP-40 harder into Tito's neck and squeezed the trigger.

There was a sharp crack, a vivid spurt of flame, and Forbes's face disappeared. His head snapped back and he toppled over to lie spread-eagled on the grass, his body quivering. Beside him lay the MP-40, smoke curling from its shattered breech. Tito looked down at the dead SOE man and then

stared hard at Douglas, as though expecting an explanation. Douglas spread his hands, not knowing what to say, then turned sharply as a familiar voice came from the darkness behind him.

‘I’m pleased that worked, or we’d have been in serious trouble!’

Lieutenant Mason stepped through the breach in the castle wall, cradling his machine-pistol, followed by Conolly and a number of heavily-armed Partisans. Douglas looked at him, nonplussed.

‘Pussy! What the blazes in going on? What do you know about all this?’

Mason smiled at him. ‘I’ll start by apologizing,’ he said, ‘because I’m not all I seem to be. In fact, I’m in SOE too, and my purpose in joining this expedition wasn’t just to find out suitable landing places for supplies; the real reason is lying down there.’ He pointed at Forbes’s corpse with the barrel of his gun. ‘There isn’t much to say. It’s all quite simple, really. We knew two things: first, that the Germans were going to drop a commando team into Yugoslavia with the express purpose of kidnapping the commander of the Partisans and second, that there was a traitor in our own camp who would make contact with the Germans at some stage, and assist them in carrying out their plans. I can’t tell you how we knew; all that I can say is that we know how to break their codes.’

‘So you knew that Forbes was a traitor all along?’ Douglas said, quietly.

‘No. As a matter of fact, we thought that Eldridge was the traitor.’

‘So when did you find out the truth?’

‘When we attacked the bridge over the Tara,’ Mason replied. ‘If you remember, you detailed Forbes and Eldridge to attack the enemy armoured car. Putting the two of them together like that was quite fortuitous, really, although somewhat unfortunate for Eldridge. Forbes killed him, you see. I saw the bullet hole in the back of Eldridge’s head before we threw his body into the river. No one knew about it, except me — and, of course, Forbes. So

I knew then that Forbes was the one we had to watch.'

'Why the hell didn't you tell me at the time?' Douglas snapped angrily. 'We might have saved ourselves a lot of trouble.'

Mason looked slightly apologetic.

'Because I didn't want you to force Forbes's hand too soon,' he said. 'The whole scheme depended on getting here to Tito's headquarters, and then sucking the German commandos into a trap. We knew they were here and what their plan was. We have a contact in Admiral Canaris's headquarters. That's what we did; unfortunately, it all happened so quickly that there wasn't time to tell you about it.'

Douglas looked down at Forbes's wrecked MP-40.

'I suppose you had something to do with that, too?' he observed.

'Yes. You see, when you were asleep, earlier today, I followed Forbes up to the mosque. He didn't see me, and I saw him using a very small radio transmitter. He didn't seem to be having much success with it, so then he took out a mirror and started flashing some sort of coded message across the river. Somebody answered from not more than a mile away, so I knew that whatever was going to happen, was bound to happen quickly. By the time I'd worked out what I was going to do, you'd been whisked off to the headquarters, here. Luckily, I'd been able to do one or two nasty things to Forbes's MP-40 before he went off with you. He'd left it lying by the mosque wall while he went off to make his signals. It's the one silly mistake he's made throughout the whole business. Anyway, I had enough time to round up a sizeable force of Partisans, plus our own chaps who'd stayed behind, and lay an ambush on the road. The local Partisan commander speaks a bit of German, so Conolly here was able to convince him of the urgency behind the situation.'

Silence fell over the little group as Mason finished speaking. Away in the

distance, the echoes of firing died away. Douglas wondered if it meant that the German commandos had been wiped out; somehow, knowing their hardiness and ability to survive he doubted it.

He turned and looked at Tito, who had been listening to Mila's translation. The Partisan leader spoke a few words which the girl conveyed to Douglas.

'The Commander wishes to convey his thanks to you for saving his life,' she said, simply, her words directed at Mason. 'Now it is time to sleep; we shall talk more in the morning.'

The group dispersed and made its way back to the truck that would take them to the village. Mila drew Douglas to one side and looked up at him. She stood for a while without speaking, then said,

'What happens now? To you and your men, I mean?'

'Well,' Douglas said, 'I've achieved what I set out to do. I'll get Mitchell to send a radio signal in the morning; it's up to HQ what happens then. My guess is that they'll order us to make for the coast, where a submarine will pick us up. Or, with a bit of luck, they might even send an aircraft, if they can find a flat bit of ground for it to land on.'

'And then our paths will part forever,' she said. Suddenly, she was all defiance. 'I can't say I've enjoyed your company!' she snapped at him.

Douglas turned away to board the truck. 'The feeling,' he said, over his shoulder, 'is entirely mutual!'

Stan Brough, who had been eavesdropping, smiled benevolently. He knew perfectly well, from long experience of life, that neither of them meant what they had just said. And there might yet be a long way to travel before the wild mountains were just a memory.

ATTACK AT NIGHT

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CHAPTER ONE

The pilot of the big four-engined Short Sunderland flying boat gave a slight start as a hand tapped him on the shoulder, then looked up, smiled, and reached out to take the enamel mug of coffee that was being offered to him by one of the crew.

It was three hours since the Sunderland had lifted away from the waters of Plymouth Sound and set course south-westwards into the Atlantic, flying under a grey December sky. The island of Ushant off the Brest Peninsula, marking the most westerly point of German-occupied Europe, was well astern now, invisible in the murk that veiled the horizon, and now the flying boat was cruising over the outer limits of the Bay of Biscay.

The pilot was a squadron leader and, like the twelve members of his crew, came from the sunnier climes of Australia. He was an old flying boat hand, having captained the magnificent ‘Empire’ Class boats — from which the Sunderland had been developed — with Qantas on the Singapore to Darwin run before the war.

Now, in December 1943, the war was in its fifth year, and showed no sign of ending. As far as the flying boat skipper and his crew were concerned, war meant the monotony of endless hours droning over the ocean, protecting the vital Atlantic convoys from the ever-present menace of Hitler’s U-boats. In all those hours the Australian crew had sighted two enemy submarines and succeeded in attacking one of them, with unknown results. On the second attack, the depth-charges had hung up through an electrical fault and the U-boat had got away unscathed. Other crews had been luckier, particularly in the early part of 1943, when shore-based RAF aircraft, equipped with new

detection gear and operating in conjunction with the Royal Navy's 'hunter-killer' groups, had at last begun to get the measure of the underwater threat.

Successes had continued to mount steadily throughout the year, especially in the North Atlantic, where the German 'wolfpacks' had taken a severe hammering. In September and October alone, British, Canadian and American aircraft and warships had destroyed no fewer than twenty-five U-boats, while they themselves had sunk only nine merchant ships.

Beaten in the North Atlantic, the U-boats were now concentrating in more southerly waters, preying on the north-south convoys from Freetown and Gibraltar. In October and November two convoys had been attacked as they passed the notorious Bay of Biscay, but two U-boats had been sunk by the escorting warships and all the Germans had to show for their efforts was one merchant ship damaged.

'Navigator to pilot.'

The squadron leader put a hand to his face mask, which had been dangling loosely, and placed it over his mouth, flicking the intercom switch as he did so.

'Go ahead, nav.'

'We will be at position forty-six north, zero nine west in fifteen minutes, skipper. Should be sighting the convoy shortly, if it's where it should be.'

The pilot grunted over the intercom. 'Roger. Can't see anything yet. It's very hazy up ahead, and the cloud seems to be getting lower. Keep your eyes peeled, lookouts.' He glanced at his co-pilot, a very young flying officer who was sitting in the right-hand seat. This was his first operational trip, and the squadron leader had decided to take him under his wing for a while.

'Take over for a minute, Dickie. I'm going back for a pee.'

The boy's face brightened at being given the responsibility. 'Right, skipper. I've got her.'

The Sunderland's captain grinned and winked at him as he undid his harness and clambered out of his seat. Can't do much harm anyway, he thought as he moved back along the fuselage towards the Elsan toilet. The Sunderland was flying on autopilot.

Behind the two pilots' seats, the Sunderland's flight-deck crew of navigator, radio operator and flight engineer were all busy at their stations. The captain went past them and along the companionway, passing the beam gunners and the midupper. The Sunderland had a powerful defensive armament of fourteen 303 Browning machine-guns, and needed it; the big boats sometimes had to fight off attacks by enemy Junkers 88s over the Bay of Biscay.

A few minutes later, feeling much relieved, the captain made his way back to the flight deck and resumed control. The ASV radar operator, whose task it was to detect ships or U-boats on the surface, had nothing to report, which was puzzling; the convoy ought to have been within radar range by now.

The Sunderland crews of RAF Coastal Command generally preferred convoy protection duty to anti-submarine patrols. At least, circling protectively around a convoy, there was something to look at, something to relieve the boredom of long hours spent quartering the sea, all too often with no result.

The convoy which the Sunderland was on its way to meet was a big one, even by the standards of 1943. In fact it was two in one: SL142 from Sierra Leone, combined with MKS36 from Gibraltar — sixty-six ships in all, homeward bound for the United Kingdom under a heavy escort of destroyers, sloops and a single small aircraft carrier.

On the first day of December, as the convoy battled its way through heaving Atlantic seas, passing latitude forty-four degrees north on its homeward run, lookouts sighted a distant black speck in the eastern sky and

knew it for what it was: a Focke-Wulf Kondor long-range reconnaissance aircraft. The little carrier — a converted merchant vessel — launched two of her six Grumman Martlet fighters in desperation to intercept the enemy, but the Kondor escaped into cloud long before they got within striking distance.

The grizzled skipper of one of the freighters, a veteran of forty years at sea and an old hand on the Atlantic convoys in two world wars, settled his greasy cap more firmly on his head and sucked hard on his unlit pipe before removing it from his mouth and turning to the mate, who was studying a chart and trying to stay upright on the heaving bridge. The mate was a much younger man, and this was his first convoy run in the Atlantic; he had previously been on the East African run, from Mogadishu to Durban, before crossing the continent to join this ship at Sierra Leone as a replacement. He was UK-bound in any case, and his predecessor was still in hospital in Freetown, recovering from the effects of a bar-room brawl.

The skipper, seeing the mate hunched and shivering in his duffle coat, grinned before speaking. His accent betrayed his origins in the Yorkshire port of Hull, from where he had first taken ship in a trawler at the age of fifteen.

‘Feeling t’ cold, lad? Never mind, things’ll warm up soon enough. They allus do, after yon buggers put in an appearance.’ He waved his pipe in the direction of the cloud into which the Focke-Wulf had recently disappeared. ‘Bay o’ bloody Biscay,’ he went on, jabbing a finger at the mate’s chart. ‘Forty-four north to forty-eight. The buggers’ll give us hell for the next couple of days, until we’re abeam Ushant. Then the Air Force will come out to look after us — when it’s too bloody late, as usual.’

The skipper was being less than fair on the RAF, but he found it hard to shake off the terrible experiences of the early war years, when no air cover had been available and convoys had been decimated. Besides, he had a nasty feeling in his gut that the Germans would go all out to hit this convoy hard.

He was right. But this time, the threat would not come from beneath the waves.

Twenty-four hours later, as the Sunderland flew southwards to make its rendezvous, it was the keen-eyed co-pilot who saw the first sign of the disaster that had overwhelmed the ships.

It looked at first like a dark and threatening cloud, drifting low over the horizon. But as the Sunderland drew closer, the men in the cockpit could see that the base of the cloud was shot with red in places. Minutes later, the cloud had resolved itself into several distinct columns, merging higher up into a single spreading pall that fanned out slowly before the easterly wind.

Stunned, the Sunderland's crew gazed down on the carnage. The sea was littered with dying ships, many of them fiercely ablaze. Dense black smoke boiled up from stricken oil tankers, their shattered hulls surrounded by circles of burning fuel in which men screamed and died. Some freighters, which must have been carrying chemical cargoes, burned with a fierce multicoloured light. The escort carrier was listing heavily, but not heavily enough to have lost her aircraft overboard. Yet there was no sign of them.

The Sunderland circled the remnants of the convoy slowly. The pilots counted twenty-two vessels, either sinking or so severely damaged that it was doubtful if they could be saved. Vessels which had escaped unharmed, or apparently so, were scattered all over the ocean. The destroyer escorts were scurrying to and fro like sheepdogs, trying to restore some order from the confusion. Others were stopped in the water, braving any danger from prowling U-boats in order to pick up survivors. The flying boat's signaller tried to contact one of the warships by Aldis lamp, but got no response.

'Never seen anything like this before,' the Australian squadron leader muttered. 'Can't have been an attack by a pack of U-boats, or there'd be ships trailing back for fifty miles. This lot is concentrated in just a few square

miles of sea. The carrier has obviously launched her aircraft, so it must have been an air strike — but I've never seen damage like this caused by one air attack.'

'Couldn't have been a battleship or something, could it?' ventured the co-pilot. The flying boat skipper shook his head. 'No — if you remember the *Tirpitz* was damaged by our midget subs a few weeks ago in Norway, and the *Scharnhorst* is still in Altenfjord. Or at least she was yesterday, according to the latest Intelligence reports. Couldn't have got down here, unless she flew. Their only other seaworthy battle-wagon, the *Lützow*, is holed up in the Baltic. So it must have been an air attack, hence the absence of the carrier's fighters. The poor beggars have probably run out of fuel.'

The Sunderland flew over a spreading patch of oil which marked the grave of a ship. A dozen or so men were swimming away from it, some helping others to stay afloat.

The Sunderland's captain quickly made up his mind. Turning the big aircraft, he began a low-level run back towards the struggling survivors and instructed his crew to drop the aircraft's rear dinghy, which would hold seven men. There was no hesitation in obeying his order, even though it meant that the airmen's own chances of survival could be greatly diminished.

Below, the elderly merchant captain from Hull, who had just had his ship blown from under him for the third time in this war, saw the dinghy pack hit the water and began to strike out towards it, dragging the mate with him. The younger man had a bad gash in his scalp and was barely conscious.

'Come on, lad,' the skipper gasped, spitting out a mouthful of salt water. 'Bear up, now. We'll be all right. Told you the buggers were always late.'

Not that they could have done much about it this time, he thought bitterly.

*

Four hundred miles south-east of the Bay of Biscay, the winter sun that had

shone wanly through the smoke of the burning convoy now reflected from the salt marshes of the Camargue, highlighting their pastel shades of green and dun; but the sun was weaker now, for time had passed and December was well advanced.

The *gardien*'s sturdy white horse shifted restlessly and he clucked his tongue at it. It understood and resumed its statue-like stance, head down slightly, a tremor of pleasure passing through it as the rider stroked its neck briefly.

The *gardien* sat easily and solidly in the saddle, which consisted of a cantle in the form of a back rest and a very high pommel. It was flanked by two saddle bags. He held his chest slightly in, his legs stretched almost at full length, feet resting firmly in the stirrups — solid metal cages that were peculiar to the Camargue horsemen — with his heels turned outwards. His left hand grasped the *mourraioun*, the traditional lasso which, knotted around the horse's muzzle, also served as a bridle.

Nowhere else in France, perhaps not even in the whole of Europe, was there a region as haunting as the Camargue, that three-hundred-square-mile area of lagoons and marshy plains nestling in the heart of the Rhône delta. Here, amid this wild and lonely scenery, flourished thirty ranches, each with its own *manade*, or herd, of white horses and small black bulls.

The bulls came originally from Asia, but no one could say for sure where the horses had their origins. Some said that they were first imported to the Camargue by the Carthaginians and that later the Romans, impressed by the animals' stamina, bred them to provide mounts for their auxiliary cavalry. Another theory was that they came from Chinese Turkestan with the Huns, the terrible cavalry from the Steppes, whose drive westwards had pushed other barbarian tribes before them like a floodtide, to batter against and finally break the defences of the Roman Empire.

The *gardien* had often turned his mind to these things during his lonely vigil in all weathers, watching over the bulls that were his responsibility. It was in the nature of his people not to take things for granted, but to learn and to inquire. Secretly, though, he preferred the tale his grandmother had told him, long ago; that the first white horses of the Camargue were born out of the Mediterranean foam. It was easy to believe, when one watched the horses galloping wild and free along the shore, manes and tails flying and nostrils wide to the sea wind.

Between this horse and its rider there was a deep trust that had been built up over the years, ever since the *gardien* had cut the animal out of the wild herd and broken him in.

Ruefully, the rider recalled the end of the first round of that struggle: the *débrandage*, the kind of rodeo when, for the first time, the horseman had tried to keep his seat on his new mount's back. He had carried the bruises for a long time, but in the end mastery had been his.

Soon it would be the start of a New Year — 1944. The *gardien* let his eyes rove over the peaceful herd of grazing bulls and wondered whether, in the coming summer, the young men of nearby Arles would once again compete in the old Roman arena — once the scene of gory contests between gladiators and wild beasts — to pluck cockades from the bulls' horns.

Last year, for the first time in the long memory of the Camargue, there had been no such event. The Germans had put a stop to all big public gatherings when they had moved in to occupy Vichy France at the end of 1942. The *gardien* had asked his boss, the rancher, why the Germans had done that, and had learned that it was because the British and Americans had invaded North Africa. From then on the rancher had been happy to tell *the gardien* how the war was progressing, pointing out the places where fighting was taking place with the aid of a school atlas.

Then one day the rancher, Etienne Barbut, had taken the *gardien* to one side and, after swearing him to secrecy, had asked him to do a curious thing. If ever the horseman came upon any strangers as he watched over his herd of bulls, he was to report the matter immediately to Barbut. In particular, he was to report any aeroplanes which he spotted flying low down, as though they were about to land at Istres, the airfield that lay close to the shores of the Etang de Berre, the big lake to the east of the Camargue between Arles and Marseille.

For this reason, the *gardien* raised his head, suddenly alert, as his keen ears caught the distant throb of aero-engines. A moment later he saw the aircraft themselves, strung out across the north-western horizon like a gaggle of geese. His eyes widened a little, for he had never before seen so many at the same time. He counted twenty-six as they thundered over his head, four at a time, with two bringing up the rear. The noise of their engines spooked his horse and he had to fight for a few moments to bring the animal under control again; the bulls were already scattering in all directions, but they would have to wait.

The last two aircraft were lower than the others, and the *gardien* could see every detail clearly as they passed overhead, down to the black, white-edged crosses and the oil streaks under the pale blue wings. The aircraft had bulbous noses on which the sun glittered, and slender bodies ending in a kind of double tail. He noted all this carefully, knowing that he would shortly be quizzed by his boss. Most interesting of all, each machine carried what seemed to be two little aeroplanes, one under each wing.

He watched the formation for a while longer as it crossed the coast, losing height steadily and splitting up. The leading aircraft broke away and descended towards Istres, their wheels lowered; the remainder circled like a flock of pigeons, then more of the big twin-engined machines also dropped

away and followed the first down to land.

The *gardien* had seen enough. There would be much work to do later, rounding up the scattered bulls, but first he had to tell his boss about the aeroplanes. Barbut was certain to have seen them too, of course, but the ranch was a good five miles away, too far for him to have seen the little aircraft attached under the wings of the larger ones. That, the *gardien* was sure, was important, although he did not understand why. Neither did he understand the rancher's sudden interest in what was going on at Istres. But then, that was no business of his. He clapped his heels to the horse's flanks and the animal launched almost at once into a supple gallop, sure-footed as it sped across the spongy ground, its hooves kicking up little rainbows of salty spray.

CHAPTER TWO

The six men crawled flat on their bellies across the snowfield, moving forward a few inches at a time. Their white winter-camouflage smocks rendered them all but invisible against the background.

Slowly now, the leader of the six told himself. Slowly. Only another fifty yards to the objective, but don't rush. All the training has paid off. We've come through twenty miles of hostile country to get this far. Only a few more yards …

A machine-gun chattered, the bullets flicking up spurts of snow just a few feet in front of the line of crawling men. They froze, hearts pounding. The burst of fire came again, the second stream of bullets following the path of the first, underlining the fact that it was all over, finished.

Suddenly, the leader of the group wanted desperately to be sick.

'All right,' a voice called. 'You're all dead. Up you get.'

Over on the right, a small group of what had seemed to be boulders suddenly shook themselves free of snow and resolved themselves into men, one of whom cradled a Bren light machine-gun. They advanced to meet the others, who were now rising ruefully to their feet. The man with the Bren stood in front of the leader of the ambushed group and grinned at him.

'Hard luck, Einar,' the man said, a slight Scottish accent betraying his origins. 'But don't look so downhearted. You've come close enough to the target to qualify. The main test was to get across country without being spotted, and this time you managed it very well indeed. Congratulations. Now let's go over to the hut. You've earned your rations.'

Einar, who like the other five in his group was a Norwegian, trudged

through the snow towards the hut that had been their objective, shoulder to shoulder with the man carrying the Bren.

‘Captain Douglas,’ he said, ‘does this mean our training is now completed?’ The Norwegian spoke excellent English, although a little slowly. He had been a Professor of Physics at Oslo University before the war, and still could not quite comprehend the circumstances which had brought him to this wild and remote part of Scotland on the west coast of Inverness.

The other looked at him, smiling. ‘I think it means that the hard part is over, Einar. I can’t say I’m sorry, either. After all, we’re supposed to be here for a rest.’

Behind Douglas, Sergeant-Major Stan Brough chuckled. Rest — and by that he meant proper rest — was something this particular Special Air Service detachment hadn’t known for more than a year. First there had been North Africa, and operations deep behind the enemy lines that had culminated in a hair-raising attack on a German headquarters in Tunisia; then a landing on the island of Pantelleria to blow up Italian gun positions and supply dumps prior to the main Allied invasion; and after that the SAS men had been thrown more or less immediately into the murderous Partisan war in Yugoslavia, where they had been sent to make contact with Tito, the legendary guerrilla leader.

The wilds of western Inverness were gentle compared to the harsh mountain fastnesses of Yugoslavia, yet in a way Brough had been sorry when the RAF Dakota transport had come to take them away. There was something about that land, and its people, which appealed to him deeply. Maybe he would go back there after the war, if only to see how things had turned out for the people the SAS men and others had gone to help. The same thoughts, he knew, had been foremost in the mind of Callum Douglas, but for the young officer there had been the added attraction of a young Partisan woman

called Mila.

Anyway, he told himself, it was all academic. The war might go on for a long time yet, and the odds were stacked heavily against any of them coming through it alive.

Not many of Douglas's original command were left. Some had died in North Africa, others in Yugoslavia. Apart from Douglas and Brough himself, there remained only Liam Conolly, the Irishman, and Trooper Brian Olds, the stolid and dependable ex-farm hand from Norfolk.

Brough looked around at Conolly, who was keeping up a halting conversation with one of the Norwegians in the latter's own language. A born linguist, the Irishman's talent in that direction had got his companions out of a desperate situation on more than one occasion. During the weeks in Inverness he had set himself the goal of learning the basics of Norwegian, and had managed to build up a considerable vocabulary — not that it really mattered to anyone except Conolly, because all the Norwegians spoke English.

Brough shook his head at the memory of some of the irrepressible Irishman's antics during the past year. His native sense of humour had done much to raise their morale in perilous times. He looked habitually untidy, even when wearing his best uniform — a uniform that now sported a sergeant's stripes, which Conolly had accepted only after much protest — and his vivid blue eyes wore a dreamy, faraway expression that belied his talent for killing swiftly and silently with a variety of weapons ranging from commando knives to crossbows. A student of Dublin University, he had been on vacation in Germany when Hitler invaded Poland, escaping by the skin of his teeth on one of the last trains to cross the Dutch border. Brough knew that Conolly had turned down the offer of a commission at least twice.

Brian Olds was a different sort entirely. At this moment he was in the hut

up ahead, preparing a meal for the dozen men who had been taking part in the training exercise. It was the farm boy from Norfolk who, in his own quiet, soft-spoken way, had imparted to the Norwegians something of his own uncanny sixth sense; he could look at a stretch of countryside and tell almost at a glance if anything was wrong or out of context in it. His ability to pick out the location of an ambush, a sniper or an enemy patrol simply by observing the movements of birds and listening to their warning calls had proved more than a mere asset; as far as Douglas, Brough and the rest were concerned, it had often been the recipe for survival in a hostile terrain.

Among the others who made up Douglas's ten-man team, two — Troopers Barber and Mitchell — had joined as replacements just before the Pantelleria operation. Barber had created some hostility against himself at first because of his garrulous Cockney nature, but the opposition had disappeared soon after the first demonstration of his ability to move with catlike stealth over any kind of ground. Mitchell, the signaller, was something of a mystery. He was a Rhodesian, from one of the longest-established settler families, and had the look of the veldt in his grey eyes. He spoke only in monosyllables, as though conserving reserves of apparently inexhaustible energy. He could run up one side of a mountain and down the other, carrying a radio pack, with scarcely an increase in his heartbeat rate.

The other four, Troopers Cowley, Lambert, Sansom and Willings, were newcomers. Cowley and Lambert had transferred to the Special Air Service from the Commandos, and had taken part in the historic attack on St Nazaire in 1942 — the raid that had denied the use of the harbour to the battleship *Tirpitz*. Sansom and Willings had both come from the Royal Engineers, and were demolition experts. All had adapted themselves well to the tough SAS lifestyle.

This, then, was the small band of men who comprised No. 2 Special

Raiding Unit, a designation recently bestowed upon them following their activities in Yugoslavia. No. 2 SRU was an offshoot of ‘D’ Squadron of the 1st Special Air Service Regiment, which — commanded by its founder, the redoubtable Colonel David Stirling — had first won its laurels in North Africa. Stirling was now a prisoner of war, but the organization he had formed continued to flourish and expand.

In the two and a half years of its existence, the Special Air Service had grown from what many senior Army officers had regarded as something of a cowboy outfit into a hard-hitting force which had inflicted damage upon the enemy out of all proportion to its size. The badge of the SAS — Excalibur, the winged sword of King Arthur, surmounting the legend ‘Who Dares Wins’ — had become an object of fierce pride among those who were qualified to wear it.

Now, in the first days of January 1944, the Special Air Service units which had fought around the shores of the Mediterranean, from North Africa to the Greek Islands, were regrouping and training in readiness for the biggest venture yet: the assault on north-west Europe. No one yet knew when it would come, but all the signs were that it would be soon, within a few months. Britain was being turned into a vast aircraft carrier and a depot for the supplies and troops that were pouring in from the other side of the Atlantic.

Here, in snowbound Inverness, the war seemed very remote. The hut into which the SAS men and the Norwegians tramped was pleasantly warm and filled with the aroma of frying bacon, sizzling away in a large pan which Olds was tending on top of a glowing stove. He turned the rashers, saw that they were ready and scooped them onto a tin plate which he left on the stove to keep warm, replacing the bacon in the pan with a batch of eggs. Minutes later, the men were falling hungrily on the food which he dished up.

Callum Douglas chewed on a piece of bread, made succulent with the last of the bacon fat which he had wiped from his mess tin, and washed down with a mouthful of tea. The influx of sixteen damp bodies into the hut was already making the atmosphere stuffy. They would be spending the night there, and suddenly Douglas felt the need to get as much fresh air as possible before the darkness and the cold confined him to its interior.

Outside, he scrubbed his mess tin with snow before lighting a cigarette. Inhaling deeply, he looked around. The only time he ever smoked was after a meal, when he enjoyed it; any more than that and his mouth felt sour.

He gazed north-westwards across Loch Morar, taking in the spur of land beyond and letting his eyes rest on the dark violet of Skye's rugged hills, rising from the sea in the fading light. Far away, the sun dropped slowly towards the rim of the Hebrides, a cold red ball ensnared in mist.

Douglas shivered slightly, not so much with the cold but at the stark beauty of the scene. Even in the depth of winter the Western Isles, lapped by tendrils of the Gulf Stream, seemed to retain a peculiar warmth all of their own; the snow on them served to soften their contours and make different plays of colour upon them as the light varied, whereas snow merely accentuated the rugged savagery of the highlands that towered to the east.

For once, Douglas noticed, the sea was empty of ships. Normally it was otherwise, for the waters out there were the preserve of the Royal Navy, and nothing other than warships, fishing boats and the necessary island ferries was allowed into them. Because of the heavy naval presence the whole area around the Western Isles was restricted, which suited certain secretive people very well indeed.

Here on the western coast of rugged Inverness, a number of country houses in the vicinity of Arisaig, on the tip of South Morar, had been commandeered early in the war and designated Special Training School Group A. For the

past three years, amid this wild and lonely landscape, agents of the Special Operations Executive — the organization responsible for sending its men and women into enemy-occupied Europe to liaise with and train the resistance movements — had been brought to a peak of physical condition and taught how to kill their enemies silently and effectively with whatever weapon was to hand at the time, whether it were a knife, piece of rope, broken bottle or even a rolled-up newspaper. They had also learned how to use pistols and sub-machine-guns, how to jump trains and blow them up, and how to land from small boats on a defended coastline.

Douglas had enjoyed his weeks here, helping to put the SOE agents through their paces, not least because for him Scotland was home. The rambling house overlooking the River Tay, where he had been born twenty-five years ago, held both fond and bitter memories for him; fond because of the care of his father, who had brought him up, and bitter because he knew his mother only as a blurred memory. His father had destroyed every photograph of her after she had run off with an American rancher, a wealthy Texan who had come to Scotland for the salmon fishing, when Douglas was a very small child.

‘Think they’ll be all right, sir?’

The voice at his elbow made him start. ‘What? Oh, it’s you, Stan. What did you say?’

‘The Norwegians,’ Brough said. ‘Do you reckon they’ll be up to it?’

Douglas threw his cigarette end into the snow. ‘Well, we’ve taught them all we know, but I’ve no idea what they will be up against. It’s probably for the best that we don’t know, but I must confess to being intrigued, especially since most of them appear to be scientists of some sort. They’re a nice bunch. I hope it all works out for them.’

Brough began to make another comment, but broke off as a faint, alien

sound broke the silence of the hillsides. Both men found the source of the noise almost immediately. Above the shadows that were descending on Loch Morar they made out the cross-shape of an aircraft, turning in its flight and then steadying so that it was nose-on to the two watchers and level with them, as they were several hundred feet up on a hillside. As it drew nearer, Douglas recognized the high wing and heavy, spatted undercarriage of a Westland Lysander. He had seen plenty of them during his time in the desert, and in fact had flown in one during an intelligence operation in Palestine.

The Lysander tilted a wing as it crossed the shore of the Loch, as though the pilot was checking his bearings, then resumed its course.

‘Seems to be looking for something,’ Brough said, as the aircraft tilted a wing once more.

‘Or somebody,’ Douglas observed. ‘I wonder if it’s us? We’re the only ones up here at the moment.’

He realized suddenly that the Lysander pilot would have difficulty in spotting them, dressed as they were in their white winter clothing. Quickly delving into his camouflage smock, he extracted the small mirror which he always carried in the breast pocket of his battledress. The sun was not yet fully down and he aimed the mirror at it, making an improvised heliograph.

The Lysander pilot caught sight of the reflected rays and turned towards the flickering light source, flying low over the hut from which some of the others had now emerged, their curiosity aroused by the roar of the engine. They waved, and the gesture was returned by the pilot and his observer, clearly visible in the cockpit.

The pilot turned and flew back towards the hut, throttling back and coming down as low as he dared. As the Lysander passed overhead, its engine idling, the observer tossed a message container from the cockpit. It spiralled down, a red streamer fluttering in its wake, as the pilot gunned the engine again and

climbed away to a safer height.

The container landed in the snow some distance away from the group by the hut. Mitchell was nearest to it, and ran through the snow to retrieve it. He brought it to Douglas, who held it aloft and waved at the circling Lysander. The pilot rocked the aircraft wings in response before heading south into the gathering dusk.

Wondering what this was all about, Douglas unfastened the cap of the container and pulled out a rolled-up message form. Around him the others waited expectantly while their officer read it. The message was simple enough.

‘Captain Douglas report immediately to telephone box by roadside at head of Glen Beasdale. Transport waiting.’ The message ended with a map reference, to make sure that Douglas found the right spot, and the time when it was written. It was signed by a brigadier whom Douglas knew to be on the staff of SOE.

Taking Brough on to one side, he said quietly, ‘Stan, I’ve got to go. I haven’t a clue what’s going on, but this only involves me. Bring in the party as planned, as soon as it’s light tomorrow.’

He glanced at the sunset. ‘Glen Beasdale,’ he muttered to himself. ‘That’s about three miles away, and all downhill. Well, whoever is waiting won’t have to wait long.’

Five minutes later Douglas was skiing down the hillside in the twilight, scarf pulled up around his face against the cold breeze. The exercise was to have ended the next day with a cross-country ski run, for which purpose sixteen pairs of skis had been off-loaded at the hut. Douglas was grateful for that now, and for the fact that he knew this bit of territory like the back of his hand. There were few pitfalls, and those that did exist he could avoid with ease, even in the rapidly fading light.

It was almost completely dark by the time he reached the designated spot on the road that led towards Arisaig — the only road, in fact, in this remote part of the British Isles. He unfastened the skis and, resting them across his shoulder, made his way towards the telephone box. There was no sign of the promised transport, but he made up his mind to wait for a few more minutes before ringing up HQ to find out what exactly was going on.

Breaking his self-imposed smoking rule, he lit a cigarette, partly because its glow broke the monotony of the darkness and made him feel a little warmer. He had smoked it down to its last inch when he caught sight of masked headlights approaching from the direction of Arisaig. He moved out into the road to make himself visible.

The vehicle was an Austin 10 light utility car. It drew up a few feet away and the driver got out, a vague shape in the darkness. Douglas could make out little more than the pale blue of a face, topped by a beret. The figure was wearing a greatcoat, its skirt almost reaching the ground.

‘Captain Douglas? I’m sorry I’m late. The snow has blown in over the road back there, and I’m afraid I got stuck. Please wait until I turn round before you get in. I might need a push.’

The voice was soft, cultured and unmistakably female.

Before Douglas had a chance to say anything, the woman got back into the car and turned it expertly on the narrow, slippery road, causing Douglas to step sharply out of the way. He slid his skis into the back, which was covered by a canvas tilt, then climbed into the passenger seat. As the car moved off, he looked curiously at its driver.

‘What are you?’ he asked, ‘ATS, or something like that?’

He sensed that the woman was smiling in the dark. ‘No, captain. I’m a civilian. You can call me Colette, if you like.’

She volunteered no further information about herself, and Douglas was not

in the mood for talking, so the two drove on in silence. At length, the car turned left off the winding road and passed between two enormous stone pillars that flanked a gateway. There was no sign of the gate itself, and Douglas suspected that in common with most other ornamental metal structures throughout the British Isles, it had long since been removed and melted down in aid of the war effort.

The car followed a drive for a few hundred yards, negotiated something dark and circular that might have been a pond, then crunched to a halt on gravel in front of a large house. Although familiar with the training area, Douglas had not been here before; in fact, he had had no idea that the place existed.

‘Where’s this?’ he wanted to know, as they got out of the car.

‘We call it the Jam Factory’, Colette told him. ‘The story is that it used to belong to a millionaire who made his fortune out of preserves. It really is a beautiful house, though, as you’ll see in a moment.’

They went up a broad flight of steps and Colette rang the bell. A few moments later there was the sound of bolts being drawn, then the big door swung back to reveal a huge foyer with carpeted stairs at its far end. It was lit by a chandelier. No attempt at blackout precautions here, Douglas thought; probably no need of them.

The man who had opened the door was a Military Police sergeant. Douglas saw that he was armed, and that the flap of his holster was unfastened, the butt of a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver protruding so that the weapon could be quickly drawn.

The MP stepped aside to admit the newcomers. ‘Oh, it’s you, miss,’ he said, nodding at the woman in friendly fashion.

‘Good evening, sergeant. This is Captain Douglas. He has been ordered to report to room 20.’

The sergeant made a careful scrutiny of Douglas. ‘Evening, sir,’ he said politely. ‘The order is on my desk, but if I could just see your ID?’

Douglas produced his identity card, which the MP examined at some length before handing it back. ‘Thank you, sir. That is all in order. Would you both follow me, please?’

‘Just a moment, sergeant,’ Douglas said. ‘I’d rather like to shed this lot before I go anywhere.’ He indicated his winter overalls.

‘Right, sir. You can leave it behind my desk over there. No one will walk off with it.

Douglas gratefully stripped off the overalls. As he did so, he was aware that the MP was looking thoughtfully at the ribbons of the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross which the SAS officer wore above the left breast pocket of his battledress blouse. The woman, too, took off her greatcoat and beret, which she also left behind the MP’S desk.

Douglas gave her an appreciative sidelong glance as the pair of them followed the MP up the stairs. Her shoulder-length black hair was glossy and tied back with a green band; her features, from the side, were somewhat aquiline, with high cheekbones and a curve of the nose that was not unattractive. This, together with a rather dark skin, gave her a Mediterranean look. She wore dark green slacks and a short blouson of the same colour, fastened at the waist with a finely-worked leather belt. The bottoms of her slacks were tucked into fur boots. She was petite, not much over five feet tall. Douglas found himself wondering what her body was like under the clothing, then mentally admonished himself for being a lecherous pig. All the same, he was suddenly uncomfortably conscious that he needed a shave, and that his battledress exuded an odour which was not unlike that of a wet dog.

At the top of the stairs they turned into a broad corridor, their footfalls softened by the thick pile of the carpet. The walls were hung with portraits of

stern-looking bewigged men, some of whom wore the tartan. Douglas wondered whether they were the jam millionaire's ancestors, or whether they had come with the house.

The MP halted at a door and knocked. An indistinct command of entry came to them through the oak panelling. He opened the door and snapped to attention, announced the arrival of the two newcomers and then stepped respectfully aside to let them pass.

They entered the room, Douglas following the woman. A man rose from a leather armchair to greet them. He and Douglas looked steadily at one another. It was a half-second, no more, before recognition flashed through the SAS officer's mind — and with it came the certain knowledge that extreme danger must be in the offing.

CHAPTER THREE

Brigadier Sutton Masters extended his right hand as the MP closed the door behind Douglas and Colette.

‘Well, Douglas,’ he said, ‘our last meeting was in a somewhat warmer climate.’

Douglas murmured something by way of response. The last time he had encountered Masters had been nearly six months earlier, in Malta. It had been Masters who, as head of the Balkans Section of SOE, had briefed the SAS officer for the Yugoslavian venture.

There was another man in the room, standing with his back to a crackling log fire. Unlike Masters, who was dressed in civilian clothing, this man wore a uniform — the uniform of a very senior Naval officer, with several rows of medal ribbons making a splash of colour below his left lapel. Masters made the introductions.

‘Sir, this is Captain Douglas of the Special Air Service. The young lady you have already met. Douglas, this is Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Westerfield.’

Westerfield was a short man and very lean, obviously getting on in years but still possessing a considerable crop of grey, wavy hair. He regarded Douglas steadily out of eyes that were barely visible amid folds and creases, caused no doubt by the winds that had swept the world’s oceans.

‘Thank you for coming so promptly, Douglas,’ he said. His voice was surprisingly soft, with a hint of the West Country. ‘Please sit down, both of you. But first, help yourselves to a drink.’ He indicated a tray that stood on a sideboard.

The girl declined, but Douglas poured himself a generous measure of scotch

before making himself comfortable in one of the easy chairs that had been placed by the fire. Westerfield came straight to the point.

‘Douglas, we have a big problem. It is one that has to be solved very quickly, otherwise enormous damage could be inflicted on certain operations that will be undertaken in the near future.’

He leaned forward and stared at Douglas intently, the heavy gold braid on his forearms reflecting the firelight.

‘Early in December,’ he continued, ‘one of our homewardbound convoys was subjected to a severe air attack off the Bay of Biscay. Losses were very heavy — about one-third of the ships involved, including an aircraft carrier. This came as a very nasty shock to us, especially as we had begun to get the upper hand in the Atlantic. Now, the thing that made this attack so devastating — and potentially frightening, as far as the future is concerned — is that the Germans used missiles, not bombs or torpedoes.’

‘Missiles?’ The word was an unfamiliar one, at least when it was mentioned in the context of weaponry. The rear-admiral nodded.

‘Yes. Or, if you prefer it, rocket-powered projectiles. Masters, hand Douglas that folder, will you?’

The brigadier obligingly passed over a buff-coloured Ministry file. Douglas opened it, and saw that it contained a selection of photographs.

‘Look at them carefully,’ Westerfield said, ‘and I will explain what they are all about. The first one shows the Italian battleship *Roma* on fire and sinking between Corsica and Sardinia after being attacked by the Luftwaffe. The weapons the Germans used were glider bombs, which we believe were steered to the target by some form of radio guidance. The attack took place in September last year, when the Italians were on their way to Malta to surrender to us after the armistice. Another battleship, the *Italia*, was badly damaged in the same attack. Now look at the next picture.’

Douglas did so. It depicted another warship, this time pictured at close quarters in harbour. Douglas recognized the unmistakable scenery of Valletta in the background. There was a massive hole in the warship's hull.

'That's the battleship HMS *Warspite*' Westerfield told Douglas. 'She was hit by three glider bombs off Salerno and very severely damaged. She'll be out of commission for months. Now, I want you to close the folder for a minute.'

The rear-admiral got up and resumed his stance in front of the fire. 'Those glider-bombs are very accurate,' he went on. 'There was only one thing in our favour. They had to be launched from close range, a couple of miles or thereabouts. Moreover, the launch aircraft had to fly straight and level over the target while the missile was guided after launch. So, as you may imagine, the Germans took heavy losses from our antiaircraft fire. Now you can take a look at the third photograph in there.'

It was an aerial shot, showing an area of sea dotted with burning ships.

'Not a pretty sight, is it?' Westerfield said grimly. 'That's the convoy that was attacked off Biscay in December. The photograph was taken by one of the RAF'S Sunderlands that went out to look for it. The convoy was heavily escorted, but there wasn't a damned thing the escorts could do to prevent the massacre. It seems the Germans launched their missiles from nearly ten miles away. According to reports, the missiles came in low over the sea at incredible speed — some accounts suggest it must have been over six hundred miles per hour. We have a particularly detailed description from a lookout on board one of the escorting destroyers who tracked a missile with his binoculars; he said that it was leaving a white trail when he first spotted it — presumably the rocket exhaust — but then the trail cut out and the weapon seemed to coast over the final few hundred yards.'

'It makes you wonder what else they've got up their sleeve,' Douglas

muttered, trying to imagine the nightmare of terror and suffering that lay behind the frozen, impersonal image of the photograph.

'It does indeed,' Westerfield agreed. 'Incidentally, RAF Intelligence has identified the Luftwaffe unit that carried out the attack. It's called KG 100, and it apparently exists to carry out special operations. We think that it was KG 100 that led the attack on Coventry back in November 1940. They acted as pathfinders, flying along a radio beam transmitted from a station on the French coast. They've been in Russia for the past couple of years, but now they're back. A few days after the convoy attack. Intelligence pinpointed their base at Cognac, north of Bordeaux. We asked the Americans to obliterate the place with one of their daylight precision attacks. They did it with admirable thoroughness, as you'll see from the fourth picture.'

Douglas stared at what had been an airfield, covered with hundreds of overlapping bomb craters. 'Nice work,' he commented.

'Very,' said Westerfield wryly. 'However, there was only one problem: KG 100 wasn't there any more. Over to you, Brigadier.'

Masters coughed and took out a silver cigarette case from his inside pocket. He played with it, unopened, as he spoke.

'Well, it now seems that KG 100 has turned up at Istres, in southern France, SOE has received reliable word to that effect from our main resistance contact in the area. This is worrying us a great deal, because from Istres they are in a position to interfere seriously with forthcoming operations in the Mediterranean.'

Masters paused to take out a cigarette and light it. Douglas took the opportunity to ask an obvious question.

'Can't the Americans do to Istres what they did to Cognac, and put the place out of action?'

The brigadier shook his head. 'They tried, and suffered unacceptable losses.

The Germans have moved a wing of fighters into Istres. The Americans just couldn't get through. The RAF can't carry out a night attack for fear of causing heavy casualties among French civilians in the surrounding area.' He looked suddenly at Westerfield. 'How much can I tell Douglas, sir?'

The rear-admiral sighed and passed his fingers through his hair, moving away from the fire and sitting down once more. 'All right, Brigadier,' he said. 'I'll take the chance, and the responsibility along with it. Needless to say, Douglas, anything you hear from now on does not go beyond these four walls.'

'You have my assurance on that, sir,' Douglas told him.

'Good. The situation is this. Very soon — before the end of January — an Allied invasion force will go ashore at a location on the west coast of Italy. I'm not going to tell you where, but I can say this: the objective is to take Rome and cut off the enemy forces in southern Italy from those in the north. If we succeed in doing this, we can probably force a complete withdrawal of German forces from Italian territory, leaving the way open for a drive into Austria. Taken alongside other plans, about which I can say absolutely nothing at this stage, it could all add up to the possibility of the war being over this year.'

He smiled, a little wearily. 'Then, Douglas, we can all go home somewhat earlier than we envisage.'

Douglas said nothing. He waited expectantly for whatever was coming next. Westerfield did not keep him waiting for long.

'On the other hand,' he went on, 'unless we can nip this new enemy threat in the bud, and quickly, our plans for a speedy end to the war could face disaster. At this very moment, a large convoy carrying the United States reinforcements and material essential to the success of the proposed landing is assembling in various West African ports. In ten days' time it will pass

through the Strait of Gibraltar and head straight for its objective, joining up with other assault ships from North Africa en route.'

Westerfield paused for a moment, as though gathering his thoughts, then said: 'Inevitably, the Germans must know all about the American convoy. Their U-boats tried unsuccessfully to attack it in transit, and they have plenty of agents still in West Africa. What they don't know is the objective. Our Intelligence people have been doing their best to lay a false trail in the hope of persuading the enemy that a major landing is about to take place on the French Riviera. The idea is that the Germans, with luck, will remove some of their forces from northern Italy to the Riviera, although as yet we have no reports that they are doing so. Perhaps they think it no longer necessary.'

Douglas looked at Westerfield questioningly. 'Sir?'

'What I mean', the Naval officer went on, 'is that the Germans now probably believe that they can decimate the convoy by use of air power alone as it passes through the Mediterranean. I fear that with these new weapons, they are quite capable of doing so. They have got to be stopped. Back to you, Brigadier.'

'As you have already heard, Douglas,' Masters said quietly, 'we cannot eliminate KG 100 by air attack. Clearly, the only way to accomplish it is by an assault from the ground. We want you to take in your SAS team, Douglas, and organize the local Resistance to do exactly that. And it has got to be done within the next ten days — less, for safety's sake.'

Douglas leaned back in his chair and expelled his pent-up breath in a long exhalation.

'Bit of a tall order,' he said. His voice was completely steady, which surprised him; he didn't feel in the least bit steady.

'You have considerable experience in airfield attack techniques,' Masters pointed out. 'In that respect, your record in North Africa was outstanding.'

‘Well, sir, with due respect, that was a bit different,’ Douglas told him. ‘We would pop up out of the desert, hit the target and get out again. We knew the lie of the land, and we had plenty of air reconnaissance to tell us what we were looking for. Besides, the Germans’ desert airstrips weren’t very heavily defended. At Istres we would be going in blind, not knowing what we would be likely to be up against.’

‘Not entirely.’ Douglas looked round in surprise; it was the woman who had spoken. Masters looked encouragingly at her.

‘Please go on, Colette,’ he said. ‘But first, Douglas, I should explain that Colette will be going along with you.’

Douglas felt his hackles beginning to rise. ‘Now just a minute, sir,’ he said truculently. ‘For a start, I don’t think that any of this is feasible. And even if it were, I don’t want any unknown quantities tagging along.’

Masters held up a hand. ‘All right, Douglas,’ he said sharply, ‘just draw in your horns a little and listen to what Colette has to say. She is by no means an unknown quantity, as you will learn. She has our complete support; in fact, she is quite indispensable to this operation.’

There was a lengthy pause before Colette spoke again. She stared at Douglas, and the silence was laden with reproof.

At length she said in an even voice: ‘Captain Douglas, I don’t think you quite understand. There is a very strong resistance movement in southern France, in some ways stronger than that in the north. In Vichy France we are fighting not only the Germans, but also the Milice, the pro-fascist police, who in many respects are worse than the Gestapo. Let me assure you that you will receive all possible help in your task; in fact, the groundwork is being prepared at this very moment.’

‘You seem very sure of yourself,’ Douglas interrupted, ‘and in any case, I haven’t said that I’m going to risk the lives of my men in this crazy venture. I

assume' — the question was directed at Masters — 'that you aren't going to *order* us to do this?'

The brigadier shook his head slowly. 'No, Douglas. Of course not. It'll be strictly a job for volunteers.'

Douglas was beginning to feel tired. He lay back in his chair and passed a hand over his eyes.

'Look, gentlemen,' he said, addressing both senior officers, 'I think I would like to sleep on it. First of all, I want a bath and a shave and a change of clothing. That might be a problem, since my kit is over at Group A Headquarters.'

Masters smiled. 'No, it isn't,' he said. 'I had it brought here. There's a room for you. First things first: I suggest that when you have freshened up, you take dinner with Colette. We've quite a nice little mess room here, and there's hardly anybody about just now, so you'll be able to talk privately. Colette can tell you what she knows about the Resistance, and I hope set your mind at rest on a few matters. Then you can give me your answer first thing in the morning. Fair enough?'

'Fair enough, sir. You'll have my answer then.'

'Don't forget, Douglas, that thousands of lives may be in the balance here. I trust you will make the right decision.'

He's putting me well and truly on the spot, Douglas thought. He'll have his answer, all right. But what happens to me if it's the wrong one? And what will happen to me anyway, and especially to my men, if we go?

There was no choice, not really. A suicide mission to save many lives was, perhaps, acceptable. But what if it failed? What if the lives of his men were to be squandered for nothing? He knew that this operation would be unlike anything he had undertaken before. In North Africa, in Yugoslavia, there had been places to hide if the going got rough — places where a few men could

hold an army at arm's length if they needed to. But in southern France the enemy were likely to hold all the cards, right from the start. Unless, of course, there were factors of which he was still unaware, secrets which no one had yet seen fit to reveal to him.

First things first, Masters had said. Very well, then. He rose from his chair.

'Will that be all for now, sir?' he asked, directing the question at Masters in a polite tone that by no means matched his mood.

'Yes, Douglas. I will call you in the morning,' Masters said, also getting up. Westerfield rose too, and came forward to take Douglas's hand.

'I don't suppose I shall be seeing you again, Douglas,' he said, and then flashed a quick smile. 'Sorry. I didn't mean that to sound like it probably did sound! What I meant is, I am heading back to the Clyde at once. I have told you all I can. I'd just like to wish you good luck — no matter what your decision may turn out to be.'

At that moment, Douglas made up his mind what he was going to do, come what may. But he had no intention of telling Masters — not just yet.

Colette said that she would show him to his quarters. He followed her up another flight of stairs, and she led him to a door that was recessed into an alcove on the left of the landing at the top.

'Go ahead,' she told him. 'Open it.'

He did so, and gasped in amazement. It was as though he had stepped straight into Jacobean times. The dominant feature of the room was a huge four-poster bed, hung with dark blue drapes that were tied back. Firelight glowed on burnished shields that hung over crossed swords on the wall above the fireplace. The only twentieth-century feature, incongruous and out of place, was an electric table lamp that stood on an eighteenth-century dresser.

'Good Lord!' Douglas exclaimed. 'Who was the last to sleep here — Bonnie Prince Charlie?'

Colette chuckled. ‘You might not be far out, at that,’ she said. ‘He was supposed to have landed at Arisaig, so one of my Scottish friends tells me. Anyway, you might as well make the most of it.’

‘And where’s your room?’ Douglas asked, grinning a deliberately wicked grin.

‘Mind your own business,’ she told him firmly. ‘Now, it’s exactly seven o’clock. You’ve got one hour to sort yourself out, and then I’ll come and collect you.’

Someone, Douglas thought a few moments later, was being extremely efficient. His best uniform had been laid out on the bed, together with clean shirt and underwear, and his shoes had been polished until they glittered. Also, to his delight, he discovered that a bath had already been drawn in the adjoining bathroom. His rolled-up winter overalls were on top of his back-pack, which stood in a corner of the room.

Gratefully, he unlaced his boots and peeled off his sweaty battledress. For a few moments he stood naked in the middle of the room, flexing his weary muscles. Then he slid into the bath and luxuriated drowsily for a few minutes before setting to work to soap away the grime that had accumulated during the exercise with the Norwegians. He couldn’t help feeling sorry for them, and for his own men, roughing it in the hut up in the hills, yet in an odd sort of way he would rather have been with them. Conolly, he thought with an inward grin, would probably have produced a whisky bottle from somewhere by now, and it would be doing the rounds.

Feeling much refreshed, he had just finished changing into his clean clothing when there was a knock on the door. Colette entered at his summons and smiled at him. ‘Good,’ she said, ‘you’re ready. I like punctual people. Very smart, too, if I may say so.’

‘Thanks,’ Douglas grinned back. ‘You don’t look so bad yourself.’ It was

one of his bigger understatements. From where he was standing, she was beautiful. She seemed to have a penchant for green, for she now wore a simply-cut emerald evening gown, fastened at the neck with a little galaxy of stones which, from the way they flashed and sparkled in the firelight, were clearly not synthetic. She wore no lipstick, but a mild touch of rouge accentuated the hue of her complexion.

'Um … very nice indeed, actually,' Douglas said, rather at a loss for words. 'Well, shall we go and make a dramatic entry into the dining-room?'

The dining-room, he discovered, was on the ground floor. They descended the stairs with Colette's hand resting lightly on his arm, paused a moment at the dining-room door, and saw immediately that the only occupant was a mess waiter, standing stiffly by a serving hatch in starched white jacket. He wore a corporal's chevrons, in gold, on his right arm.

Colette chuckled. 'So much for the dramatic entry,' she said.

The corporal bade them a polite good evening, showed them to a table and placed a menu in front of each of them. The meal was excellent and, apart from game soup, distinctly un-Scottish; the main course consisted of a brace of small birds which, Douglas found to his surprise, were wood-pigeons, cooked in a deliciously piquant sauce. To finish off there was a custard tart, dusted with nutmeg, followed by fruit and cheese. There was a palatable red wine, too, served from a decanter.

The corporal came to clear the table, and asked them if they would like their coffee where they were, or in the ante-room. Douglas, feeling like a smoke, decided on the ante-room, which was a small and comfortable lounge next door. They settled down in armchairs by the fire; the corporal brought them their coffee and, to Douglas's delight, some cognac, and then discreetly made himself scarce, closing the door quietly behind him with the words, 'Just ring that bell over there, sir, if you want anything.'

‘Amazing, this,’ Douglas observed. ‘I haven’t enjoyed a meal as much in years. Can’t help being curious about who was behind that serving hatch. One of the faithful old retainers, do you think?’

Colette laughed. ‘It’s possible. We hardly ever see any of the mess staff. It’s all part of the policy, I suppose. The less they know about us the better, even though they might suspect a great deal. By the way, I want to thank you.’

Douglas looked at her in surprise. ‘For what?’ he asked.

‘For not asking any questions during the meal,’ she told him. ‘I would have hated you to spoil my enjoyment of it. Now you can ask all you want; I’ll tell you as much as I can, or as I think you ought to know.’

Douglas offered her a cigarette, which she declined. He lit one himself, then said: ‘For a start, I’d like to know who I’m dealing with. Just who are you, and how do you fit into all this?’

She smiled at his blunt manner. ‘I already told you, you can call me Colette,’ she said. ‘As for my employers, it should be obvious to you who they are. And I want you to know this, Captain: I know exactly what I’m talking about. I have been in this game a long time — right from the start, in fact — and I have been in Vichy France twice since it was occupied. Does that surprise you?’

Douglas shook his head. ‘Not in the slightest. And my name is Callum, by the way.’

She inclined her head briefly. ‘Very well, Callum. Now, my first job is to brief you on what you are likely to encounter in the Vichy zone — assuming you decide to volunteer for this operation, of course. Otherwise, this conversation ends here.’ She looked at him questioningly.

‘I’m going,’ he told her. ‘But I think you already know that.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, I didn’t think you were the kind of man to turn down a

challenge, no matter how risky.'

As she began to tell him about conditions in Vichy France, it quickly became apparent to Douglas just how risky this venture was likely to be. Over and over, she stressed the fact that the main threat the SAS team was likely to encounter was the Milice, rather than the occupying German forces. The Milice, she told him, had originated as a semi-chivalrous body of gentlemen anxious to restore France's shattered military honour after the defeat of 1940, but since then it had turned into something much more sinister.

'They are the scum of the jails,' she said vehemently, 'the same sort of would-be gangsters as the thugs Mussolini and Hitler built their movements on. They are Frenchmen who live and work in their home towns and villages, using their local knowledge expertly; that is what makes them so dangerous to our agents. Whereas the ordinary police might be friendly or at least neutral, and the Germans are strangers who might be bluffed, the militiamen are sharp, suspicious characters who are wholeheartedly devoted to the fascist cause. The French SS — oh, yes, Callum, don't look so surprised, there *is* a French SS division — recruits widely from their ranks.'

Douglas listened attentively as Colette went on to tell him about the Maquisards, the Resistance fighters, who had already been betrayed by the Milice.

'The main problem in France.' she explained, 'is that security among the Resistance is virtually nil. It isn't in the French nature to be secretive, and people get arrested simply because they can't keep their mouths shut. That's why I'm pleased we'll be going into the Camargue; people tend to keep themselves pretty much to themselves in that corner of France, which increases our chances. Also, the activities of the Milice are kept under constant surveillance by one very clever — and very successful — Resistance

circuit in the area.'

Colette spoke for several more minutes, by which time Douglas had acquired a fair grasp of what he and his men were likely to encounter. When she had finished, she paused for a few moments and looked at him gravely. Then she said, 'There's one thing I have to point out. You will not be able to carry out this operation in uniform. So if anything goes badly wrong and you are captured, you will almost certainly be shot.'

'I've a strong feeling they'd shoot us anyway,' Douglas told her. 'Anyway, you'll be in the same boat, I expect.'

'Perhaps. But the Germans have more refined ways of dealing with captured agents. The lucky ones are shot; the unlucky ones are interrogated by the Gestapo for weeks, perhaps months, before being sent to a concentration camp.' A flush of anger crept over her face. 'Some day, when this war is over, the deaths of many people will have to be avenged. It will not be easy to sort out the innocent from the guilty among our own people. I sometimes wonder who are the most despicable — those who secretly collaborate with the enemy, or those who come out into the open to side with them.' Douglas looked at her in curiosity. 'You say "your people,"' he said. 'Are you French?'

She nodded. 'In part, at least. It is a strange and very sad story. Do you wish to hear it?'

'If you want to tell me, I should like that very much,' he said quietly.

'My father was a soldier in the last war,' she told him. 'He was killed at Verdun in 1915, or so my mother believed. We lived in the north then, near Amiens. I was only a few months old.'

The statement took Douglas by surprise, for it meant that Colette was older than she looked.

'For a time my mother was inconsolable,' she went on. 'Then, in the early

months of 1918, she met an English officer, a good man. He married her, and brought us back to England with him. We were happy — until the day my mother discovered that my real father was still alive.'

'Good God!' Douglas interjected. 'What happened?'

'I don't know, exactly,' Colette admitted. 'It wasn't until years later, after my stepfather died of tuberculosis, that I found out anything about it. All I knew was that during the intervening years a profound change had come over my mother, something neither my stepfather nor I could understand. She never told him, of course.'

She paused and drew a deep breath, betraying how painful the story was to tell. Nevertheless, she went on with it.

'It seems that my true father was blown up by a shell. They found him on the battlefield, stripped naked by the blast, alive but suffering from severe head injuries. He knew nothing of where he was, or who he was. It was only after he had spent some years recuperating in a succession of hospitals that the authorities managed to piece together his identity, and notify my mother through their various channels.'

'Did you ever meet him?' Douglas asked gently. Again, the woman nodded.

'Yes, but only once. We travelled to France not long before this war broke out, not knowing what to expect. I, of course, had no recollection of my father, but my mother found a total stranger — a man with no memory of anyone or anything beyond that day in 1915. It was hopeless, right from the start. They parted, having talked politely to each other for a while, and never saw one another again. He is still in France, and quite a wealthy man, in his own way.'

There was a long pause, and then Douglas asked: 'And your mother?'

For a while, he thought that she was not going to answer his question. When her reply finally did come, it was barely audible.

‘She was killed in the raid on Coventry in November 1940. So you see, Callum, I have a personal vendetta against Kampfgruppe 100.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Royal Air Force Station Tempsford was an odd sort of place. Douglas knew nothing about it, apart from the fact that it was some kind of jumping-off point for clandestine operations into Occupied Europe.

On the face of it, Tempsford was hardly an ideal location for work of this kind, for the A1 Great North Road lay on one side of it and the main London-Edinburgh railway line on the other. Yet its very openness may have helped to preserve its secret identity, for few railway passengers can have taken much notice of the collection of decrepit-looking and obviously out of date aircraft they spotted from the windows of their carriages as they passed by. The villagers of nearby Tempsford eventually guessed, inevitably, that something unusual was going on, but there were never any recorded instances of careless talk.

Evidence that Tempsford's secret was very well kept lay in the fact that although the Germans knew that the RAF'S special duties aircraft were operating from a base some thirty miles north of London, they only once came near to finding it. That had happened one night in the spring of 1943, when a lone German bomber flew over the airfield and dropped a string of flares across it. The anti-aircraft defences kept silent, not wishing to betray the well-camouflaged objective. The bomber circled for some time but the crew apparently saw nothing and flew away, dropping their bombs on a nearby nursery garden.

Douglas and his team disembarked from the Albemarle transport aircraft that had brought them from Prestwick in mid-morning. The sky was clear, the sun glittering on a crisp carpet of snow, which, after a mild December, now,

lay over Tempsford. They were met by an Army major, muffled in his greatcoat against the keen January wind. Douglas saw at once that the Albemarle had dropped them on the opposite side of the airfield to the main site; as soon as they were clear of the aircraft, the pilot taxied away round the perimeter track in the direction of the distant hangars.

The major led Douglas, Colette and the others along a footpath that ended at the door of a solid, brick-built barn. Inside it was comfortably furnished with armchairs, a table and a sofa; covering the whole of one wall there was a map of France and the Low Countries. A tea urn stood on the table, with piles of cups nearby.

'Make yourselves comfortable,' the major told them, 'and help yourselves to some tea. A van will be over a little later on with some hot food, and afterwards we will issue weapons and clothing. There will be a lengthy briefing in the course of the afternoon.'

'About the weapons, sir,' Douglas said. 'I specifically requested MP-40s and ammunition. Have they arrived?'

The major nodded. 'Yes, Douglas, they have. Some priority was attached to their delivery, in fact. They'll be brought over from the armoury this afternoon.'

Douglas felt satisfied. On every operation he and his men had so far undertaken, they had chosen the German MP-40 machine pistol as the optimum weapon, not least because the 9-mm ammunition it used could be readily obtained when operating behind enemy lines. It was also simple to break down into its component parts, a useful feature when it came to concealment. Brigadier Masters had tentatively suggested that they take the recently-designed Sten gun along with them, but Douglas had declined; he had fired one and found it to be highly inaccurate, as well as prone to jamming. Stan Brough, in his blunt Yorkshire fashion, had endorsed

Douglas's feelings.

'Bloody Sten? Couldn't hit a barn door with one if you were sat on the latch,' had been his comment.

The major turned to leave. Douglas had noticed a motor cycle outside; that must be his transport. He turned as he was about to open the door.

'Just one thing,' he said. 'This is to be your home until you leave tonight, and I must ask you not to set foot outside the door until then. There's a lavatory through that door at the back, inside a small yard, with washing facilities. I'm afraid it's a bit primitive, but it's the best we can do. Sorry for the inconvenience, miss.'

'Don't worry about it, Major,' she smiled. 'I've been in worse places.' The major looked slightly embarrassed and left, carefully closing the door behind him. They heard his motor cycle start up and chug away.

'Well, this is fun,' said Conolly, crossing to the solitary window and rubbing some condensation from it with his sleeve. 'What a dump.' He peered moodily out over the snow-covered airfield.

Douglas sat lost in thought while Conolly produced a pack of cards and persuaded some of the others to join him in a game of poker. Colette reclined in an armchair, reading from a slim, leather-bound volume she had brought with her.

Douglas felt more than the usual sense of unease about the forthcoming operation. So much depended on the woman; what if she were to become separated from them during the drop? Only she knew where the contact was to be made. He didn't like it at all. He had a strong gut feeling of helplessness, brought on by the knowledge that in this matter — for the time being at least — he was not master of his own destiny.

Some time later lunch arrived in a NAAFI van and was served up by two cheerful middle-aged women who, Douglas suspected, were more than they

seemed to be. The food was basic — vegetable soup followed by sausages and mash — but they ate it with relish nonetheless, seated around the stove that stood in the middle of the barn.

‘Nice touch, this is,’ commented Barber, the cockney. ‘Good old bangers an’ mash. Won’t be much of that where we’re going.’

Douglas shot him a warning glance, but the women who had served the meal had not heard him, or pretended they hadn’t. Colette smiled at him. ‘You can have mine, if you like,’ she told him. ‘Not my favourite food, I’m afraid. Anyway, I’m not hungry.’

Barber took the plate from her with a mumbled thank you that changed to a shout of protest as Conolly pinched one of his sausages.

The two women collected the empty plates and disappeared. The men resumed their game of cards and Colette went back to her book. Douglas fidgeted and wondered how much longer they were going to have to wait. Inactivity chafed on his nerves.

It came as a relief when an RAF truck drew up outside. Douglas, looking through the window, saw some stores being unloaded from the rear of the vehicle. The Army major stepped down from the cab, followed by an RAF officer. The latter approached the barn, opened the door, nodded cheerfully to the occupants then stood aside to admit a relay of airmen, carrying assorted boxes and bundles of clothing which they placed on the floor. Finally, they brought in what Douglas had been waiting for: the MP-40 machine-pistols, together with a case of ammunition.

The men appeared totally unconcerned, as though their activity was routine stuff — which, Douglas told himself, it probably was. He could guess that whatever aircraft were hidden in the hangars on the other side of the airfield plied a regular trade into the heart of Occupied Europe, carrying their cargoes of gallant agents — men and women alike — who were fighting their own

secret war against Nazi tyranny and who faced, at best, a quick death if they were captured, and at worst a lingering one at the hands of Gestapo torturers.

The airmen departed without a word, not sparing anyone a glance. Douglas heard the RAF officer tell them to come back in an hour. Then he re-entered the barn, followed by the major.

Douglas saw that he had the rank of wing commander. The major introduced him, after a fashion.

‘This officer is the wing commander (flying) on this station,’ he said. ‘His name, of course, is irrelevant. He is here to brief you on tonight’s operation.’

The wing commander peeled off his greatcoat, revealing an impressive array of medal ribbons under his pilot’s brevet, and draped it over the back of a chair. He was not very old, probably not yet out of his twenties, but his relative youth was partly camouflaged by an enormous handlebar moustache. His eyes were old, though; the eyes of a man who had seen too many of his friends set out on operations, never to come back.

He stood with his back to the wall map and surveyed the gathering for a few moments before speaking. His voice was clear and slightly high-pitched. He wished them good afternoon, and a reciprocating murmur went around the room. They looked at him expectantly.

‘I’m afraid I have some very bad news for you,’ he said with a slight smile that rather gave the lie to his words. ‘The weather forecast for southern France tonight is not good; lots of low cloud. So that means we can’t parachute you in. Sorry to disappoint you.’

Douglas could sense the relief among his colleagues. All had been through the parachute course at Ringway, but few of them had made an operational drop; none of them had been looking forward to it, especially at night.

‘However,’ the wing commander continued, ‘there are other ways and means. One of the aircraft types we operate here is the Lockheed Hudson; for

the benefit of the uninitiated, that's a twin-engined aeroplane kindly supplied by our American friends. Coastal Command used a lot of them earlier in the war, and we've got a few of their cast-offs for long-range trips where we need to land a number of passengers. Usually we take a maximum of eight, but this time we're going to stretch a point and take all eleven of you. After all, I don't suppose the young lady weighs very much. One of the advantages of the Hudson for this sort of job is that it lands in a very short distance.'

The wing commander paused briefly, fiddling with the button of his tunic left breast pocket. Douglas noticed that two fingers of his right hand were missing.

'Be under no illusion that this is going to be an easy trip. It won't be. Under different circumstances, with more time available, I would have recommended a different course of action — flying you out to Gibraltar, and then landing you on the Riviera from the sea. As it is, you are faced with a four-hour flight, almost all of it over enemy territory, and at the end of it we've got to land you on a strip about the size of a cricket field. Fortunately, our crews are the best in the business; they'll get you there. After that, it's up to you and the reception committee. We've already sent a coded signal to them to advise them of the change in plan.'

He turned to the wall map of France and tapped it with his index finger. 'The landing zone is here,' he told them, 'northeast of Vauvert, between Nîmes and Arles. It's about two miles from the main road that runs to the coast, and passes Istres. It's one of our regular landing-grounds, and there are no Germans in the immediate area — at least, not as far as we know.'

The wing commander finished his briefing and then handed over to the major, who first of all indicated the bundles of clothing. Bending down, he picked one up, untied the string band that was holding it together, and shook it out. They saw that it was a black, one-piece garment. The major explained

its purpose.

‘These are a new type of overalls designed especially for SOE operatives engaged in sabotage and other covert work at night. They are waterproof and flame resistant, and are fitted with a hood so that the wearer can render himself virtually invisible against a dark background.’

‘Good job there’s no snow where we’re going,’ someone chuckled. The major shot a frosty look at someone behind Douglas.

‘Quite. Now, if I may continue. As you will see, the overalls contain plenty of pockets, including a built-in sheath here on the right leg for the standard one-pound Sheffield dagger. What you store in the other pockets is up to you; I know that you like your own private arsenals. As far as explosives and detonators are concerned, these have already been air-dropped to the Maquis in your operating area. When you change into your overalls, please bundle up your uniforms and leave them here; they will be looked after and forwarded to you upon your return.’

‘Optimist’, somebody murmured.

The major ignored the remark, then said: ‘As this is not a normal SOE operation, you will not be carrying the standard issue equipment used by our people in the field. However, we can let you have something that may be of use to you in the unhappy event that you are taken prisoner.’

He delved into a carton and produced a handful of small, transparent packages, each one marked with a different colour, and held them up in turn. ‘These are pills to resist fatigue,’ he told them, ‘and these produce a high fever and every symptom of typhoid. They have, on occasion, been known to get people out of a tight fix by persuading the Germans to transfer them from a prison cell to hospital, from which escape is obviously much simpler. And finally, we have these.’

He opened one of the little packages and a glass capsule rolled into his

palm. He held it out so that they could all see it.

‘Concentrated arsenic,’ he said mildly. ‘Inside the capsule it’s quite harmless; you can keep it in your mouth and even swallow it. But break it between your teeth and you’re dead in less than a minute — about forty-five seconds is the average for a normal, healthy person. It’s not a pleasant way to go, but preferable to some of the alternatives, should you fall into enemy hands.’

Douglas resolved to have nothing to do with that particular form of self-execution. The rest of them, it seemed, felt the same way, for when it came to distributing the pills, they all left the arsenic capsules alone. All except for Colette, who picked up three or four of them.

Douglas looked sideways at her. ‘You’ll only need one,’ he said. She gave a short laugh.

‘Oh, it’s not for me. The arsenic might come in handy for dropping into somebody’s coffee, though.’

Douglas was forced to agree with her. Changing his mind, he picked up a couple of the tablets himself and stowed them away in a pocket of his overalls.

Take-off was scheduled for 20.00 hours. That would get them to the landing zone shortly after midnight GMT, well inside the hours of curfew imposed by the German occupation forces. In this way, there was less risk of the clandestine landing being seen by casual eyes.

The Hudson’s mid-upper gun turret had been removed, presumably to save weight and add to the aircraft’s range. Canvas ‘bucket’ seats had been fitted on either side of the fuselage interior. The Hudson carried a crew of three: pilot, navigator and wireless operator, who would normally have doubled up as air gunner if there had been any guns for him to sit behind. Douglas saw that the navigator had his left hand and wrist in plaster, and inquired about

the injury; the man told him cheerfully that he had fallen off a beam in the Mess bar at Tempsford during a prank a few days earlier.

The Hudson's passengers made themselves as comfortable as they could as the pilot taxied out and revved his engines at the end of the runway. Douglas's black overalls felt stiff and smelt of oil — something to do with the waterproofing, he told himself … It made him feel slightly sick, and he hoped he would get over it. His MP-40 was lashed securely to a metal strut beside him.

The pilot gunned the engines to full power and the Hudson began to move. After a few seconds the rumble of its undercarriage ceased as it lifted away from the runway, turning as it climbed on course.

For Douglas, the next four hours were the most nightmarish he had ever spent. The Hudson was flying in cloud for most of the time, lurching and bumping as it encountered turbulence.

Nothing but inky darkness was visible through the small window next to his seat. Warm air was coming out of the aircraft's heating system somewhere near his backside, and after a while he began to sweat. He had taken a bath that morning — they all had — and had shaved an hour or so before take-off, but the heat began to make him feel scruffy and queasy.

They had eaten a substantial meal earlier that evening, and some of the passengers were beginning to regret it. From behind Douglas came the sound of someone retching into a paper bag, and the nauseating stench of vomit drifted through the aircraft, starting a chain reaction. For a while Douglas tried hard to breathe through his mouth, then he too succumbed.

The wireless operator came round with some coffee, which made the sufferers feel much better, and collected the noxious paper bags.

'I'll drop'em down the flare chute,' he yelled to Douglas above the roar of the engines. 'We're well inside enemy territory now — might give some

Jerry a nasty surprise!'

Douglas grinned weakly. His eyes were well accustomed to the darkened interior of the aircraft now, and he could easily see the figures of his companions, slumped in their various attitudes of misery.

Some time later the airman came back and roused Douglas from a heavy sleep.

'Skipper wants to know if you'd like to come up front. We'll be starting our descent soon so that the navigator can pick up some landmarks.'

Gratefully, Douglas followed the wireless operator on to the flight deck. The airman took his seat behind the pilot, who half-turned and motioned him into the second pilot's seat. The navigator was already down in the Perspex nose, ready to get his bearings when the Hudson broke cloud.

The wireless operator tapped Douglas on the shoulder and handed him a flying helmet, complete with face-mask and microphone. Douglas put it on and the airman plugged the microphone lead into a nearby socket.

'Can you hear me OK?' The pilot's voice sounded in Douglas's earphones. 'Just put the mask across your face and flick that little switch at the end when you want to talk. Don't forget to switch it off again when you've finished talking, though, or it makes unpleasant noises over the intercom.'

'I can hear you fine,' Douglas told the anonymous pilot. 'Have we far to go?'

'About fifty minutes. Sorry about the bumpy ride, but at least the cloud gave us cover from any fighters that happened to be around. Bit of flak as we crossed the coast; quite close, really. Must have been radar-directed. Did you see it?' Douglas had to admit that he hadn't. Nothing, as far as he knew, had interrupted the pitch darkness outside.

Suddenly, the Hudson popped out of the cloud base. 'Thank God for that,' the pilot said fervently. 'Two thousand feet — a bit higher than the Met

people led us to believe. You could have been parachuted in, after all. Oh, well, this is what I'm paid to do, I suppose. Any idea where we are yet, Taff?'

'Still looking,' the navigator answered from his position in the nose. He sounded worried. 'I hope we haven't drifted too far east of our track, or we'll be into all the high ground. Can't see a damned thing except what's directly below.'

'We ought to be somewhere near Montauban,' the pilot told Douglas. 'We've been flying more or less due south to avoid letting down into the high ground of the Massif Central,' he explained. 'Mind you, with the cloud base as high as it is, we could have taken a more direct route and avoided most of it. But there it is. Can you see anything out of your side?'

Douglas peered out of the window on his side of the cockpit. Strangely enough, although there was cloud above the aircraft, and no moon to afford even a haze of light through its layer, he found that he could pick out some detail against the dark shadow of the ground; the faint ribbons of waterways made patterns in the gloom.

He was still looking when the navigator's voice came over the intercom.

'Hold on, skipper, I think I've got something.' There came a few seconds' pause, and then: 'Yes, I'm certain now. That's the Garonne up ahead. We're a few miles west of track.'

The navigator made a few rapid calculations, then ordered the pilot to turn on to a heading of zero nine eight degrees. 'That'll take us between Montauban and Toulouse,' he announced, 'and put us on track for the landing zone. We've lost a little time, but we've got a good tailwind now. We should make our ETA all right.'

The pilot tilted the Hudson's left wing and swung round on to the new heading. As they flew on, the navigator kept up a running commentary on the

landmarks that came up under the nose. Douglas noticed that there did not seem to be an effective blackout; lights flickered in towns and villages, making the navigator's task easier. He remarked on it to the pilot, and also on the fact that they hadn't seen a single searchlight.

'The searchlight and flak belts are concentrated in the north,' the pilot informed him, 'stretching in arcs from the Channel and North Sea coasts right back into Germany. There's hardly anything in the way of air defences this far south — lucky for us.'

They flew between Castres and Albi, scene of terrible religious persecution in medieval times, and then crossed a hilly region dotted with lakes that showed up in the valleys as patches of dark gun-metal. At length, the navigator announced that they would be passing five miles north of Montpellier in eight minutes' time. Their target area was approaching fast.

'I'm going to ask you to go back to your seat now,' the pilot said to Douglas. 'The navigator will be coming up out of the nose as soon as we spot the LZ.'

'Right. I'll go and alert the others. Thanks for the ride.'

Douglas climbed out of the right-hand seat, passed his helmet to the wireless operator and went back into the fuselage. He told the others that they would be landing in about ten minutes, and there was a flurry of activity as they checked their weapons and equipment. If the reception committee turned out to be hostile, they were determined to give a good account of themselves.

In the nose of the Hudson, the navigator picked out a faint 'V' of roads, just visible in the darkness. The left-hand fork led to Nîmes, the right-hand one to Arles. He had done all he could. Somewhere, just up ahead — unless things had gone badly wrong — the Maquisards would be waiting to detect the sound of the aircraft's engines before lighting a rudimentary flarepath. He scrambled out of the nose position and climbed into the seat recently vacated

by Douglas.

‘Nice work, Taff,’ the pilot said quietly. The navigator grunted. He didn’t think that he had done anything special.

They circled, looking for the elusive pinpricks of light that would show them the position of the landing ground. The blackness below remained unbroken.

‘Bit bloody grim, this is,’ the pilot remarked. ‘Could have done with a moon. Surely they must have heard us by now? I hope there hasn’t been a cock-up. Can’t go on swanning round the sky for much longer.’

The navigator said nothing. He was concentrating on scanning the ground as carefully as he knew how. After a few more tense minutes, his persistence was rewarded by the sight of a red light ahead and off to the right. It flickered on and off in a series of dots and dashes.

‘Recognition signal, skipper,’ the navigator said urgently. ‘Two o’clock. We’re just about on top of it.’

‘OK. Got it.’ The pilot turned the Hudson towards the flickering signal and flashed the aircraft’s navigation lights in response. A few moments later, two parallel lines of flowing dots came to life. The flarepath seemed ridiculously small. This landing, the pilot knew, was going to need every ounce of his accumulated skill. The wireless operator, returning from a quick trip to the main cabin, assured him that the passengers were firmly strapped in.

‘Right. Here we go, then.’ Gently, the pilot eased the Hudson round until it was in line with the flarepath, landing into wind. They already knew which direction the wind was coming from, for the navigator had been checking it throughout the flight, but the pilot saw with satisfaction that the reception committee had placed an additional flare at the upwind end of the strip. He suspected, although he could not see, that it also marked the boundary of the field, which was useful to know.

He lowered the undercarriage and flaps and throttled back gradually, allowing the Hudson to sink towards the flarepath but ready to open the throttles again instantly if some obstacle loomed up out of the darkness. But the reception committee had done its work well and the approach to land was faultless and trouble-free, the flarepath seeming to expand and meet the Hudson as it sank through the last fifty feet. The pilot checked its sink rate with a gentle backward pressure on the stick and, with the flares rushing past the wingtips, allowed it to stall on to the ground.

The undercarriage hit the earth with a thud that rattled the entire aircraft. The Hudson bounced a little way into the air and the pilot fought to keep the wings level as it settled again. This time it stayed down, the pilot ruddering to keep it straight and applying the brakes cautiously. Mud or water, possibly both, splattered against the fuselage.

In the cabin, Douglas held his breath and looked out of the window apprehensively, seeing the flares rush past. Then the Hudson began to slow down and finally stopped altogether, its engines ticking over. A collective sigh sounded in the cabin as its occupants expelled their pent-up breath.

The wireless operator came back into the cabin and unlatched the main fuselage door. Douglas and his companions had already unfastened their seat belts. The SAS officer had no need to tell the others what to do. Led by him they tumbled out into the night, machine-pistols at the ready, and deployed in a line that extended outwards from the aircraft, flinging themselves prone on the ground.

Even at this moment of potential danger, the thought ran through Douglas’s mind that the moist earth and the clean night air had never smelt so sweet.

They lay there, MP-40s cocked, and waited. Apart from the rhythmic beat of the Hudson’s still-idling motors, there was no sound in the night. Then Douglas sensed, rather than saw, shadowy movement beyond the aircraft’s

tail. He settled the butt of the MP-40 into his shoulder and prepared to open fire.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Montfort!’

The word came unexpectedly out of the darkness. It was Colette, lying next to Douglas, who provided the response.

‘Montségur!’

She levered herself upright and looked down at Douglas. ‘It’s all right,’ she told him. ‘They’re friends.’ The SAS men also rose and followed Colette to meet the reception committee. One of the latter, his features invisible, began to say a few words, only to have them drowned by the sudden roar of the Hudson’s engines. Douglas winced; the aircraft was making enough racket to wake the entire neighbourhood.

The roar died away to its previous idling rumble. A moment later, the fuselage hatch opened and the wireless operator jumped down.

‘I say,’ he said urgently, ‘we seem to be stuck. The skipper wants to taxi back down the strip so that he can take off into wind, or we won’t get off at all. Can you give us a shove?’

Colette quickly explained to the Maquis reception committee what had happened. Without a word, the Frenchmen — there were eight or nine of them — clustered around the Hudson alongside the SAS newcomers and laid willing hands on the aircraft at spots indicated by the wireless operator, who now jumped back on board. The pilot gunned the engines again, showering his helpers with mud as they pushed with all their strength.

After a couple of minutes, it was apparent that the Hudson was not going to come free. The wheels were sinking deeper into the waterlogged ground. At length, the pilot shut down the engines altogether and climbed down from the

aircraft.

‘It’s no use,’ he told them dejectedly. ‘She’s bogged, and no mistake. We’ve already made enough noise to wake the dead. Wouldn’t surprise me if the Germans or the Vichy cops are on their way here now.’

Colette spoke again to the reception committee, some of whom immediately turned and ran off into the night.

‘They’ve gone to get some shovels,’ she said. ‘They always bring some with them in case it’s necessary to bury parachutes or other equipment. We’ll have a go at digging you out.’

The pilot sounded relieved. ‘That’s fine. But I don’t think I can risk giving it much more than an hour — say ninety minutes at the outside. If we haven’t got clear of the mud at the end of that time I shall have to set fire to the aircraft to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.’

A few minutes later, the Frenchmen returned with the shovels and a couple of picks, which they immediately applied to the mushy ground in an effort to dig shallow, sloping trenches to front and rear of the Hudson’s main undercarriage. It was difficult work in the darkness, especially as the trenches rapidly began to fill up with water. After a while the pilot, afraid that one of the picks might pierce a tyre, called a halt.

‘I’m afraid it’s hopeless,’ he said. ‘Look — she’s sinking even deeper. The bottom of the fuselage is just about resting on the ground. I’m just going to have to burn her,’ he ended mournfully.

Suddenly, a warning shout sent the group around the Hudson scattering to retrieve their weapons. One of the Frenchmen, who had been acting as lookout, thought he had seen some movement beyond the flarepath. He was right; in the flickering light of the flares, some figures approached cautiously. The lookout, gun at the ready, ordered them to put up their hands and come closer. Whoever they were, Douglas thought, it was apparent that they were

not Germans.

They turned out to be men from a nearby village. Alerted by the roar of the Hudson's engines, they had defied the local curfew to see what was going on. Colette spoke to them in low tones; after a couple of minutes they hurried off.

'That's a stroke of luck,' the woman told Douglas and the pilot. 'They've gone to fetch some horses and oxen. They say they'll be back inside an hour.'

She had a hurried consultation with the Frenchman who appeared to be in charge of the reception committee, then turned back to address Douglas.

'All this is making us late,' she said, 'but I don't see what we can do. The Maquisards are determined to stay here until the Hudson is either airborne or set on fire; in the latter case, the last thing they want is for the RAF crew to roam around the countryside until they are taken prisoner, which would almost inevitably happen. If things do go wrong, they'll be taken with us. And since we can't go a step further without the help of the Maquisards, we'll just have to wait with them. There's no alternative.'

Douglas nodded. 'Right. But first of all I suggest you get somebody to extinguish the flares, at least until those villagers come back. I don't think there'll be much flying under the cloud tonight, but we can't risk being spotted. Also, I'm going to deploy my men around the aircraft and well away from it. If the Germans do turn up, at least we can give them a hot reception.'

Out there in the darkness, lying a few yards next to Olds, Douglas tried vainly to relax as he waited for the return of the villagers. Every small night sound made his nerves jump, and his eyes began to ache and smart with the effort of peering into the shadows. The minutes, ticked off by the luminous hands of his wrist watch, crawled around the dial with the speed of a lame snail.

Olds, with his keen hearing, was the first to detect the jingle of harness, and alerted Douglas with a warning hiss. Suddenly, by the edge of the field, a

light flared, followed by another and another.

‘Oh, my God,’ Douglas groaned. ‘They’ve lit torches! What the hell do they think this is — bonfire night?’

‘It will be, if we don’t get that plane out of the darts,’ said Olds practically. ‘Anyway, they must be pretty certain there are no Jerries around.’

They stood up and watched the approaching cavalcade. It seemed almost that the whole village had turned out to help. The two groups of Frenchmen, villagers and Maquisards, greeted each other with much hand-shaking and back-slapping. The throng milled around the stranded Hudson for a while, then sorted itself out into some kind of order; a team of draught horses was harnessed to the undercarriage legs, and the work of freeing the aircraft began once more.

Despite the combined efforts of men and animals, it was another thirty minutes before the Hudson finally came clear of the mud with a gigantic sucking sound.

The crew lost no time in boarding the aircraft, the Maquisards scattering to relight the flarepath as the horses were unharnessed. The Hudson’s engines coughed into life and the aircraft began to move, the pilot turning cautiously and starting his taxi run to the downwind end of the flarepath. Douglas glanced at the sky, and saw with some apprehension that the cloud layer was beginning to break up, increasing the risk of the flarepath being spotted by any aircraft that chanced to be in the area. It would also increase the hazards the RAF crew might have to face on the long flight home.

A group of Frenchmen completed their task of filling in the holes which the Hudson’s wheels had dug into the airstrip, and ran clear as the pilot revved up his engines to full power. He released the brakes and the aircraft began to gather speed, its momentum slowed by the weight of the thrown-up mud that caked it. Half way down the strip, with the tailwheel only just clear of the

ground, the pilot felt with sickening certainty that he was not going to make it. The Hudson's take-off speed was ninety miles per hour, and with the flare that marked the far boundary rushing closer, the airspeed indicator showed only fifty.

Then the miracle happened. The Hudson hit a bump and lurched into the air. Somehow the pilot kept it flying, teetering on the edge of a stall, and flew between two trees at the far end of the field. There was a crunch as its wingtip sliced through some branches, and then it was climbing away into the night.

Back on the field, Colette came to stand beside Douglas as the drone of the Hudson's engines faded.

'I hope they make it,' she said softly. 'They are very brave men.'

'I hope we all make it, but we won't unless we get a move on,' Douglas reminded her. 'What's next?'

'I've had a word with the Maquis leader,' she told him. 'We're being taken to a farm a couple of miles away in the first instance. After that I don't know. It seems we have to meet somebody. We are completely in their hands, for the time being at least, so we will just have to go along with them. I'm afraid that one or two of them are a bit suspicious of you and your men. You're something out of the ordinary, so I expect there will be questions they want to ask.'

The Maquisards, having seen the villagers safely on their way home, led the way to their destination along a track that wound its way through sparse woodland. They marched in single file, carefully spaced out, keeping the SAS men in the middle.

Presently, the trees thinned out and gave way to an expanse of scrub — the maquis from which the French Resistance movement had taken its name. As they went on, Douglas noted that one of the Frenchmen took care to fall in

close beside him. The man reeked of stale sweat and garlic. Douglas took an instinctive dislike to him, even though he had no doubt that the Frenchman was simply obeying orders and would, without hesitation, slit the SAS officer's throat if the need arose.

They crossed a narrow dirt road and, after a few more minutes, a cluster of low buildings loomed out of the darkness. The group made straight for the biggest one and halted outside while the Maquis leader went forward and rapped sharply on the door. He called something out in a low voice, there was a response from inside, then a rasping sound as bolts were drawn. The door swung open, revealing an aged woman in a long black dress silhouetted against the light of a lantern. She waved them inside and snapped something at the French leader in a shrill tone.

Colette, who was in front of Douglas, gave a chuckle and half turned. 'Roughly translated, the old woman wants to know where the hell we've been,' she explained. 'She says that she's been up half the night cooking for us, and now the food is nearly ruined.'

They filed quickly into the building and one of the Frenchmen closed and bolted the door behind them. Douglas saw that they were inside what appeared to be a timber barn or storehouse of some sort, with a high roof and beams running from wall to wall. A lantern hung from one of the beams, and sacking had been hung over the windows to prevent its light being seen from outside. The interior of the barn was acrid with smoke that curled from an ancient stove.

'They've done us proud,' Colette whispered to Douglas. 'Look at the table.'

Douglas did so. A long table, with benches on either side, had been carefully laid with best crockery and embroidered napkins. There were even real crystal glasses.

'This must have been collected from every home in the village,' Colette

said. ‘It’s the kind of stuff that only appears when there is a grand occasion, such as a wedding, baptism or funeral.’

‘Well, I hope it isn’t our funeral they have in mind,’ Douglas remarked sceptically. ‘I’ve just noticed that most of our French friends seem to have disappeared.’

‘I shouldn’t worry about that,’ she told him. ‘I overheard their leader tell them to mount guard around the village. It might be to stop us getting out as much as to prevent the Germans getting in, though,’ she admitted.

Only two of the Maquisards remained in the barn, and Douglas now had his first chance to study them closely. The first man was their leader. He was short, with a sallow face framed in dark stubble and thin, rather cruel lips. A black beret was tilted forward over his brow. Douglas saw that he was armed to the teeth with an assortment of weapons, including a Sten gun, a pistol and a long combat knife.

The other Frenchman was the individual who had marched alongside Douglas. In contrast to his leader, he was tall and lanky, with brutal, simian features and close-set eyes under beetling brows. The ends of a sparse moustache dangled past the sides of his mouth. He stood leaning against the wall by the door, casually picking his fingernails with the tip of a stiletto, staring at Douglas with an unwavering, hostile gaze.

Douglas smiled engagingly at him and murmured to Colette, ‘Who is the chap with the charmless stare?’

‘Do not worry, my friend. That is just Jean-Pierre’s way. He means no harm.’

The words came from the Resistance leader, and took both Douglas and Colette by surprise. Neither had realized until now that the man spoke English. Douglas felt somewhat relieved; it was going to make things a good deal easier.

The Frenchman, Douglas discovered, called himself Raoul. He invited the SAS men and Colette to be seated at the table, and the old woman served them with generous helpings of an omelette from two pans on the stove. Raoul fetched some bread, and made the sign of the cross on the back of each loaf as he cut it. Then he poured some wine into the glasses from a large pitcher and stood back from the table, watching them as they ate and drank.

The old woman hovered over them throughout the meal. She seemed to have taken a particular fancy to Conolly, who whispered something in her ear, causing her to cackle shrilly. Apart from that, few words were spoken until the dishes were cleared away. Then Raoul indicated a pile of blankets in a corner of the barn.

‘Sleep now,’ he told them. ‘In the morning I will take you to where you have to go. You, Mademoiselle, will spend the night with my mother.’ He inclined his head in the direction of the old woman. Douglas felt a niggle of suspicion.

‘Are you sure that’s all right?’ he asked Colette.

She smiled. ‘Perfectly. There’s no need to worry. Besides, it means I won’t have to share that bucket with you.’ She pointed to a rusty object by the wall. There was a small pile of torn-up paper beside it. The Maquisards, it appeared, had thought of everything.

‘No one is to leave the barn until we come for you,’ Raoul warned. ‘Now, sleep well. Tomorrow there may be danger.’

He went out, followed by Colette and the old woman. The brutal-looking Jean-Pierre showed no sign of leaving, so Douglas rose from the bench and made to go towards him. Conolly placed a restraining hand on his arm.

‘Leave it to me, sir, if you don’t mind. I know his type. Besides, I speak some French.’

Douglas nodded. Conolly ambled over and stood a foot or two in front of

the Frenchman, then said something in a low tone, smiling amiably as he did so. Jean-Pierre turned and spat on the floor, then resumed his original stance by the door.

The Irishman spoke to him again, a little more sharply. This time, the Frenchman flattened himself against the wall, knees slightly bent. His right hand came up to the level of his chest, the stiletto blade pointing towards Conolly. The latter smiled again and spread out his hands, as though in apology, and turned away as though to rejoin the others. A sardonic smile of triumph crept over the Frenchman's dull-witted face.

The next instant he was on the ground, writhing in agony and clutching at his genitals, where Conolly's kick had just landed. Strangled noises came from him. The Irishman bent down, scooped up the fallen stiletto, and tossed it to Barber, who caught it deftly. With the other hand he seized Jean-Pierre by the jacket and hauled him upright. Opening the door, he tossed the Frenchman out into the night, then shot the bolts into place.

'Nasty piece of work, that,' Conolly said. 'I don't think we'll have any more trouble from him, though. He was just testing us, to see how far he could go.'

'Well, now he knows,' Douglas remarked. 'I hope you're right about him not causing any more trouble. By the way, something has just struck me. Barns usually have bolts on the outside of the door. Here it's the other way round.

Conolly shrugged. 'Probably the Resistance hold meetings here, and it's a safeguard against uninvited visitors,' he said. 'Anyway, it means nobody can creep in on us in the night.'

'Nevertheless, you and I will keep watch while the others get their heads down,' Douglas told him. 'The more I see of this set-up, the less I like it. Stan, I'll wake you in a couple of hours.'

Brough nodded and handed out the blankets to the others. Soon, all except Douglas and Conolly were asleep. Douglas, worried by his feeling of unease, paced restlessly around the room and wished that he could see outside. On more than one occasion he was tempted to open the door and take a look, but decided against such a move. In due course, he and Conolly were relieved by Brough and Sansom, but even then he found it impossible to sleep properly. After a while he lapsed into a fitful doze and awoke unrefreshed at dawn, with a foul taste in his mouth.

A pounding on the door roused them all and they tumbled out of their blankets, reaching for the MP-40s. They kept the doorway covered as Lambert drew the bolts on Douglas's signal and swung the door open. Pale daylight flooded into the barn and Raoul stood on the threshold.

'You can come out now,' he told Douglas. 'There is no danger as yet. We have time to eat.'

They filed out of the barn, looking around them in curiosity, seeing their surroundings clearly for the first time since their arrival in France. The barn in which they had spent the night, they now saw, stood on the edge of a small village, a cluster of half a dozen cottages with white limestone walls and red roofs. The village lay amid fertile, green countryside, with a range of hills climbing on the northern skyline.

The old woman came out of one of the cottages, tottering under the weight of a huge and steaming tureen. She placed it on the ground and then went back indoors, returning with a pile of bowls and some sticks of bread which she distributed among the SAS men. Unbidden, they dipped their bowls into the tureen, which was filled with hot soup. It had a vegetable flavour which Douglas could not quite place, and was slightly spiced. He tore off a hunk of bread and dipped it into the liquid.

'Where is everyone?' he asked Raoul. The Frenchman waved a hand

towards the cottages. ‘Indoors,’ he said. ‘We thought it better that you were seen by nobody but myself and my mother. Jean-Pierre and the other Maquisards have gone back to the hills. This is a place of old women and little children.’ He paused and then said, very seriously, ‘You should not have antagonized Jean-Pierre. Despite what I said earlier, he can be a dangerous enemy. But then, you are not likely to meet him again.’

‘Just as well,’ Douglas muttered. ‘But where’s Colette?’

‘Gone,’ the Frenchman told him, and smiled thinly. ‘Don’t look so alarmed — she will be back before too long. Then my task will be over, and I can get back to my real work.’

Douglas looked at him, puzzled. ‘Which is?’ he wanted to know.

‘Why, making life as uncomfortable as possible for the Germans, of course,’ Raoul told him. ‘That has been my main occupation for some time now.’

Douglas was still perplexed. He set down his soup bowl and asked, ‘But who are you? Your English is far too good for you to be what you seem.’

For the first time, Raoul allowed his face to relax into a grin. ‘Maybe that’s because I’m not French, Captain Douglas. I’m French-Canadian. Got taken prisoner at Dieppe, escaped, and made my way south to the Vichy Zone. Thought I’d head for Marseilles and hop a ship for Algiers. Then the good guys invaded North Africa, and that was that. So I decided to devote my war effort to helping out in these parts. The Maquis could use my military experience. They’re a good bunch, but piss poor at organizing anything.’

‘Well, I’ll be damned!’ Douglas exploded. ‘Why the blazes didn’t you tell me this in the first place?’ He frowned suddenly. ‘But the old woman — you called her your mother.’

Raoul nodded. ‘Yes. I’ve been calling her that for months now — kind of got used to it. She took me in and fed me when I wandered into this place,

and put me in touch with all the right people. She wanted me to call her mother. I think I'm a sort of replacement for her real son, who went off and joined the Foreign Legion and got his head blown off fighting the Arabs.'

Douglas shook his head. 'Amazing. But you haven't answered my original question. Why didn't you let me know who you were right away?'

'Because I wanted to know more about you,' Raoul said. 'This is my territory, and I don't like to be in the dark about anything that goes on it. Now that I know a bit more about why you are here, I'll have some of my men keep an eye on you — just in case you run into trouble.'

'Colette told you why we are here?' Douglas asked quietly.

'Not everything, but enough,' the other replied. 'Certainly enough for me to realize that if your plans don't succeed, it will be some time longer before I see Quebec again.'

Douglas had not the heart to tell Raoul that he had no plans, at least not yet. So much depended on Colette, and the next contact along the Resistance line.

Their breakfast over, they collected their weapons and equipment and, on Raoul's advice, took shelter in a small copse that stood a few hundred yards away from the village to await Colette's return. By this time, the clouds that had shrouded southern France during the previous night had broken up almost completely, and the sun rose higher in a watery blue sky. The breeze from the Mediterranean was cool, but not unpleasantly so. Olds glanced up at a blackbird, singing lustily in a treetop, sniffed the air and announced confidently that it would rain before the day was many hours older.

Douglas deployed his men along the edge of the copse that faced the village. Now that the soldiers had gone, those villagers who remained came out of the cottages and busied themselves with their morning tasks of feeding livestock and collecting eggs; no one so much as glanced in the direction of the trees. It was all a bit unreal; here they were, in the heart of enemy

territory, overlooking a peaceful village where the only sign of the war was the absence of menfolk. This area, Douglas told himself, must be completely safe, otherwise the Germans and the Milice would have been asking awkward questions as to the men's whereabouts.

Olds had been right about the rain. Before midday the clouds gathered again and the rain came, torrents of it, heavy but warm, streaming from a leaden sky. A mist of droplets drifted across the grassy plain that ran southwards from the village.

Just after noon, Sansom, who was keeping watch at the left-hand end of the line, raised the alarm. Douglas ran across to him, carefully keeping under cover of the trees, and asked what it was the trooper had seen. Sansom pointed towards the south, and the SAS officer made out a vague white blur of movement through the rain.

After a few seconds, the blur resolved itself into a small herd of white horses. There were only two riders, who appeared to be driving the rest. They headed towards the village and halted beside the farm. One of the riders got down and spoke to Raoul, who had appeared from one of the houses. Douglas counted twelve horses in all, and reached the obvious conclusion.

'Unless I'm much mistaken,' he said to Sansom, 'that's our transport.' Fortunately, after his own experiences in Yugoslavia, where the Partisans had made much use of horses, he had insisted on every man in his section learning to ride on the grounds that it might come in handy. It certainly looked as though his foresight was going to come in handy now.

The rider who had spoken to Raoul remounted and cantered towards the copse. It was Colette, now wearing a broad-brimmed cowboy-type hat and a poncho. Both streamed with water. She dismounted again and unslung a pair of large saddle-bags from the horse's back.

'There are some hats and ponchos in these,' she explained. 'Put them on.

You'll be less conspicuous that way. Then follow me down to the village.' Jumping astride the horse once more, she galloped off without another word.

Douglas and the others did as they were told. Back at the village, Colette and the other rider were busily shortening the long reins they had been using to control their respective teams of horses as they drove them across the plain; it was a technique, Colette explained, that had been in use in the Camargue since the days of the Romans.

Colette made no attempt to introduce the other rider, who remained a little aloof from the rest of the party as they mounted up. The horses were spirited, but controllable. Conolly, Douglas noticed, was more at ease than any of them; the look that crossed his face as he caressed the neck of his mount was almost one of exultation.

As they trotted out of the village, destination unknown, Douglas turned in the saddle and gave a brief salute to Raoul, who raised an arm in return. Douglas wondered if they would ever meet again. The odds, he thought, were stacked heavily against it.

CHAPTER SIX

General Horst von Falkenberg stepped down from the Volkswagen 82 Kubelwagen — the Wehrmacht's equivalent of the famous American jeep — and swore fluently as his highly-polished boots sank into four inches of mud. He turned and glared at the driver, a young Luftwaffe corporal.

'Idiot!' he snarled. 'Couldn't you have picked a drier spot?' The corporal reddened and muttered an apology. The general's criticism was hardly fair, for the entire surface of the field had been turned into a quagmire by the heavy rain.

The Kubelwagen was accompanied by a two-ton Opel Blitz half-track. Twenty heavily armed soldiers jumped down from the back of it and, spurred by the harsh commands of an NCO, spread out across the field, forming a protective cordon around the general. Two more men stepped out of the cab, in which the driver remained. The taller of the two wore a long greatcoat that bore the insignia of a Luftwaffe colonel; the other was dressed in civilian clothing but might just as well have been in uniform, for the thigh-length black leather coat and the dark, broad-brimmed felt hat were the characteristic of the Gestapo.

The two men approached von Falkenberg and the Luftwaffe officer saluted. He was beginning to feel warm in his greatcoat, for the rain had ceased some time ago and the sun had come out again.

Colonel Karl Preuss, officer commanding Kampfgruppe 100, was beginning to wish that he had never set eyes on von Falkenberg. Despite his First World War decorations, the man had become a typical staff officer, haughty and overbearing, straight from the plush and relatively secure offices

of the Reich Air Ministry in Berlin. He had, Preuss suspected, authorized a trip to Istres for himself as much to sample the wine and food of Provence as to see how the new weapon worked, which was ostensibly the reason behind his visit.

Von Falkenberg had been at Istres for less than forty-eight hours, and in that time he had never been off Preuss's back. He wanted to fly, to see the new weapon in action for himself. Preuss had spent hours trying to convince him that the weather was unsuitable, that there was little in the way of a worthwhile target, that the weapons were in short supply anyway, and existing stocks had to be carefully husbanded for the coming big operation. It was all useless. Von Falkenberg wanted to fly, and see one of the weapons launched at something. Preuss had resigned himself to the fact that once the general had made his trip, he might then go back to Germany and leave everybody in peace.

Then this little business had cropped up, just to complicate matters even further. A couple of nights ago, a local militiaman had received a report that an aeroplane had come down somewhere in this area. The German authorities had been informed, and had sent out a Fieseler Storch observation aircraft to make a low-level search. Its crew had not found any downed aeroplane, but they had sighted what appeared to be pronounced tyre-tracks in a long field. It was a little unfortunate, Preuss thought, that von Falkenberg had got wind of the affair; the general had insisted on seeing for himself, and so here they were, in company with a weasel-faced little runt from the Gestapo.

'Where?' the general demanded curtly. The Gestapo man regarded him through slitted eyes, and there was a long pause before he answered. Even generals did not use that tone of voice to the Gestapo these days, and fail to have their names entered in a little book for future attention.

He pointed with a black-gloved hand. 'Over there, I believe, Herr General.'

There was a slight and rather sinister emphasis on the title. The Gestapo man's tone did not go unnoticed by von Falkenberg, who chose to ignore it.

They trudged through the mud to the spot indicated. The twin set of tyre tracks was easy to see. The party followed them, noting a spot where they appeared to sink deeper into the ground. The general turned to Preuss.

'Your opinion, Colonel?' he demanded.

Preuss peered at the marks. 'Aircraft tyres, most definitely, Herr General,' he said. 'Quite a large aircraft, obviously, and heavily-laden on landing, judging by the depth of the ruts. Also,' he added professionally, 'I would say that the tyres were of American make. The tread has quite a distinctive pattern. Possibly a c-47, or Dakota, as the British call it.' In this he was wrong, but his analysis was close enough.

'Sir!' The shout came from the Luftwaffe corporal, the general's driver, who had been following the party at a respectful distance. He hurried across and stood rigidly before von Falkenberg, saluting crisply. The Gestapo man saw that the salute was of the standard Wehrmacht type, rather than the version pioneered by the Führer. That, too, would be noted.

Anxious to redeem himself for his earlier failure to deposit the general in a dry patch, the corporal said, 'Herr General, I humbly beg to report that there are more tracks over there. They are not as easy to see as these.'

The general nodded. 'Good, Lehnert. Well done. We shall take a look.'

He strode across the field, followed by his entourage. The Gestapo man found that he was almost forced to trot to match the strides of the general and Colonel Preuss, and fumed inwardly at this indignity. Something would have to be done, he told himself, to teach these Luftwaffe upstarts a lesson.

The second set of tyre marks ran parallel to the first, some distance away and on slightly drier ground. The general and Preuss spent several minutes inspecting them, and also some curious circular marks spaced at intervals

alongside. At length, Preuss gave his opinion.

‘It is quite clear what happened here,’ he announced. ‘An aircraft, quite heavily laden, landed here and disgorged a cargo of some sort. At the end of its landing run it became bogged down, was extricated, and then took off along this line here, where the ground is a little drier. These circular marks seem to have been made by oil drums — used, no doubt, to form a flarepath.’

The general looked at him with some amusement. He had reached the same fairly obvious conclusion some time ago.

‘Quite,’ he said drily. ‘But what we need to know, Preuss, is what, or who, was off-loaded from the aircraft.’ He turned suddenly to the Gestapo man.

‘Where is the nearest village?’

Thrown by the sudden question, the Gestapo man pulled a map from his pocket and consulted it. ‘About a mile in that direction, Herr General,’ he said, pointing towards the west. Von Falkenberg nodded.

‘Very well. Then I suggest you take these troops and make a thorough investigation. Find out what the villagers know. I am sure there are methods you can use, if they prove reluctant to talk.’

The Gestapo man glared at him, but said nothing. Von Falkenberg turned to Preuss and said: ‘You can come back to Istres with me in the Kubelwagen, Preuss. I hardly think we shall need an escort. The weather is clearing nicely; I wish to fly this afternoon.’ He turned on his heel and strode back to the car, the driver running ahead and Preuss following, swearing quietly to himself.

Some hours later, a twin-engined Dornier 217 bomber made its ungainly way around the perimeter track at Istres. The aircraft was heavily laden; in addition to a substantial load of fuel, it carried a pair of stub-winged missiles under its wings, each one weighing a ton.

The Dornier turned on to the runway. In the cockpit, Colonel Preuss opened up the engines to full power and the aircraft began to move, laboriously at

first, held back by the weight it carried. The tail came up but the pilot continued to hold the Dornier down on the runway, adding a few extra knots to the normal take-off speed for safety. Then it was airborne and climbing away ponderously, its undercarriage coming up as it entered a steady climb, circling over Istres before settling down on a south-westerly heading.

Heavily conscious of the presence of General von Falkenberg just behind him, occupying the radio operator's seat, Karl Preuss chewed on an unlit cigar and allowed his thoughts to wander. Despite the authorization signed personally by von Falkenberg, everything about this flight was highly irregular and ran counter to the orders Preuss had received from the Luftwaffe High Command. Those orders had stated, quite specifically, that the new weapons were not to be used again until the chance came to mount a major attack. The factory that produced them had been heavily bombed, and it would be some time before production picked up once more. The missile stocks at Istres were all that existed.

The trouble was, Preuss thought, that von Falkenberg outranked the officer who had signed the order. There wasn't much he, a mere group commander, could do about it. Inwardly, as he flew on, the pilot cursed everything; the war, von Falkenberg, the improvement in the weather which had made this flight possible, the reconnaissance report of a large enemy freighter west of Sardinia, the freighter that was now their target. Preuss hoped fervently that the ship was still beyond the range of the Spitfire squadrons that had recently moved into Corsica.

Hampered by the drag of its missiles, the Dornier was making a bare 180 miles per hour. At this rate, it would be over an hour before the bomber reached the target area. To help pass the time, and also to relieve some of the tension that gripped the back of his neck, Preuss decided to make some small talk. Over the intercom, he spoke to his observer, Sergeant Rainer Becher,

who was crouched at his station in the bomber's glazed nose. Much depended on Becher's skill, for he was responsible for guiding the missiles. The other crew members, navigator and flight engineer, had their respective positions behind the pilot. At action stations, each crew member manned an MG131 machine-gun, while the pilot controlled a forward-firing cannon mounted in the nose and operated by a trigger on his control column.

'How is Fritz, Becher?'

In the nose of the aircraft, Becher grinned. Fritz was the code-name for the missiles suspended under the Dornier's wings. They were fitted with a special system that piped hot air to them in flight from the aircraft's engines — an essential precaution, otherwise their complex mechanisms would almost certainly freeze at altitude. Becher decided to say something for the benefit of the general, who was also listening on the intercom.

'Fine, sir. Warmer than we are, I'll bet. And with any luck a lot warmer than a great many Tommy sailors will be before long.'

Preuss decided that small talk might not be such a good idea after all. Highly professional military man though he was, he did not relish the prospect of condemning men to death by drowning. That fate had brushed its wing darkly over his own face on more than one occasion, when he had struggled back home in a damaged aircraft following some anti-shipping operation. But this was total war, and at last his group had been given an effective method of waging it — as the previous month's operation against the convoy off the Bay of Biscay had shown.

They called the new weapon Fritz-z, although its proper designation was PCMOOZ. It was developed from the earlier Fritz-x glider bomb which had been used successfully against Allied warships in 1943. Fritz-z's liquid-fuel rocket motor boosted it to a speed of over 600 miles per hour, which made it virtually unstoppable. It was guided to its target by radio control, the operator

steering it by means of a small joystick mounted on the side wall of the cockpit.

That was Rainer Becher's job, and he was good at it. During missile trials in the Baltic he had hit the target nine times out of ten, and he was just as good on actual operations. The other operators in the group were not quite up to his standard, but good enough.

The minutes dragged by. At last the navigator, who had been poring over his charts, taking drift sightings and calculating where the enemy ship ought to be if it had not changed its course and speed, called Preuss over the intercom.

'Maintain heading and airspeed, pilot. Target should be thirty miles ahead in Sector Dora Friedrich 4022.'

Preuss acknowledged briefly and consulted his own map, singling out the reference mentioned by the navigator. DF4022: that would put the ship about one hundred and twenty miles west of Sardinia's Cap Spartivento. So far they had not sighted any other vessels, which was all to the good; the presence of a lone Dornier, heading southwards across the Mediterranean, was bound to excite suspicion and send the RAF'S long-range Beaufighters scurrying into the air from some Algerian airfield.

So far, Preuss had kept the Dornier at low altitude to avoid detection by the British radar that had recently been installed on Corsica. Now, with the target area coming up, he took the bomber in a climb to 12,000 feet, the optimum height for launching the missiles. The pilot peered ahead, scanning the rather murky horizon; there was quite a lot of haze, but visibility was not too bad. It should not prove difficult to detect a sizeable vessel, assuming that it, and they, were in the right place at the right time.

In the Dornier's glasshouse nose, Rainer Becher was fussing over his control panel, making last-minute adjustments to the missile guidance system

and his high-magnification tracking sight. At length, he reported to the pilot that all was ready. The Dornier droned on, and General von Falkenberg, who had been listening in silence to the crew's chatter over the intercom, suddenly became impatient. He began to bombard the navigator with questions, demanding to know if the man was sure his calculations were correct. Karl Preuss, inwardly furious but striving to keep his voice calm, intervened on behalf of the navigator before he could reply.

'Herr General, as captain of this aircraft I must remind you that you are a passenger on an operational mission, and as such I must respectfully ask you not to interfere with my crew members in the performance of their duties.'

There was a highly charged silence, punctuated only by a strangled sound over the intercom, presumably from von Falkenberg. Mercifully, before the general had time to launch into his anticipated tirade, Becher's excited yell sounded from the nose.

'Target ahead, two o'clock! On the horizon!'

Sure enough, there it was — or rather there they were, for there were two ships instead of the expected one. They were elongated streaks against the lighter horizon, one larger than the other. Preuss called the crew to action stations, turned the nose of the Dornier to the right until the ships were directly ahead, and settled himself firmly in his seat as he began the run-in. He had already decided to launch from six miles to make doubly certain of a hit, having deduced that the smaller of the two ships was most likely an escorting destroyer and that the aircraft would be well outside the range of its armament.

The sea crept under the bomber's wings, and the tension in the cockpit increased as the two ships grew larger. In the nose, Becher, his eye already glued to the tracking sight, began the count-down. 'Number one missile ready and armed. Stand by. Thirty seconds … twenty … fifteen … ten … five …

launch!’

Preuss, who was in control of the launch, pressed a switch on his control column and at once throttled back. The Dornier, freed of the missile’s weight, gave a sudden leap and Preuss rapidly re-trimmed the aircraft to compensate for the asymmetric effect of the remaining weapon that hung under the starboard wing.

The released Fritz-z, still travelling at the original speed of the bomber, sped ahead of its parent aircraft. Becher pressed a button on his control panel and there was a vivid flash of flame as the missile’s rocket booster ignited. At the same time, a brilliant flare also lit up in the weapon’s tail. Becher picked this up and centred it in the cross-hairs of his sight, then moved his control stick until the flare was superimposed on the outline of the target — the bigger of the two vessels.

Mentally, he counted off the seconds to the missile’s objective. Fritz was travelling very fast now. The glare of its rocket exhaust was suddenly cut off as the fuel burned itself out, but that did not matter; the weapon had more than sufficient forward speed to carry it over the last few hundred yards. Becher, handling the control stick with sensitive fingers, kept his eye glued to the sight and centred the tracking flare on the grey, magnified hull of the freighter, just above the waterline.

Travelling at more than 600 miles per hour, the missile’s armoured warhead sliced through the freighter’s hull as though it were tissue paper and its thousand-pound charge exploded in the engine room with terrifying force, killing everyone there instantly and rupturing the boilers. From the Dornier, the German crew saw a great column of smoke and steam erupt from the stricken ship, which immediately broke in half and began to sink. General von Falkenberg, who had come up to stand behind the pilot’s seat, slapped Preuss on the shoulder, their earlier exchange of words apparently forgotten,

and clapped the pilot on the shoulder in an uncharacteristic display of excitement.

‘Good, Preuss!’ he shouted. ‘Very good indeed! Now for the other ship!’

The destroyer had turned towards the approaching Dornier and was heading towards it at full speed, shrouded in smoke as it opened fire with its forward armament. Shell-bursts spattered the sky ineffectually a long way ahead of the aircraft. Becher completed his second count-down and the other Fritz-z dropped away, spearing towards the warship at the head of a trail of flame and smoke.

This time, Becher kept the flare centred on the destroyer’s bridge. He did not miss. The missile flashed over the ship’s forward four-inch gun turret and blasted the superstructure into a shambles, killing the captain and his executive officers.

The destroyer maintained her speed and her guns kept firing, but she was leaderless now, her nerve-centre destroyed. She might survive to limp back to port, but she would be out of action for months, possibly for the duration of the war.

Preuss swung the Dornier round and pushed the nose down to gain speed, anxious to get clear of the area before Allied fighters showed up. He had no doubt that they would, for the ships must have been signalling frantically for air cover.

‘That has shown them that the Mediterranean is not yet an Anglo-American pond!’ von Falkenberg cried. ‘You will all be decorated for this — I shall see to it in person!’

And no doubt you’ll be at the top of the awards list, thought Preuss wryly. Nevertheless, he was glad that the general had enjoyed his trip; it would make life a lot easier back at Istres. Maybe von Falkenberg would now go away and leave everybody in peace.

Preuss suddenly felt tired and washed out. He wished fervently that the war was over and that he could go back to his pre-war job as an airline pilot with Lufthansa, the German civil airline. That had been fun, especially the long-range mail flights to America that were just getting started when the war brought a stop to them. The pilot did not think about the lives he and Becher had just ended; he had long ago ceased to give that sort of thing any thought. What grieved him now, in these first weeks of 1944, was that no matter how hard he and his comrades fought on, Germany had lost the war. No matter how many Allied soldiers and sailors they killed, there would be others to take their place. And all Germany had were growing numbers of old men and boys to take the place of the troops who were being massacred and frozen in Russia, the human sacrifices of men such as von Falkenberg and the madman at the helm.

For a wild, impulsive instant, Preuss had an almost uncontrollable urge to send the Dornier plunging into the sea. It passed, but afterwards he found himself trembling slightly and sweating. Now, added to the fear that was a natural reaction to the constant strain of combat flying, was another, even greater fear: the fear of himself.

How long, he asked himself as the Dornier slid down the sky towards Istres, could he go on — how long could any of them go on?

CHAPTER SEVEN

The rain had stopped, but the illusion of warmth it had brought to the Camargue was now dispelled by the breath of the mistral, blowing icily down the valley of the Rhône. It rattled the shuttered windows of the ranch-house where Douglas and his men now sheltered. The ranch stood midway between the village of Albaron and the Rhône, beyond which lay the SAS commandos' objective: Istres airfield.

Douglas, with the aid of sketch-maps compiled by the rancher, Etienne Barbut, was trying to work out how to carry out a reconnaissance of the target. He saw at once that it was not going to be easy. If they went overland from their present location, they would have to cross the broad, fast-flowing Rhône and then cross two main roads to get near the airfield boundary, and as far as Douglas could make out there was very little in the way of cover; anyone seen prowling around in the vicinity of the field would certainly be arrested, for Istres had recently been placed under heavy guard.

His opinion was challenged by Barbut, who explained that, south of Arles, the river opened out considerably and as a consequence the speed of its flow lessened. However, it was half a mile wide at its narrowest, and although there were no German or Milice patrols on this side — mainly because there were no proper roads running through the Camargue — there were plenty on the other, and it would be difficult to cross the river unseen.

Douglas pondered on this, and frowned as he considered the possible alternatives. His finger traced the course of a railway line that ran from Arles to Miramas and then branched off to Port-de-Bouc, on the coast. The important point was that it appeared to run past the eastern boundary of the

target airfield.

‘What about this?’ the SAS officer wanted to know. ‘Wouldn’t it be possible to see most of what is going on at Istres from a train?’

Barbut smiled, and once again spoke through the medium of Colette, who was acting as interpreter. Douglas noticed that the elderly rancher seemed to get on very well with Colette; there was almost a bond of affection between them.

‘That is exactly how some of these sketches were compiled, my friend. The driver of one of the locomotives on this line is sympathetic. But one has to have a special permit to travel as a passenger, and passes are always checked by the Germans and the Milice. You would be spotted immediately.’ Barbut suddenly looked upset. ‘Be assured, my friend, that the sketches are as accurate as we can make them. They show where every aircraft is dispersed, the location of the buildings, the dump where the weapons are stored. We have done our best.’

Douglas smiled at him. ‘I don’t doubt that for a moment,’ he said. ‘What I am looking for is a way in — and, what is just as important, a way out again once the job has been done. Come to that, I haven’t yet worked out how we are going to put a spanner in the works. A lot depends on your Maquisards.’

Between them, they had worked out a tentative plan of action. While the local Maquis launched a strong attack on the airfield perimeter at a point yet to be determined, the SAS men would go in elsewhere. Their main objective would be the weapons dump, but they would also try and destroy as many of KG 100’s aircraft as possible.

There was much groundwork still to be done, and when the action came it would have to be carried out quickly and with accurate timing. When the Allied convoy that was bound for Italy was about to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar, Etienne Barbut, the local Resistance leader, would receive a coded

signal from London. After that, the SAS and the Maquis would have about four hours in which to move into position and launch their respective attacks. That, Douglas calculated, was the time it would take the Germans to receive intelligence of the convoy's movements and to plan their assault on it. In his own mind, he was convinced that the Germans would try to hit the convoy as it passed Gibraltar in order to create maximum confusion, rather than wait until the ships were in the Mediterranean and sailing along the North African coast, where they would probably have fighter protection.

But he did not like second-hand information. He had to see the layout at Istres for himself.

Looking at the sketches again, and comparing them with a map of the local terrain, he was struck by the possibility that it might be possible to approach the airfield from the south. He could follow the Rhône southwards to the coast, cross the mouth of the river somehow and come inland by Port-de-Bouc. That way there would only be one road to cross before he was within sight of Istres.

Through Colette, he told Etienne Barbut of his scheme, mentally calculating the time still available. He alone knew that the convoy was due to enter the Strait of Gibraltar on 19 January, although he did not know the time; it was now the fourteenth. He made up his mind that there was no time to spare for shuttling back and forth across the Rhône; once he and his men were on the east bank of the river they would have to stay there and lie low until it was time to carry out the attack. He asked Barbut if he thought the plan was feasible. The rancher shook his head slowly.

'It is possible, of course,' he said, with Colette translating. 'But it will mean extra organization. For example, you will need a boat to get you across the river mouth, for there is no bridge. Then we shall have to find somewhere safe for you to hide, provide you with food, and arrange for our men to make

contact with you there. Then there is the problem of the message from London: how will I be able to get it to you?'

Barbut's brow furrowed for a moment or two, then he brightened and gave a broad grin.

'Of course, my friend! What could be simpler? I shall come with you? Your signaller here' — he waved at Mitchell — 'has a radio set which is the same type as mine, and works on the same frequencies. I regret that I cannot entrust you with the code, as that would put too many lives at risk if you were to be captured, but if I come with you I can listen out for the message and send the acknowledgement. Besides, I could do with a little excitement! Is it agreed, then?'

Douglas opened his mouth to protest, but Colette placed a warning hand on his arm.

'I think that would be a very good idea,' she said. 'Monsieur Barbut will be a great asset. He knows the area thoroughly. Above all, he is trusted. No one will question him if he is challenged by the Milice,' She smiled. 'In fact, I think they are a little afraid of him. The Camargue is a strange, sometimes eerie place. Those who live outside do not consider it wise to cross the paths of people who belong to these marshes.' Listening to the mistral moaning its dirge outside, Douglas could well believe some of the superstitions. There were, after all, enough of them among his own Gaelic race. After some hesitation, he agreed to take the rancher along.

They spent some time discussing the equipment they would need. Barbut's cellar contained a sizeable collection of the necessary tools for espionage and sabotage, air-dropped by the RAF during the past months; as well as the radio transceiver he had mentioned, there were daggers, miniature cameras, a selection of German and British igniters, delayed-action pencil detonators, plastic explosives and silent pistols. Douglas distributed the explosives and

detonators among his team, and also some German 9-mm ammunition which the Resistance had ‘liberated’ from the enemy.

Suddenly, as he was completing this task, there came a sharp rapping on the door. Immediately, the SAS men scattered and flattened themselves against the wall on either side, ready for instant action and out of sight of whoever might be outside. Colette remained at the big circular table that was the centre-piece of the kitchen, her hands concealed beneath it. They grasped a Luger pistol, and it was trained on the door.

Etienne Barbut crossed the floor in a few rapid strides and opened the door wide. The next instant he was staggering backwards under the weight of the body that had collapsed against him. Barbut regained his balance and lowered the body to the floor, turning it as he did so. The pain-glazed eyes of Raoul stared up at him, then fastened on Douglas.

‘You must get out, my friend,’ he said weakly. ‘The bastards are on to you.’

Colette hurried forward and placed a cushion under Raoul’s head. As Douglas and Barbut knelt alongside, she deftly unfastened the French-Canadian’s jacket and gently stripped away his blood-caked shirt. There was a gaping hole in his right shoulder; he had been shot from behind. The hole was plugged with mud which he had used in a desperate attempt to staunch the flow of blood.

‘What happened?’ Douglas asked, his face grim. He had a feeling that he already knew. Raoul took a sip of brandy from a glass proffered by Barbut and coughed slightly, but his voice grew a little stronger.

‘It must have been only an hour or two after you left,’ he said. ‘When was it? Day before yesterday? Christ, I can’t remember. Been on the run for ages.’ He closed his eyes, and for a moment Douglas thought that he had fainted. But the eyes opened again, and Raoul went on: ‘It seems the Germans found the tracks your aeroplane made when it landed. A patrol of them headed for

the nearest village — you remember, the village where all the help came from when the plane got stuck. The patrol was under the command of a Gestapo official. The bastard didn't mess about. When the villagers wouldn't talk, he picked out ten men and had them shot on the spot. Then he threatened to start on the kids, at which point one of the womenfolk broke down and told him what she knew. Can't say I blame her all that much.'

He broke off and asked for a drink of water. Someone brought him a cup, which he drained greedily, holding it shakily to his lips with his left hand.

'That's better,' he gasped, handing the cup to Colette. 'Let me get up, will you? Shoulder hurts like hell, but I can sit up okay.'

'Stay where you are,' she ordered him firmly. 'You've lost a great deal of blood. Besides, I'm doing my best to dress your wound, and I can't do that if you keep on moving around.'

Raoul grinned weakly at her and allowed her to continue with her task of swabbing mud and dried blood from his shoulder. 'Okay,' he said. 'You're the boss.' His gaze switched back to Douglas, and he went on with his story. 'After the woman had spilled the beans, the Germans headed straight for my place. Luckily, somebody was out in the fields and saw them coming. I told the folks in my village to make themselves scarce into the countryside. I stayed for a while and kept Jerry's head down with some shooting, just to give the folks a bit of a head start, then I ran for it too — in the opposite direction. As I had suspected, the Jerries followed me instead of the villagers. One of them managed to wing me, but I found a hiding place and lay low. Fortunately, they didn't have any dogs with them, or I'd have been sniffed out for sure. As it was, the Jerries combed around for a while, then set fire to the village and went away. I knew I had to get a warning to you, so here I am.'

He made it all sound simple, but Douglas knew that getting here must have

required an enormous feat of endurance on the French-Canadian's part. Wounded and on foot, he had crossed fifteen miles of open country, including two roads. The journey had been easy enough when Douglas and the others had made it on horseback, but for Raoul it must have been a nightmare — particularly in the knowledge that the roads he had to cross would by now be heavily patrolled.

Colette finished dressing his wound, raising him so that she could wind the bandages round his injured shoulder. 'You're lucky,' she told him. 'The bullet went straight through. You've lost a bit of tissue, but no bones were broken. I don't think there will be any permanent damage, apart from some stiffness after the wound heals.'

'Thanks,' Raoul said briefly. 'Now can I sit up?' Colette nodded, and Raoul was helped to a chair by Douglas and Brough. He subsided into it and winced as a stab of pain shot through his shoulder. He passed his left hand wearily across his eyes, prompting the remark from Douglas that he looked as though he could do with a good sleep.

'Sleep?' Raoul said in a tone that was almost accusing, staring at the SAS officer. 'There's no time for sleep. Don't you realize, the Germans will be calling up reinforcements right now, and that by this time tomorrow the whole area will be crawling with them? There was only one thing on your side right from the start, and that was the element of surprise. Now you've lost even that. You can bet your last dollar that the Germans are fully aware by now that it's British soldiers they're looking for, not just British agents — and it won't take them long to work out what your target is likely to be. You've got to move, and move fast.'

Douglas thought for a moment, then said: 'But they won't know where to look for us. Isn't it more likely that they will make an all-out drive against the Maquis in the hope that they will flush us out?'

Raoul nodded. ‘That’s what is worrying me. For the past forty-eight hours, the Maquisards who are to assist you in your mission have been quietly moving into the area west of Arles from locations all over Provence. On the eve of the operation they will assemble south of the road leading west from Salon-de-Provence. An SOE agent code-named Auguste is with them. Has Monsieur Barbut explained the arrangements London has made to contact you?’

Douglas nodded. ‘Good,’ Raoul continued. ‘The signal will also be received by Auguste, who will then divide the Maquisards into two groups. One will attack and destroy lock gates on the canal that runs southwards to the Etang de Berre, drawing the attention of enemy forces north of Marseille; the other will follow the railway line south of Miramas and launch a diversionary attack on the northern perimeter of Istres airfield. You must be in position, at a place you yourself must select as favourable, and be ready to make your move as soon as the diversionary attack develops.’

‘That’s the immediate problem,’ Douglas admitted. ‘We’ve got to get into the immediate vicinity of Istres — which we have worked out might just be possible, by taking a roundabout route — but then we’ve got to stay in hiding until we get the signal to go in. That’s going to be the difficult part. But I agree with you — what’s going to happen if the Germans discover that the Maquisards are in the area too, and take steps to eliminate them?’

‘If that happens,’ Raoul said in a low voice, ‘more will be jeopardized than your mission. We have two hundred Resistance men standing by for this operation — the cream of our men in Provence. If the Germans destroy them, they will also destroy the heart of the Resistance movement in this part of France. And the repercussions, the reprisals against ordinary French men and women, would be widespread.’

A sudden thought struck Douglas. He looked hard at Raoul and asked: ‘You

aren’t thinking of calling off your men, are you?’

Raoul shook his head, and winced again as the pain of his shoulder struck him. ‘No. I realize that a great deal is at stake. Sacrifices have to be made. I know that if the Maquisards were given the choice, not one of them would back down.’

Douglas relaxed, then said, ‘But what will you do? You can’t go back to the village, and you can’t come with us.’

‘Then I’ll stay here,’ Raoul told him, his voice faint now. ‘I like it here. It’s warm, and comfortable … ’

His voice trailed off and his chin lolled on his chest. Concerned, Colette bent over him. ‘It’s all right,’ she said after a moment or two. ‘He’s fast asleep, which is the best thing that could happen to him.’ She spoke rapidly to Etienne Barbut, then said to Douglas, ‘He will be looked after. He will be taken to one of the *gardiens*’ cottages, and hidden. He will be quite safe there.’

‘Good. I wouldn’t like anything to happen to him,’ Douglas commented. ‘But we need to get ourselves organized. The sooner we move out, the better.’

Etienne Barbut had one of his servants cook a huge bowl of *bouillabaisse* before their departure. The SAS men viewed the mixture with some misgivings; the fishy assortment was almost entirely without taste, and the only item that imparted flavour was a helping of stale bread, toasted and strongly impregnated with garlic. Nevertheless, they finished their portions, feigning relish out of courtesy to their host, and being uncertain about the source of their next meal.

Afterwards, disguised once again as Camargue cowboys, they mounted the sturdy white horses and rode southwards, accompanied by two *gardiens* whose task it was to bring the animals back to their corral on the ranch.

It was still relatively early in the morning when the party set out. The sky was clear, a light pastel blue, and the breeze was sweet. For the first time since leaving England, Douglas felt relaxed and alert; a hot bath at Etienne Barbut's, where they had spent the night, had worked wonders for them all.

They made steady progress southwards, the horses following their sure-footed way along the eastern shore of the Etang de Vaccares, its purple lagoons clouded with water-birds of every description. 'Just look at that,' Olds said to nobody in particular. 'I wouldn't have missed seeing that for the world. Just think — if it wasn't for old Hitler, I'd never have known the likes of that existed.'

The birds were their constant companions for several miles, until they turned aside from the Etang and struck out across country towards the estuary of the Grand Rhône. Far off to the south, Douglas could see what appeared to be a range of low hills, shining a peculiar white in the sun; Colette explained that they were literally mountains of salt, accumulated when the coast of the Camargue became flooded with sea-water during the summer months.

There was only one moment of alarm, when a lumbering three-engined Junkers 52 transport aircraft droned low overhead. The riders took temporary shelter in a dense thicket until the aircraft had passed; whatever its errand might be, Douglas thought, it obviously isn't searching for us. So far, so good.

After some hours, the riders reached an isolated thatched cottage. Etienne Barbut spoke rapidly to Colette, who signalled to Douglas and his men to dismount.

'This is as far as we go on horseback,' she explained. 'We lie low here until nightfall, then make our way down to the coast. It isn't far.'

Douglas swung down from the saddle and gave his horse an affectionate pat on the neck. He and the others bundled up their hats and ponchos and the two

gardiens stuffed the clothing into saddlebags; then, without a word, they rounded up the horses and headed back towards the northern horizon.

The cottage was empty, but someone had clearly been expecting them. There was bread and cheese, and a pitcher of red wine, on a rough wooden table, and a fire of juniper wood crackled fragrantly in the hearth. Barbut offered no explanation, but indicated that the food was there to be eaten. They set to work on it willingly, their appetites sharpened by the long ride.

Something was puzzling Douglas, and he voiced his thoughts to Colette. ‘How does he do it?’ he asked. ‘Barbut, I mean. I can’t for the life of me understand how he can have told whoever lives here that we were on our way. It’s uncanny.’

Colette laughed. ‘Not really. Come outside, and I’ll show you.’

She led him round the back of the cottage, and pointed to a small wooden lean-to hut. ‘Unlatch the door,’ she ordered, ‘and take a look inside. But try not to disturb the occupants too much. They are pretty hard-worked, just at the moment.’

Douglas did as she said. In the gloom, something fluttered, momentarily startling him. Then, realizing what it was, he chuckled.

‘Pigeons! So that’s it. I suppose I should have guessed.’

Colette nodded. ‘Yes, the Maquisards have quite an effective communications network in these parts. The only snag is that when the mistral is blowing at full strength, these little fellows sometimes won’t fly. I can’t say that I blame them; it’s an evil wind.’

For some reason, her words sent a chill of foreboding through Douglas. Not for the first time since arriving in France, he felt a deep sense of unease. So far, everything had been too easy. He felt like a mouse, conscious that a nearby cat was about to spring, but not knowing when or where.

Darkness, when it came, fell swiftly over the Camargue. They waited for an

hour longer, and then Barbut indicated that it was time to leave. Picking up their equipment, they set off in single file, with the Frenchman leading. Conolly moved a few steps behind him, obeying an earlier whispered instruction from Douglas. The Irishman's order was simple. If Barbut showed any sign of betrayal, he would die immediately.

They marched on, Barbut threading his way through great pans of salt that whitened the ground all around. Ahead of them, they could hear the murmur of the sea. Colette, who would have been leading the party over this tricky ground had it not been for Barbut's presence, moved up to walk alongside the rancher. The pace was slower now, as though Barbut and the woman were probing the darkness ahead in search of something as yet unseen.

Suddenly, a low-pitched whistle sounded in the night, off to one side. Barbut answered with a similar call and changed direction towards the sound. Colette fell back along the line of men and sought out Douglas.

'It's the man who lives in the cottage back there,' she explained. 'He has organized a boat to take us to the other side of the Rhône to the Golfe de Fos. There, we can mix with other fishing craft from Port-de-Bouc and Martigues. They come and go all the time, even though the Germans have tried to impose restrictions. With luck, we shall be able to go ashore unobserved at some quiet spot.'

The boat had been pulled ashore on the edge of a salt pan. They pushed it clear and waded after it through shallow water before scrambling aboard. It was a small craft, just big enough to hold them all. A man whom Douglas presumed must be its owner spoke in subdued tones to Barbut and Colette, then hoisted a small, triangular sail which immediately filled with the night breeze, propelling the craft away from the shore. The man from the cottage stood there for a few moments, a silent and unknown figure, then turned and disappeared into the darkness.

The boat's owner, at the tiller, touched a pair of oars with his foot and made signs that someone ought to make use of them. Douglas and Brough took one apiece and were soon helping the boat on its way. It followed the edge of the flat marshlands for some time and then entered the estuary of the Grand Rhône. The water was calm, little more than a placid trickle at the point where the great river met the sea.

As Colette had predicted, there were plenty of fishing craft about, some of them surprisingly displaying lights. Douglas thought that the Germans would have put a stop to that. Their own boat moved in anonymity among the rest, the man at the tiller holding a steady easterly course across the estuary until, at length, the far bank became visible, curving around a mile-long promontory into the Golfe de Fos.

The gulf itself was some four miles in width. With the SAS men taking turns at the oars, and the sail billowing nicely, the boat made good progress north-westwards toward the far shore and finally grounded among some marshy flats. The boat's occupants quickly jumped clear and helped to push the craft free before squelching their way towards drier ground. Behind them, a hoarse whisper came out of the darkness from the boatman:

'*Allez, vite*! *Et bonne chance*!'

Hefting their MP-40s, the SAS men fanned out in an extended line as the ground became harder under their feet. Barbut pounded along beside Douglas, breathing hard. Colette was a few paces to the rear. Reaching the dunes below some rising ground, well clear of the sea, they crouched down and took stock of their position. The night was ominously quiet.

Colette came up and knelt beside Douglas, who looked at her questioningly. 'What now?' he whispered.

She pointed towards the high ground. 'See that rock up there? Just beyond it there's a little village called Fos-sur-Mer. It's about three miles south of

Istres. We have a contact there who is sympathetic. He is the local priest. It was my original brief to take you to him, and I still mean to do that. Are you ready?'

Douglas got up from his crouching position and looked around before issuing his orders. Apart from his own men, there was no sign of life anywhere.

'All right,' he said. 'Let's go. But keep well spaced out, and freeze if there's any sign of trouble. We don't want a scrap on our hands.'

They set off up the slope, using a few small, dark bushy trees as cover and taking as much care as possible not to dislodge the stones that were strewn liberally over the area. The rise in the ground was not significant, and Douglas's team were soon at the top. Here, another strip of sandy ground lay between the top of the rise and a cluster of buildings a couple of hundred yards away.

Douglas and the others paused again, checking that all was well before moving on. Fleetingly, the SAS officer wished that it was light enough to get a better idea of the lie of the land.

And his wish was granted. For at that moment a searchlight beam flicked on, bathing the village and its environs in a piercing glare.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Instinctively, Douglas's party flattened themselves against the ground just below the top of the rise. The beam of the searchlight swept round from the village and traversed just above their heads, arcing in a swathe of light over the water behind them. It was a small searchlight, of the kind mounted on patrol boats.

A guttural voice called out something in French from beyond the searchlight. Douglas slid closer to Colette and put his mouth close to her ear.

'What's he saying?'

'He's ordering us to come out with our hands up,' she whispered back. 'It's clear that he thinks we are all French. They must have been watching the boat as it put us ashore. They must want to take us alive, or they could easily have shot us down by now.'

Douglas's mind raced. It suddenly struck him that the Germans, or the Milice, or whoever was up there, were not expecting to be confronted by a party of heavily-armed British commandos. They obviously thought that they had netted a group of the French Resistance. Whatever the truth, there was no way now that a fight could be avoided. Douglas wondered what the odds were, then dismissed the thought. It didn't matter very much, in their present predicament.

'Stall them,' he ordered Colette. 'Say anything you like — just buy me a minute or two.'

She squeezed his arm in acknowledgement as he crept over towards the spot where Stan Brough lay. Conolly, he saw in the reflected glow of the searchlight, was close by.

‘Stan, we’ve got to get round them,’ Douglas said rapidly. ‘They think we’re a party of Frenchmen, probably unarmed. Take Olds, Barber, Mitchell and Cowley and work your way along to the left. The rest of you come with me. I’m going to create a diversion. As soon as you hear things starting to happen, go hell for leather for the village and don’t stop until you’re under cover.’

He turned and, followed by Conolly and the remainder of his team, crawled back past the spot where Colette and Barbut lay. The two were engaged in a brisk exchange of words with the men at the searchlight. Colette, playing on the enemy’s uncertainty about whether the party was armed or not, was asking for guarantees that if they did come out into the open, they would not be harmed. Douglas noted with satisfaction that the enemy were taking no chances; no one had yet shown himself against the skyline, preferring to remain behind the searchlight in relative security.

After a fast crawl of fifty yards or so Douglas and his men found themselves just below a patch of scrub. Signalling the others to remain where they were, the SAS officer eased his way through the wiry tangle until he could peer through the last few twigs across the open ground. He saw at once that the searchlight was sited well to the right of the village, its beam playing in a short arc over the rise behind which Colette and Barbut lay. Words were still flying back and forth between the two sides, but judging by the increasingly high-pitched shouts from the vicinity of the searchlight the opposition was growing impatient. With the glare of the light in his eyes, Douglas could make out no further detail.

He slid back through the scrub to where Conolly and the others were waiting.

‘Come up through the scrub to the edge of the rise,’ he said quietly. ‘Liam, I’m going to knock out that light. As soon as I open fire, send up a flare.

When we’ve got some light on the scene, give ’em all you’ve got — grenades, the lot. It’ll give Stan and the others a fighting chance of getting across that open strip to take ’em from the flank. Got it?’

‘Got it, boss.’ Conolly followed Douglas back into the scrub, reaching into a pocket of his overall for a small cylinder. It was a type of flare specially developed for the commando forces. Operated without the need for a bulky pistol, it needed only to be pointed in the right direction and then ignited by twisting and pulling a cap at its base.

Douglas waited until his men were in place, then slowly pushed the barrel of his MP-40 ahead of him through the last fringe of scrub. Snuggling down behind the weapon, he drew a careful bead on the searchlight. A tap on the leg from Conolly told him that the others were ready for action. Expelling a breath, he pressed the trigger of the machine-pistol.

The harsh chatter of the weapon sounded in his ears as he loosed off a full magazine at the searchlight. At the same time, there was a crack beside him as Conolly detonated the flare. Several things happened within a split second of one another; the searchlight went out with a tinkle of glass, the flare sputtered into life overhead, and three grenades hurled by Lambert, Sansom and Willings curved across the open ground. They exploded close by the searchlight, throwing out whining splinters and raising a cloud of dust.

Douglas slammed home another magazine, then rolled over again and snapped off a rapid burst at the figures he could see moving in the light of the flare. One of them dropped. To the right of the now defunct searchlight a machine-gun barked into life, causing the SAS men to duck as its bullets pounded a stream of dust and stone particles from the crest of the rise. Lambert hurled a second grenade but it fell short, its smoke momentarily obscuring the enemy weapon.

‘Save your grenades!’ Douglas ordered. ‘Keep their heads down with your

MP-40s. Liam, get another flare ready!'

The Irishman had already done so. Before the first flare fizzled out a second had taken its place, keeping the enemy position illuminated as it swung down on a handkerchief-sized parachute.

The enemy gun stopped firing for a few moments, and inexplicably a small group of the men near it chose that moment to change position in an attempt to get closer to Douglas's party. They ran into the concentrated fire of five MP-40s and were bowled over before they had gone twenty yards. The machine-gun resumed its vicious hammering, forcing the SAS men to duck for cover once more.

'I wonder how many of them there are?' Douglas said. Conolly ventured his opinion.

'Not more than twenty, I should say. Fewer than that, now. We've knocked out at least half a dozen. It's that bloody MG that's the problem. Could keep us pinned down for ages.'

Conolly sent up another flare, his third and last. Sansom said that he had two, but that was all. They had to do something to extricate themselves, and quickly. Suddenly, a voice yelled something from over on their left, near the village.

They looked. A figure came running from the shelter of one of the houses, zigzagging and firing in short bursts from the hip as it went. Douglas saw the helmeted heads of the machine-gun crew come into brief sight over their parapet of sandbags as they strove to shift the weapon round to meet this new threat.

'Cover him!' Douglas shouted. The bullets from his MP-40 spattered the enemy's sandbags. Beside him the others resumed firing too in a deafening cacophony that was echoed from the village, where more guns were blazing in support of the lone runner.

The machine-gun spat at him but he continued to come on, still firing. Then his MP-40 fell silent. He tossed the useless weapon to one side, then his arm curved back. Douglas clearly saw the grenade as it arced through the flare's dwindling light to explode with a flash and a crack directly above the machine-gun. There was a shrill scream and a man reeled over the sandbags, clutching at his face before tumbling to lie motionless.

The flare went out, but not before its light had revealed the lone runner sink to his knees, his hands outstretched to greet the earth.

'Flare, Sansom!' Douglas screamed, but the trooper was already igniting one. Its light revealed several figures, running away from behind the machine-gun towards the village. There were seven or eight of them, and they were chopped down mercilessly by the SAS men who had thrown themselves under cover among the small huddle of houses.

The echoes of the shooting died away. Douglas jumped from his position in the scrub, MP-40 levelled in case of more trouble, and ran towards the man who had been hit by the MG. He had fallen sideways and now lay curled up, his breath coming in short gasps. He groaned as Douglas knelt beside him and gently turned him over.

It was Cowley. The front of his overalls was soaked in blood, and Douglas knew at once that there was nothing that could be done for him. In the light of the dying flare his eyes flickered open and fastened on Douglas; they were already glazing over. The SAS officer bent low to catch the whisper that came from Cowley's lips.

'I … I did all right, sir, didn't I?'

Douglas touched the side of his face. 'You did fine, son. Just fine.'

A brief smile flickered across the dying man's face and his head sank into the dust. The breathing stopped. A bitter feeling of rage and helplessness welled up inside Douglas. He felt like pounding the earth with his fists.

Someone was standing alongside him. Dimly, through the blazing fury that pounded inside his head, he heard Stan Brough's voice.

'Bravest bloody thing I ever saw, sir. There wasn't a thing I could do to stop him.'

Douglas stood up, getting control of himself again. There was no time for emotion; soon, all hell was likely to break out in this corner of France. Brough, however, was right. Cowley's action was in every way deserving of a posthumous Victoria Cross; Douglas made up his mind that if he survived this mission, he would put in a recommendation to that effect as soon as he got back to England.

He retrieved Cowley's identity disk and slipped it into a pocket. Colette and Barbut, shaken but unhurt, had emerged from their place below the rise and were standing off to one side, as though uncertain about what to do next. Douglas told them to go off and locate their Resistance contact, but to be back in five minutes.

Conolly came running up. He and the others had been checking the enemy dead.

'There are a dozen, not counting the machine-gun crew,' he reported. 'Fewer than we thought. Some may have got away, but it's doubtful. This has blown our plans somewhat, hasn't it?'

'You can say that again,' Douglas said grimly. The noise of the brief and bloody battle must have been heard for miles around. He looked down at Cowley's body. 'We've got to get him under cover,' he said. 'Liam, get a couple of men and take him down into the patch of scrub. Empty his pockets first. Bury him as best you can. The enemy may not yet know who we are, and even though they'll probably discover the body eventually, they may not do so for another few days. The longer we can keep them guessing, the better.'

A few minutes later Colette and Barbut came back, having made a hurried tour of the village. Its inhabitants were cowering indoors; they had been told that if they ventured outside, they would be shot. As far as the priest — their Resistance contact — was concerned, there was bad news.

‘The Germans have taken him away,’ Colette said breathlessly. ‘Somebody betrayed him. But it seems that the Germans don’t know the whole of the story. There’s a rumour that they were tipped off about a landing here, all right, but apparently they were expecting a boatload of French commandos from Corsica. There have been several infiltrations along the coastline recently by small groups of saboteurs. I’m sorry, but I knew nothing of this. Someone, some senior officer with the Fighting French on Corsica must have decided to take the initiative and forgotten to inform SOE.’

‘Well, he’s got us into a hell of a mess,’ Douglas snapped. ‘The question is, where do we go from here? We’ve got to hole up somewhere while we sort this muddle out.’

Colette consulted briefly with Barbut, then turned back to the SAS officer. ‘The only real cover within reach of here is about six miles to the east along the coast at a place called Carry-le-Rouet,’ she told him. ‘The hillsides are heavily wooded there, with deep inlets running into them from the coast. If we head towards Port-de-Bouc we can pick up the railway line and follow that for most of the way; it will keep us clear of the main road.’

She spoke again with Barbut, who shook his head and said something in a low voice. Then, surprisingly, Colette embraced him and kissed him on both cheeks. Turning back to Douglas, she said:

‘He says that he will not come with us. He is an old man and slow, and will only hold us up. He will take shelter in the village tonight, and tomorrow will make his way to Arles to contact the Maquis. He says that you must not worry, and that he will contact you again within the next three days.’ She

hesitated, then said: ‘Because of the change of plan, he has entrusted me with the code.’

Douglas did not like the revised arrangement, but had little choice in the matter. He reached out and shook Barbut’s hand firmly and, in his halting French, wished the rancher good luck.

From the north, along the road that led past Istres towards Miramas, there came the sound of vehicles moving at high speed. It grew steadily louder. Douglas quickly got his men together and set off southwards at a steady trot, leaving Fos-sur-Mer behind. Fifteen minutes later, as yet unchallenged, they struck the expected railway line near Port-de-Bouc and followed it under an unguarded road bridge. They made a detour across country to avoid a small station and picked up the line once more where it entered the Chaine de l’Estaque hills, the name given to the elevated arm of limestone that cradled the southern edge of the Etang de Berre and ended, some miles further on, at Marseille. The countryside here was arid and devoid of settlement, for which Douglas was thankful. The hue and cry would be well and truly raised by now.

Presently, east of La Couronne, the narrow-gauge railway track curved into the beginning of a wooded area. Thankfully, Douglas and the others turned aside from the railway and headed down a slope, moving deeper into the shelter of the trees. After a few hundred yards Douglas called a halt and they sank down to rest. Douglas put out four sentries; the whole group, including Colette, would take turns at guarding the approaches to their temporary sanctuary. At first light, it was his intention to make a thorough reconnaissance of the area. That was the first rule: always establish a secure operating base and make sure that you knew the lie of the land round about. In that way, you seldom got taken by surprise.

Dawn came reluctantly through a partial overcast, finding the SAS party

red-eyed and sleepless. Douglas, taking a final turn on sentry-duty, had ventured back up the slope as far as the railway line to see what lay beyond the wood, which now revealed itself as a mixture of pine and oak.

To his surprise, he saw that, a few hundred yards to the east of the point at which his party had entered the woods, a road coming down from the north-west crossed the railway by way of a stone bridge and then followed the line of the trees as it wound its way towards Marseille. He resolved to explore that section of the line, and the road, a little further at the first opportunity, and a few minutes later mentioned his intention to Colette. She told him that a few miles further on the road detoured in a northward curve to avoid the limestone hills, but that the railway ran through a couple of tunnels before it terminated in the port.

‘Does it, now,’ Douglas mused. ‘Tell me — where is the biggest concentration of enemy troops in this area?’

She looked at him in some amazement, as though his question was naive, then replied, ‘But I thought you knew that already. In Marseille, of course. That’s where the Milice have their principal headquarters, too.’

Douglas nodded. ‘Exactly. So if we can block both the road and the railway line at one go — just before we move out to attack Istres, I mean — how much extra time will that give us before the enemy garrison in Marseille can get on our tail?’ Colette thought for a moment, her brow furrowed. ‘Well, they would have to go in a big circle round the eastern side of the Etang, then approach Istres from the north via Salon-de-Provence. Let’s see — that would be forty or fifty miles, at a guess.’

‘Twice as far as if they were to come this way,’ Douglas mused. A plan was beginning to form in his mind — a daring plan, but one that might just work, if luck was on his side.

‘I need to know a number of things,’ he told her. ‘For instance, how often

the trains run up the line from Marseille, and whether any of them go direct to Istres with supplies and so on. I noticed from the sketch-maps that there's a short spur line running from the main track to the airfield. It could be a way in for us. I think we've got to form our own concrete plan of action, and do it now, rather than depend on the Resistance for help. For all we know, the Germans could be mopping them up right now.'

Colette nodded soberly. 'You're right. I'm going to have to make a trip to the station in Carry-le-Rouet to find out what's what.'

'Can't have that,' Douglas said firmly. 'It would be much too dangerous. There must be some other way.'

'Well, can you suggest one?' she asked, looking him in the eye. 'Of course you can't, because there's no alternative. Look, I've got my civilian clothing in my bag, and my papers are all in order. They've passed inspection before, and there is no reason why they should fail now.'

'Why don't you let me go with her, boss?' It was Conolly who spoke. 'I speak passable French — enough to fool the average German, at any rate — and I reckon we could cope with most problems between us.' He grinned at Colette. 'I've a feeling you're not exactly a Lent lily, as the saying goes.'

Douglas stared at him. 'You've forgotten one thing,' he pointed out. 'Unlike Colette, you don't have any civilian clothing.'

'Well, I'll just have to liberate some,' Conolly said cheerfully. 'It shouldn't be too difficult.'

'Don't be bloody stupid,' Douglas snorted. 'You aren't going, and that's that. Colette has a chance of pulling it off, but you'd be just a liability to her.'

The woman smiled at Conolly. 'He's right, Liam,' she said. 'Let me do it my own way. I won't come to any harm, I promise you. However, if Captain Douglas agrees, I'd like you to escort me as far as the edge of the wood that overlooks the village. If I do run into trouble, you can cover my line of

escape.’

Conolly looked questioningly at Douglas, who nodded grudgingly. ‘Very well. But I can’t afford to lose any more men, so take it easy.’

A few minutes later, Colette, having changed into slacks, a jumper and a pair of brogues, and with a headscarf tied under her chin, accompanied Conolly through the trees towards Carry-le-Rouet, a two-mile walk away, with a promise to Douglas that the pair of them would be back within a few hours. On the way, she found a small stream and paused to wash her face, removing the grime that had accumulated during the hectic hours of the previous night. Feeling more presentable, but still uncomfortably dirty, she and Conolly followed the line of the wood until suddenly it dropped away down the side of a steep inlet in which the sea lapped. A mile or so away, at the landward end of the inlet, lay a pretty fishing village with boats drawn up on the shore.

They followed the trees, which were becoming more sparse now, around the edge of the inlet — known as a *calanque*, so Colette informed her companion — until they were in a position to look down into the village itself. From their vantage point they could see some people moving near the boats, and a few more close to the houses themselves. They could also see the railway line, threading its way past the far side of the village.

Some distance to the east it disappeared into a tunnel, cut through a limestone hill.

‘This is as far as you go,’ Colette told her companion. ‘Look — I can get down to the shore along that track. See it? It runs behind those rocky outcrops. No one will see me until I am in the village itself. Stay here and keep a good lookout — but if anything should happen to me, don’t try anything heroic. Just get back to the others as fast as you can.’

‘All right,’ said Conolly, ‘but be careful. We’d be a bit lost without you.’

She nodded at him reassuringly, then turned and picked her way down the slope until she reached the track. She alone knew the risks she was running; as soon as she entered Carry-le-Rouet she was bound to be singled out as a stranger, but she was banking on the character of the people in these parts to keep her out of trouble. They liked to mind their own business. Nevertheless, in case she should be challenged she had made up a cover story which was simple enough, and plausible; she was walking from Marseille to Arles in search of work. She had spent the night in the woods and now, finding that she had hurt her foot, she wished to know the times of the trains. She had a few francs for her fare. Also, to add to the degree of plausibility, she had wrapped a few pieces of bread and cheese — saved from the meal at the cottage in the Camargue the day before — in her headscarf.

She came to the shore and walked along it past the beached boats, stooping every now and then to pick up a shell or a shiny pebble — the sort of thing a young woman might do, if she were in no particular hurry. One or two of the fishermen who were busy with their nets glanced up at her as she strolled past, but showed no particular curiosity.

She reached the village and walked on down the main street. From a small café came a tantalizing aroma of fresh coffee and croissants. Her mouth watered. Dare she risk going inside? She had some Occupation currency on her, money now valid throughout France which was issued to every SOE agent. Why not? she asked herself. If she ate now, she could be more sparing with her small share of rations later.

She stood outside for a moment, peering in through the window, acting the part of a young woman who was alone and feeling lost. Then she pushed her way through the door, starting a little as a bell clanged rustily.

The only occupants were two old men, who sat smoking and drinking coffee at a corner table. They took no notice of her. Uncertainly, clutching

her headscarf, her bundle of bread and cheese in front of her, she took a few steps into the room and looked around. The old men continued their low drone of conversation. She coughed twice, the second time more loudly than the first.

On the second cough, a formidable-looking woman emerged from a room behind the counter, wiping her hands on her apron. The severity of her appearance was heightened by the fashion in which she wore her iron-grey hair, pulled tightly back and fastened in a bun. She looked at Colette through narrowed eyes.

‘Yes, mademoiselle?’ she queried brusquely.

‘Please, madame,’ said Colette in a timid and quavering voice, as befitted her appearance, ‘I should like a bowl of coffee, with a little milk if you please.’

The woman stared at her distrustfully. ‘You have the money with which to pay?’ she asked. Colette nodded eagerly. ‘Yes, madame. See.’ She fished in a pocket of her dress and pulled out a handful of small change, which she held out. The woman stared at it for a moment, then poked it with a finger, as though expecting it to disintegrate. Then, without a word, she disappeared into the inner room, returning a few moments later with a steaming bowl. Placing it on the counter, she extracted some money from Colette’s outstretched palm. Colette knew full well that it was too much, but said nothing.

‘You also wish for a croissant?’ the woman asked, her features softening slightly. Again, Colette nodded, and took the one offered to her. Like the coffee, it was piping hot.

‘I regret that there is no butter,’ said the woman. For the first time, Colette smiled. She said that it did not matter.

She took the food and drink to a table and sat down, looking out of the

window as she ate. From here she could see the railway station, such as it was: little more than a short platform with a ticket office attached, perched on top of the slope above the village. It was only a short walk away. With luck, Conolly would not have to wait long for her return.

Finishing her coffee, she eyed the counter. There were some sticks of bread on it, together with a round of cheese and what appeared to be dried figs. She decided to buy some, to take back to Douglas and the others. It would be a welcome supplement to their meagre rations.

Going back to the counter, she placed her empty bowl on it and called hesitantly for the woman. The latter came out, again wiping her hands on her apron, and asked what she wanted.

'Please, madame, is it permitted to buy some bread and cheese?'

The woman looked at her with even greater suspicion. 'You have a ration card?' she asked.

This was the real test, Colette knew. 'Certainly, madame. One moment.' Turning aside from the counter, she reached down the neck of her jumper, bringing a snicker from one of the old men, and drew out a card, which though tattered and stained with use, was in fact less than a fortnight old, carefully forged amid the secret labyrinths of SOE in London.

The woman took the card from her and scrutinized it carefully, turning it over in her hands several times. At length, she placed it in a pocket of her apron and said, 'That will be quite in order, mademoiselle. Please come through to the kitchen. I have fresh bread there.'

Colette breathed an inaudible sigh of relief and followed the woman behind the counter into the room beyond. When they were both inside, the woman closed the door and said in a loud voice: 'There is the bread, mademoiselle. Please choose what you wish to buy.' Then in a quieter tone meant only for Colette's ears she added, 'This card is a forgery, mademoiselle.'

An icy chill clutched at Colette's stomach, yet her brain, thanks to her special training, remained completely calm. Already, she was calculating how long it would take to draw the commando knife, concealed behind her other garter, and use it to cut the woman's throat.

She deliberately put fright into her voice. 'Madame — what do you mean? I do not understand.'

For the first time, the woman smiled. 'My child, your ration card is a forgery. I know, for I have seen others like it. But do not worry; it is God's will that you came here. You see, this village has no *mairie*, where new ration cards are usually issued, and so the authorities entrust me with the job. Wait one moment.'

She flourished Colette's useless card, then went over to a metal box that stood on a table by the kitchen window. Taking a key from her apron pocket, she opened the box and extracted a new card, upon which she wrote Colette's fictitious details. Then she rubber-stamped it and handed it back, smiling.

'There! Now you are once again legal, mademoiselle. Tell me — you are with the English, are you not?'

Colette gaped at her. 'Excuse me, madame? Again, I regret that I do not understand.'

'Pah!' The woman snorted and waved her arms. 'It is well known that a party of English commandos has landed in these parts — well known to all but the Boches and the Milice, that is. You come here, a stranger with a forged ration card, and therefore I deduce that you are not what you appear to be. But you do not trust me, and that I understand, on such a short acquaintance. Come a little closer.'

Colette leaned forward, still keeping her hand close to her dagger. The woman whispered certain words into her ear — words known only to key Resistance members in southern France, and to the agents sent to support

them. She relaxed, and was immediately conscious of sweat trickling down her back.

‘You are right, madame. I am with the English. And we need all the help we can get.’

Briefly, she outlined what had happened on the previous night, telling the woman that the commandos had come ashore to help the Maquis in acts of sabotage — but omitting to mention the real target. That would be stretching confidence too far.

She told the woman that she had come to Carry-le-Rouet in search of food, then added: ‘I should like to take a look around the place, particularly at the point where the railway enters the tunnel. It may be the line can be blocked there.’

‘Maybe so.’ The woman looked a little doubtful. ‘Will you return later?’

‘Here, you mean? Yes. I should like to take as much food as I can carry. And’ — she smiled, a little wickedly — ‘I have the money to pay for it!’

The woman laughed. ‘Well, you had better take the bread you have just bought with you now, or it will seem a little strange to those old fools out there.’

Colette left the little café with her heart considerably lightened. It was as though she had just found sanctuary. Clutching her sticks of bread, she made her way up the slope towards the rail halt. An elderly railwayman — who, she suspected, also carried out every other function around the place — was sweeping the wooden platform. She went up to him hesitantly.

‘Good morning, monsieur,’ she said politely. He looked at her and gave a non-committal grunt before returning to his task. ‘Excuse me,’ Colette persisted, ‘can you tell me the times of the trains to Arles?’

He straightened his back with difficulty and fixed his watery gaze on her again. Leaning on his broom, he leaned forward as though to see her more

clearly.

‘Trains to Arles? Trains to Arles? Everyone knows the times of the trains to Arles.’ His voice was petulant, as though he resented this sudden intrusion.

Colette flinched away from the old man’s stale breath and said, ‘But, monsieur, I am a stranger. I set off to walk from Marseille to Arles in search of work, but I grew tired and, besides, I hurt my foot. I have enough money for the fare from here, but I regret that I do not know the times of the trains. Must I wait all day?’

The old man cackled. ‘Mademoiselle, you may wait until hell freezes, but it is unlikely that you will catch a train from here to anywhere. The Boches have suspended the rail service until further notice. It is to do with their confounded troop movements.’ He turned and spat, aiming the gobbet carefully over the edge of the platform.

Colette’s mind became icily alert. For a moment, her peasant girl disguise almost slipped, but she regained control of herself and said timidly, ‘But, monsieur, I do not understand. Why should they do this?’ She managed to squeeze out a despairing tear. The railwayman’s gaze followed its course as it trickled down her cheek, and his heart softened. He reached out and patted her on the shoulder.

‘Why, *ma chère*? Who knows why those swine do things. I know only that I was summoned from my bed early this morning by the telephone, to be told by my superior in Marseille — that fat pig Martineau — that there would be no more trains except German ones, full of troops, which would be moving north from eight o’clock tonight. That is the time the first one will leave Marseille. So’ — he tapped his finger craftily against the side of his nose — ‘so, I telephoned my old friend Bertrand at Miramas, who had also telephoned his friend Henri in Arles, to find out what he knew. Yes, he told me, the troop trains will go only as far as Arles, and then return.’

‘Will there be many?’ Colette asked, ‘I mean, will it be long before our own trains will be running once more?’

The old man shrugged and turned his palms outwards, forgetting that he had been holding his broom. It fell to the platform with a clatter. He bent down creakily to retrieve it. ‘Who can say, mademoiselle?’ he said. ‘I have told you all I know. You are welcome to use my ticket office in which to wait, if you so desire, but I fear it may be a long wait.’

Colette adopted a crestfallen expression. ‘Thank you, monsieur, for your kindness, but I think I must begin walking once again. These are terrible times. Good day.’

‘Terrible times indeed, mademoiselle. Good day to you. And a safe journey.’

She turned and made her way back down the slope towards the café, her mind racing. In London, she had been thoroughly briefed on the disposition of the German forces in the Marseille area. The garrison there consisted of 7,000 officers and men of the 244th Infantry Division, commanded by a General Schaeffer. Now it appeared that a sizeable portion of that force was being moved up to Arles, and to Colette there could be only one possible explanation. The Germans were about to launch an all-out offensive against the force of Maquisards assembling in the area. They were using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but that was their way. They would use hundreds, even thousands, of troops in a bid to encircle the Resistance fighters, throwing a cordon around the whole area and then systematically sweeping inwards, tightening the net. It was the type of operation at which the Germans excelled.

Somehow, the Resistance had to be warned. Colette hurried back to the café, quickening her steps. The grey-haired woman looked up from the counter in surprise as she came in. Colette noticed that the two old men were

still there, but as yet there were no other customers.

‘Back already, mademoiselle? Have you seen all the sights?’

‘Yes, madame. I wonder … have you some water with which I may wash my face and hands?’ She inclined her head towards the kitchen door, and the woman understood at once.

‘Most certainly, mademoiselle. Please come through.’

In the kitchen, Colette told the woman what she had learned. She hesitated, then asked, ‘Madame, have you heard of a man named Auguste?’

The woman nodded slowly. ‘I have heard of such a one. He is an Englishman, they say. I have heard those of the Maquis speak highly of him.’

Colette nodded. ‘Madame, Auguste is in great danger. So are many of our Maquisards. I believe that those Germans are going to try and eliminate them. If that happens, it will not only be a tragic day for the Resistance in this part of France; it will also gravely compromise certain plans which are afoot plans that could affect the course of the war. Madame, I beg of you, is there a way that we can warn our men in Arles, to avert a disaster?’

The woman thought for a moment, then said, ‘There may be a way. Wait here, mademoiselle.’ She took off her apron and went out through a small back door. Colette waited anxiously for her return; she felt apprehensive and a little ill with anxiety. She prayed that she could trust the woman, although she spent each one of the fifteen minutes or so that she waited in an agony of suspense, half expecting the Milice to burst in at any second.

Instead the woman came back, bringing with her a tall, gangling youth with a spotty face and shrewd eyes. ‘This is Louis,’ she informed Colette. ‘He has a bicycle, and runs errands all around this area. Everyone knows him, and he is completely trustworthy. On many occasions he has acted as a courier for the Maquis, and knows where people may be contacted.’

Colette looked at the youth earnestly. ‘Louis, you are willing to help?’

‘Certainly, mademoiselle.’ The boy had a quiet and surprisingly cultured voice. ‘Please tell me what it is you wish me to do.’

‘I would like you to go to Arles,’ she told him. ‘You know some of our people there?’

The boy nodded. ‘Yes, mademoiselle. I have delivered messages to them on several occasions.’

‘Good. Then go to them and ask to see one Monsieur Etienne Barbut. It is certain that he will be there by the time you arrive. If something has happened to him, find the most senior among the Maquis and give him this message.’ Briefly, she outlined what she knew about the enemy troop movements. Then she took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. She was conscious that she was about to make the biggest decision of her life. She only hoped that Douglas would agree with it.

‘Tell him also’, she said, looking hard at Louis as though to imprint every word into his memory, ‘that the English will try and hold up the Germans. And that the main operation must be brought forward. It must happen tomorrow night. He will understand. Is everything clear to you?’

Louis nodded. ‘Yes, mademoiselle.’ He repeated it almost word for word. As he spoke, the woman who owned the café prepared a bundle of bread and cheese for him. ‘Go now,’ she said, thrusting the bundle into his hands. ‘There is no time to be lost, and it is a long ride to Arles. May the good God go with you.’

The youth turned and left the café without a word, and Colette knew instinctively that he would do his utmost to fulfil his mission. She faced the grey-haired woman and took both her hands in her own.

‘Madame,’ she said softly, ‘how can I ever repay you?’

The woman smiled. ‘I am an old woman,’ she answered, ‘with not many years left, I think, before I go to join my dear husband. But before I die, I

want to see my country free again. It was providence that brought you here. Now you must go, and do what it is you have to do. And some day, when this is over, come back to my little café, and drink my coffee and eat my croissants. And on that occasion, you will need no money.' She pressed some more bread on Colette, together with some cheese, and pushed her gently through the café, past the two muttering old men. Colette kissed her on the cheek, then turned and hurried away down the cobbled street, towards the shore and the place where Conolly was waiting.

CHAPTER NINE

‘You were right to make the decision you did,’ Douglas said to Colette. ‘Absolutely right. We’ve got to bring the operation forward. There’s no other way.’

He turned to the Rhodesian signaller, Trooper Mitchell. ‘Mitch, try and raise London on your radio. Send the code “Forensic minus 72.” ‘Forensic’, he explained to Collette, ‘is the code we agreed on for a substantial change of plan. What I’m telling London is that I am bringing the operation forward by seventy-two hours. There’s absolutely no alternative. Tonight we do everything in our power to disrupt the German troop movements, and tomorrow night we hit the airfield. God knows how we’re going to do it; we’ll just have to find a way. Sansom and Willings, come over here a minute.’

The two troopers looked at him expectantly; ‘Colette says that there’s a tunnel just to the east of Carry-le-Rouet,’ he told them. ‘Do you think you can blow it, preferably with a train inside?’

‘We’ll have a damned good try, sir,’ Willings told him. ‘But we’d need to have a good look at it first, to find out exactly what we need.’

Douglas nodded. ‘Right. We’ll move out right away. We’ll probably need to blow the road bridge near Fos-sur-Mer, too, later on.’ He called to the sergeant-major. ‘Stan, get everyone together. We’ll move east, keeping to the woods.’

Douglas was sure, by now, that if the enemy was searching for them after the shoot-out of the previous night, he was looking in the wrong place. If the Germans still believed that they were dealing with a party of French

saboteurs from Corsica, they must also have assumed that the raiders had gone north, to join up with the Maquis near Arles. So much the better.

Colette changed back into her overalls, keeping behind a tree for modesty's sake as she did so. The rest of Douglas's party checked their weapons and packs, ate a little bread and cheese out of the store she had brought with her from the village, and washed it down with clear water from a small stream that trickled down between the trees. Then they set out, moving in single file with Douglas in the lead.

It was hard going. Moving horizontally across the wooded hillsides, they often had to negotiate deep gullies, the landward ends of the steep inlets that cut into the coast. But it was a route that kept them well under cover, and the nature of the terrain was such that an enemy was unlikely to take them by surprise; a large body of troops would have been heard a long way off.

They passed a few hundred yards to the north of Carry-le-Rouet and eventually picked up the railway line at a spot where it curved back towards the coast on the last few miles of its run into Marseille. They followed the track down a fairly steep gradient and at length, when the trees began to give way to flat, sandy ground, they came within sight of the tunnel Colette had spotted earlier from the village. Here they paused for a while to spy out the lie of the land, and Mitchell took the opportunity to try and raise London again, but without success. Douglas told him to keep at it; it was to be the signaller's sole task until he produced a result.

They waited for half an hour. Nothing but seabirds moved on the lonely strip of land that fronted the sea below the limestone hills. At last, Douglas stood up.

'Stan, you stay here with the others,' he ordered Brough. 'I'm going down to see where the tunnel leads. You two, come with me,' he said to the two demolition experts.

Sansom and Willings shouldered their kit and followed Douglas at a steady lope downhill towards the tunnel mouth, their MP-40s held ready against their chests in case of trouble. They sprinted over the last few yards of open ground and dashed into the shadows, Douglas turning briefly to give a thumbs-up to Brough, who was watching their progress from the edge of the wood.

Cautiously, followed by the other two, Douglas made his way along the single track into the tunnel's darkness, finding his way with the aid of the narrow beam from his hand-pump torch. He sensed that the tunnel was curving gently, and was right; as they moved further along a spot of light came into view, some distance ahead.

'How far d'you reckon?' Douglas asked his companions. 'I'd say about half a mile.'

'About that,' Sansom agreed. He was prodding at the walls of the tunnel as they went along. 'Surprised this lot hasn't come down already,' he commented. 'It's in a pretty lousy state of repair. Soft as putty in places. We'll see if we can engineer a bloody great fall of rock.' He grinned in the light of Douglas's torch.

They plodded on towards the far end of the tunnel, taking care to keep close to the walls so that their figures would not be silhouetted against the light of the tunnel entrance. Sansom and Willings conferred frequently with one another, selecting likely spots to plant their charges.

'Trouble with limestone,' Sansom said, 'is that it's powdery. You've got to pick just the right spots, or all you end up with is a few tons of dust. It tends to smother the force of the explosion. Still, we'll see what we can do,' he concluded matter-of-factly. Douglas had no doubt that Sansom knew exactly what he was talking about; he had been a highly experienced quarryman before the war.

They reached the far end, having completed their inspection, and Douglas watched in some fascination as Sansom and Willings began their task of turning the tunnel into a death-trap. What they were doing seemed simple, when they explained.

‘What we do first of all,’ Willings said, ‘is to plant charges at intervals along the tunnel, at spots on the wall we have already picked. We place the charges in holes we drill as we go along — not a hard job even for a hand-drill, in rock like this, and they don’t need to be big charges.’

He worked as he spoke, placing the first set of charges in record time. When he had finished, he carefully strung a length of very thin wire across the track at about chest height. It was attached to each detonator. The process was repeated at fifty-yard intervals throughout the length of the tunnel. Sansom brought up the rear, making some sort of adjustment to each detonator.

‘Simplest thing in the world, sir, really,’ he told Douglas. ‘You see, going on experience, we’ve worked out the speed the train is likely to be doing when it reaches the tunnel. If it’s the average length, it will take it about twenty seconds for it to get completely inside the tunnel and another ten seconds before the front end comes through the far side. So, here’s what happens. Locomotive comes along and breaks the wire. There is then a timed delay of twenty-two seconds before the two charges back there go off. The time lag is progressively reduced as we progress along the tunnel, so that when the engine breaks the last strand of wire the whole lot goes off more or less at the same moment — near enough to make no difference, anyway, Get it?’

‘Yes,’ Douglas said dubiously, ‘I think so. It all seems a bit problematical, though, doesn’t it?’

Sanson looked at him in surprise. ‘Why no sir, not really. We’ve taken all

sorts of things into account — the approach to the tunnel, the maximum speed on this bit of track and so on. We'll be accurate enough, don't worry. That train won't be going anywhere after we've done with it.'

Douglas couldn't help smiling at the man's confidence. However, he had a question.

'Wouldn't it have been easier, to place your explosives under the tracks and simply derail the thing?'

The two men looked at him with expressions akin to pity.

'Good heavens, no, sir,' Willings said. 'People can get out of a derailed train, especially one that's been going fairly slowly, and start fighting. They can't do that if the whole caboodle's pinned down under tons of rock — even soft rock like this. They'll have to dig it out. Probably take weeks,' he added hopefully.

'Well, just an extra day would do,' Douglas said. 'Well done, both of you. I just hope it works, that's all, or we're in even worse trouble than we are already.' Privately, he was quite sure that the scheme would work, and that the task of extricating their men trapped inside the tunnel would keep the Germans occupied for a while.

They went back up the slope to the wood where the others were in position. There was nothing to do now but settle down and wait for nightfall.

While Douglas and his party maintained their uneasy vigil that afternoon, Louis, the youth from Carry-le-Rouet, finally reached Arles after a gruelling forty-mile cycle ride. He had stuck to the back roads to avoid being challenged; nevertheless, he had been stopped at two road blocks manned by the Milice. Luckily, his comings and goings between Arles and the coast, ostensibly carrying produce, had made him a familiar figure in the area, and he had no trouble in getting through.

Arles itself was full of Germans and Milice, parading on every street

corner. Their very presence seemed to desecrate the ancient town which, in Roman days, had been a major trade centre and key port on the lower Rhône, rivalling Marseille. The Romans had made it their capital of Provence and later of the ‘three Gauls’ — the territories of France, Spain and Britain. Its links with Britain were close; it was here that St Augustine had been consecrated the first Bishop of Canterbury. Now, in 1944, the Germans had turned it into a grey place, a place devoid of its traditional life and colour.

Louis carefully chained his cycle to a set of iron railings and went into a small hat shop not far from the old Roman baths — all that remained of the palace built by the Emperor Constantine — that stood near the banks of the Rhône. A middle-aged man looked up in surprise from some ledgers as the youth entered.

‘Louis! What brings you here? It is not the day of your usual visit.’

‘I have urgent news, Monsieur Bizot,’ Louis said. ‘I saw that the blue flowers were hanging outside, so I knew that no one was watching and that it was safe to come here.’

The blue flowers hung in a basket above the shop doorway. If they had been red it would have meant that the shop, a meeting-place for Resistance workers, was under possible surveillance by the Germans or the Milice.

‘Well, my boy, what is it that I can do for you?’ Bizot asked. Louis leaned forward across the counter and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone.

‘Monsieur Barbut,’ he whispered. ‘Has he been here?’ The other nodded.

‘Yes. He was here a very short while ago, but he is here no longer. He came on the autobus from Port-de-Bouc, stayed for a little while to refresh himself, and then borrowed a cycle, saying that he had friends to visit. You know what that means. He seemed very agitated.’

Louis’s heart sank. The expression “friends to visit” meant that Barbut had gone to make rendezvous with the Maquis at their nearby hideout of Les

Baux. That in turn meant another cycle ride of seven or eight miles out of Arles, most of it uphill. But there was nothing for it; he would have to pursue the rancher as fast as he could go.

He thanked the shopkeeper courteously and went back to his cycle, looking round guardedly to see if anyone was watching him. There were two policemen on a corner opposite, but they were engaged in animated conversation and took no notice of him. He mounted his cycle and pedalled away slowly, so as not to arouse anyone's undue interest.

He took a small, winding road that climbed laboriously into the high ground north-east of Arles, past the low hill on which stood the former Benedictine abbey of Montmajour. Further on, he passed without hindrance through the village of Fontvielle; and it was half a mile after that, as he approached a place where a side-road branched off towards Tarascon, that he ran into trouble.

Louis had dismounted from his bicycle to push it up a short but steep hill when suddenly he heard voices up ahead. Pushing the cycle off the road and hiding it behind some bushes, he crept forward under cover to find out what was happening. At the top of the hill, close to where the road forked, he wormed his way forward until he was able to peer through some scrub.

He saw at once that a road-block had been erected at the point where the road divided. Behind it, that is to say on his side, a German half-track straddled the road, the machine-gun mounted on it pointing towards Les Baux. To one side of the road a group of half a dozen German soldiers were sitting on the grass, playing cards; a seventh was sitting in the rear of the vehicle, behind the MG, smoking a pipe.

Something that looked like a tow-bar protruded from the rear of the half-track. A man was trussed securely to it, his head bowed dejectedly forward. A bicycle lay abandoned on the road nearby.

Louis knew, instinctively, that the bound man was Etienne Barbut. He also knew that he must do something to try and rescue him from his predicament. But what? If only he could get close enough …

He retreated some distance down the hill and crossed the road, working his way back up the other side among the undergrowth. He made scarcely any sound, for this was the way he often stalked rabbits and other small game in the woods near Carry-le-Rouet. Reaching the top of the hill, he lay still for a minute and surveyed every possible avenue of escape. Fifty yards away to the left, a dip in the ground curved round the side of a low hill; the hill itself, and those beyond it that rose progressively towards Les Baux, were densely covered in scrub. If he could release the prisoner and get him as far as the first hill, there was every chance that they could hide safely. It would take an army to find a couple of fugitives in that scrub, he told himself, and there were only seven Germans.

Cautiously, still under cover, he snaked his way forward. Reaching the edge of the road, he risked another peep through the vegetation. The card-playing Germans were out of sight on the other side of the half-track; he could still hear them talking and laughing amongst themselves. The German in the half-track, whose head and shoulders were visible, was looking the other way, puffing contentedly on his pipe and gazing towards the blue-misted hills of the Vaucluse that rose on the horizon.

Taking a deep breath, Louis felt in his pocket and pulled out a jack-knife, opening the razor-sharp blade with great care and gripping it between his teeth. Then he slithered forward into the road, inch by inch, until he lay in the shadow of the half-track, invisible now to the vehicle’s sole occupant. The bound man had his back to him and Louis knew that he had to be especially careful, for a sudden move on his part might cause the prisoner to cry out in fright.

He crawled alongside Barbut, who sensed his presence and looked round sharply. At once, Louis raised a finger to his lips, cautioning silence. Barbut nodded in understanding. Working quickly, Louis sliced through the ropes that bound the rancher, who let out an involuntary gasp of pain as the circulation started to return. Man and youth both froze in apprehension, but there was no sign that anyone had heard the sound. The laughter from the far side of the half-track told them that the card game was still in progress.

Louis put his lips against Barbut's ear and whispered, so quietly that the rancher could barely hear the words: 'Follow me, monsieur. But be silent!'

The two crept away from the half-track. As they crawled into the scrub by the side of the road Louis glanced up fearfully, but the German behind the machine-gun was still gazing into the distance. Fighting against a desperate urge to get up and run, or even to move too quickly, the two crawled on their bellies away from the road, yard by yard, until they reached the dip in the ground Louis had spotted earlier. Just as they slipped into it, a hoarse cry split the air behind them.

'*Halt*! *Halt sofort, oder Ich schiesse*!'

'Run, monsieur!' Louis screamed in terror. 'Run like the wind!'

They scrambled to their feet and raced as fast as they were able along the gulley, swerving from side to side like hares. For an elderly man, Barbut had a surprising turn of speed. Suddenly, the machine-gun on the half-track opened up, sending clods of earth and grass flying into the air around the fleeing pair. The curve in the gulley, where it ran round the slope of the hill, was only yards away.

Then a searing pain lanced through the flesh of Louis's thigh. He screamed and stumbled but somehow kept going, driven on by the strength of fear. Blood streamed hotly down his leg as they put on a final spurt and rounded the hillside, plunging into the sheltering scrub. Behind them, they could hear

guttural commands as the Germans launched themselves in pursuit.

Almost weeping with pain, Louis hobbled after Barbut. After a few more steps the two of them flung themselves down and began to claw their way up the hillside, keeping their heads well down. The scrub's rough branches tore at them, scratching their faces. After several agonizing minutes, they reached a particularly dense thicket and burrowed their way into its sanctuary.

The sounds of pursuit grew louder. Desperately striving to control their laboured breathing, Barbut and Louis crouched lower into the scrub, praying that the enemy would pass them by. Louis clutched his jack-knife, resolved with all the determination of his sixteen years that he would try and take at least one German with him if their hiding-place should be discovered.

Close by, jackboots crunched on dry twigs. The bushes quivered with the passage of a body through them. Louis cowered against the earth next to Barbut, certain that each of his heartbeats must be loud enough to be heard a hundred years away, hardly daring to look up.

There was a sudden exclamation, and Barbut seized the boy's arm. A shadow fell over them. Louis, forcing himself to look up at last, found himself staring into the muzzle of a machine-pistol. Behind it was a blond, bareheaded German, not much older than himself. There was a thin smile of satisfaction on his face.

'*Hier sind die Schweine*!' he yelled. '*Ich habe die Blutspur gefolgt*!'

Louis gripped his knife tightly and prepared to hurl himself at the German's throat. His eyes were on the knuckles of the finger that curved around the trigger. They were white.

There was a sudden bang and Louis hurled himself to one side, screaming. There had been no time to make his move. No time. It was all over. He dropped the knife and clutched himself, wondering where he had been hit.

But he had not been hit. Feeling alternately hot and cold with reaction, he

rolled over on to his knees and looked wildly around him. The blond German was lying spreadeagled on his back, blood pouring from his throat. He was making feeble movements, his eyes rolled back in their sockets until the whites showed. Barbut had already seized his fallen machine-pistol.

A crackle of gunfire erupted on the hillside behind them. It was returned by the other Germans, who were steadily retreating down the slope. Louis looked round; some distance away, a man was waving his arm at them, beckoning.

‘*Allez*!’ he called. ‘*A nous, vite*!’

They scrambled up and pushed their way through the scrub, Louis limping and wincing with the pain of his injured thigh. Hands grabbed at them and pulled them down into cover. The firing resumed and now the Germans were in full flight, running for their lives down the slope. One of them threw up his arms with a scream and tumbled over and over like a shot rabbit.

The men in the scrub ceased firing and began to move back up the hillside in relays, taking Louis and Barbut with them, each relay covering the other. There were a dozen of them, armed with an assortment of weapons. Barbut faced one of them, a stocky man with aristocratic features and a tonsure of dark, wavy hair.

‘My friend,’ he said grinning, ‘to say that I am pleased to see you would be an understatement!’

‘We spotted your predicament,’ replied the other, ‘and set out to give you some help. But it seemed that someone else had the same idea.’ He smiled at Louis and shook him by the hand. ‘Well done. You are very brave. But you are injured,’ he observed, suddenly full of concern, looking at the youth’s leg. ‘Let me look at that.’

The wound turned out not to be serious; little more than a graze, but the bullet had taken a chunk of flesh with it and caused a lot of bleeding. It was

quickly bandaged. Louis felt a flush of intense pride as both Barbut and the Resistance man showered praise on him; the pride became even deeper when he learned, later, that the man was the legendary Auguste, the Englishman who had come at great risk to help Louis's countrymen.

While his wound was being attended to, he told his story. When he had finished, the faces of both Barbut and Auguste were grim.

'This is grave news,' Auguste said. 'We thought that something was afoot when the Germans suddenly threw up road blocks all around this area. So they are waiting for reinforcements before launching an offensive against us, are they?'

'Yes, monsieur. But the English will try to stop them getting here.'

Auguste nodded. 'Good. And you say the English plan to attack the airfield tomorrow night?'

'That is so, monsieur.'

'In that case we must be ready to assist them,' Auguste said decisively. 'But first we must contact London to make arrangements. It was planned that a fast motor launch of the Royal Navy would land at a point west of the Rhône estuary to take the English commandos to safety once their mission had been carried out. Now we must change the timing, and hope that the Navy will have a craft to spare at such short notice. Louis, do you know at what hour the English commandos will make their attack on the enemy troop train tonight?'

'All I know, Monsieur, is that it will be sometime after eight o'clock,' the youth informed him.

'Very well. Then we must start moving down from the hills as soon as it is dark. It may be that the Germans will muster sufficient troops from elsewhere to attack us here; we must be gone before daybreak tomorrow. We will move into our positions closer to Istres and be ready to carry out our diversionary

raids tomorrow night. But first, let us return to our headquarters; there are things we must see to.'

With two Resistance men supporting Louis, they made their way through the hills to the mainly deserted village of Les Baux. Even in broad daylight it was a ghostly place, perched on its spur in the hills. On a crag above the village a ruined castle stood; it had once been the home of a despot whose main amusement had been to kidnap local peasants and force them to leap to their deaths from the clifftop. Its advantage as a Resistance base was that the approaches to it could be held against an army.

After conferring for a few moments with Auguste, Etienne Barbut went into the deserted cottage which was used as an HQ building and wrote something on a scrap of paper. Emerging, he went round to a shed at the back of the building and selected a grey and white pigeon from among the dozen or so that roosted inside. He rolled up the scrap of paper and placed it carefully in a tiny canister, which he attached to the bird's leg. Then he raised the pigeon to his lips and kissed it fondly on the head before raising it high in his cupped hands.

'Fly straight and true, my little one,' he murmured. 'Fly to Raoul!'

He released the bird, which soared skywards in a whirr of wings and circled once before setting its course towards the west, speeding low over the scrub-covered valleys towards the Camargue.

*

In the woods beyond Carry-le-Rouet, Douglas and his team waited for nightfall. Douglas was reassured by the fact that, after considerable delay and difficulty, Mitchell had at last established contact with London. His signal had produced a brief acknowledgement, and nothing more, but in the War Office the wheels would be turning to set the revised plan in motion.

From their vantage-point, Douglas could see across the bay to Marseille

and, while the light lasted, studied it through his binoculars, making sketches of the strong points he could see and noting the types of vessel that lay in and around the port. Almost directly opposite, high on a cliff and surmounted by a lighthouse, was the Château d'If, the setting of one of his favourite boyhood stories.

Darkness brought the cold with it; not the crisp coldness of an English winter, but an insidious, numbing chill that crept into the bones. The mistral whined soulfully among the tree-tops, the only sound in the night.

'Do you think they'll be on time, sir?' It was Stan Brough who asked the question.

'They will be, if I know anything of the Germans,' Douglas answered. It was a few minutes before eight o'clock. They were all listening to catch the first sound of the train, but the continual moan of the wind made it hard to hear anything else.

Nevertheless, it was not long before his theory about Teutonic punctuality was borne out. After a few more minutes, they all heard the unmistakable chug of a locomotive approaching up the line. The sound was muted for a while as the train entered the first tunnel, then grew suddenly louder. A warning blast on the whistle signalled that it was about to enter the second tunnel.

'Any second now,' Sansom muttered, looking at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Douglas found that he was holding his breath. The steady rumble of the train came to him as an echo through the tunnel mouth.

A succession of heavy thuds shook the ground, followed immediately by a muffled roaring. An immense blast of hot air burst from the tunnel, bearing with it clouds of powdered stone and smoke. The roaring continued for a few seconds, then ceased. A great slab of stone crumbled from the hillside above the tunnel mouth and rolled downhill, bringing an avalanche with it. Seconds

later, it was as though the tunnel had never existed.

Douglas had been expecting a big bang, but nothing like this; ‘Jesus!’ he exclaimed. ‘What did you put in there?’

‘It’s some new stuff,’ Willings told him. ‘First time it’s been used for real. Quite effective, don’t you think?’

‘Quite,’ Douglas agreed. ‘Well, that train isn’t going anywhere, and I don’t think anyone is going to use that tunnel for quite a while. Let’s get out of here before the fun starts.’

‘What now, boss?’ Conolly asked as he shouldered his kit.

‘We’re going back to Fos-sur-Mer,’ Douglas told him. ‘That’s probably the last place anyone will think of looking for us. Besides, I want to be within easy striking distance of Istres for tomorrow night’s show. I still haven’t got a clue how we’re going to get into the place,’ he admitted. ‘Somebody’s going to have to take a good look at it.’

‘I’ll go,’ Colette volunteered.

‘No you won’t,’ Conolly told her firmly, and apologized immediately to Douglas for jumping the gun.

‘Sorry, boss, but she’s done enough. Besides, she won’t really know what to look for. I speak passable French; all I need is a disguise. Let me do it.’

‘We’ll talk about it later,’ Douglas said. ‘First things first: let’s establish a secure base where we can lie up tomorrow.’ As they began to move away through the trees, Douglas glanced back once at the ruined tunnel. He wondered if any of the troops on the train had survived. Over-gifted with imagination, he visualized the nightmarish horror that would now be gripping any who still lived, entombed in the reeking darkness. Suddenly, the night did not seem so cold.

CHAPTER TEN

Outside the windows of the War Office in London snow was swirling. It drifted down into the streets and formed a blackened carpet of slush in which people and vehicles squelched as they went about their business.

The depressing scene outside exactly matched the mood of Sir Richard Westerfield. He stood at the window of the conference room and stared out over Whitehall, marshalling his thoughts as he watched the eddying snowflakes. He rather wished that it were dark and the heavy blackout curtains drawn, to bring at least an illusion of cosiness to the room.

Brigadier Masters was sitting at the table, together with a number of other senior British officers, all of them members of the Directorate of Operations. The other officer was an American one-star general, who wore the shoulder flashes of the US Rangers. His deep suntan suggested that he was a new arrival in the wintry climate of England. He doodled on a note pad with his pencil, then looked up at Westerfield.

‘What is the present position of the convoy, Admiral?’ he asked.

Westerfield turned from the window to face him; ‘It’s west of Tangier, off Cape Spartel,’ he said. ‘The plan was to lie off Tangier for forty-eight hours to allow more escort vessels to make rendezvous with it, but now we can’t afford that kind of delay. The orders have gone out for it to make all possible speed through the Strait of Gibraltar during the hours of darkness, and afterwards to hug the North African coastline before turning north off Sicily. We’re just going to have to lose the extra two days in passage through the Mediterranean so that we don’t interfere with the schedule for the landings. We can arrange some fighter cover from the airstrips in North Africa, but not

much; most of our first-line fighter squadrons are in Italy, and will not be able to provide cover until the ships come within range.'

'So everything depends on this guy — what's his name? — and the French Resistance,' the American said flatly. Westerfield nodded.

'That's correct. But at least we know that Douglas is still in circulation. We can only hope that he and his men are still in a position to deal a heavy blow against the Luftwaffe unit at Istres. If they fail to do so, then the convoy must inevitably suffer severe casualties. We know to our cost what those rockets can do.'

'Well, I hope he pulls it off,' the American said grimly. 'Those are our guys in that convoy. I'd hate for them to have come all this way and be wiped out before they have a chance to fire a shot at the enemy.'

'Not only that, General,' Masters chipped in. 'If anything happens to the convoy, it will prove impossible to mount the landings at all. You know perfectly well what that would mean; this whole operation is designed to outflank the German Gustav Line, and in particular its central defensive position at Monte Cassino. If we fail to do that, the consequences could be disastrous — not only with regard to the progress of the war in Italy, but also in the context of future operations in western Europe. We need both men and equipment from the Italian front before we can mount an invasion of enemy-occupied France, General, and that invasion has got to take place this year. Quite apart from the pressure being exerted upon us by our Russian allies, there are strong Intelligence indications that the Germans are developing a whole new range of devastating weapons that could conceivably alter the course of the war in their favour.'

'I can well believe that,' the general said, 'if what you say about these anti-ship missiles is true. But I don't understand – '

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. An aide came into the room and

handed a typed sheet of paper to Westerfield, who scanned it and then smiled before addressing the assembled officers.

‘Good news from Italy, gentlemen. As you know, the British Fifth Army opened an offensive against the Gustav Line four days ago, on the twelfth of January. The French Corps had an early success, making a ten-mile advance on the northern flank. I am now pleased to be able to tell you that the American Second Corps has occupied Monte Trocchio and advanced as far as the River Liri. Air reconnaissance indicates that the Germans are withdrawing several divisions from the seaward end of the Gustav Line in order to meet the threat.’

He moved away from the window and laid the sheet of paper on the table, placing his hands on either side of it and leaning forward slightly as he spoke.

‘Gentlemen, the enemy appear to be taking the bait. They have left their seaward flank exposed at its most vulnerable point. This means that, with luck, our landings will be carried out virtually unopposed. If the reinforcement convoy gets through safely — and I have every confidence that it will — then in just a few days’ time, the name Anzio will go down in history.’

*

Twelve hundred miles south-west of London, an elderly, rusting freighter churned its way through the Atlantic. The ship had sailed from Cork in neutral Ireland several days earlier and now, after one short stop at Lisbon to unload butter, had rounded Cape St Vincent and was on its way to Casablanca with a cargo of spare parts.

The vessel’s elderly skipper leaned on the bridge rail, took his pipe out of his mouth and spoke to his mate, who now bore a livid scar on his brow.

‘Bloody hell, lad, just look at yon lot. Like a flock o’ sheep.’

Some miles distant, the sea was crammed with merchantmen — American-

built Liberty ships for the most part — with their rakish escorts scurrying in attendance like sheepdogs.

The mate looked. ‘Safety in numbers,’ he commented. The skipper looked sideways at him. ‘Like hell! Look what happened to us, the last time we were in a convoy.’

‘That’s right enough,’ the mate agreed. ‘I still think they might have given us a bit more leave after that lark.’

The skipper was unsympathetic. ‘You had Christmas and the New Year at home, didn’t you? What more do you want? If you thought that scratch on your head was going to earn you a few months off, you must be bloody daft. You’d have had to have a leg off, at least, with this outfit. Anyway, there’s a war on.’

‘I’d noticed,’ the mate said laconically. ‘It looks as though somebody’s taking notice of us, too,’ he added, pointing.

A destroyer had detached herself from the convoy and was heading towards the freighter at full speed. She turned, the water creaming white below her bow, and after a few minutes of manoeuvring came up on a parallel course, within hailing distance. The elderly skipper looked at her three smoke stacks and her blue-grey splinter camouflage and snorted.

‘Bloody Yank,’ he said contemptuously. ‘All starched uniforms and orange juice. You won’t get a drink on one of those, lad. Dry as a bone, they are.’

An amplified American voice rang tinnily across the narrow stretch of water that separated the two ships.

‘What ship is that?’

The old skipper leaned over the rail of the bridge and pointed towards the bow, where his ship’s name was painted.

‘Can’t you bloody well read?’ he yelled. There was a pained silence from the bridge of the American warship, then the amplified voice said curtly,

‘You are to hold your position until further notice. Stop your engines and drop anchor immediately, sir. This is an order.’

The tone in the American’s voice brooked no argument. The merchantman’s skipper sighed and then gave the necessary orders to the engine-room. The ship lost way and then the anchor went down, trailing a cloud of rust from its chain. There was no more word from the American destroyer, which increased speed and went away to rejoin the convoy.

‘Wonder where they’re off to?’ the mate remarked.

‘Couldn’t say, lad. Could be Italy; could be the Far East, through the Canal. I expect we’ll read all about it in the papers. Well, we’ve nowt to do for a while but enjoy the view. See if you can organize some cocoa, will you?’

Unknown to the old skipper, someone else was also observing the convoy as it steamed past Tangier into the Strait of Gibraltar. Perched high on a rock near Tarifa, at the southernmost tip of Spain, a man watched the progress of the ships through powerful binoculars. He looked rather like a peacetime tourist, with his tweed jacket and plus fours — the kind of clothing a gentleman might wear on a stroll in the country.

In fact he was a gentleman: Rittmeister Freiherr Siegfried von Seydlitz was a son of one of Prussia’s oldest aristocratic families, and possessed inherent sound taste and manners that had stood him in good stead during his career in the German diplomatic service. It was something the Spaniards appreciated, too, which was why he had many friends in high places — friends who saw to it that his movements around southern Spain, especially in the vicinity of Gibraltar, were never restricted or hindered in any way.

Now, from his vantage point, von Seydlitz was making an accurate tally of the ships as they came into view over the horizon. He counted the merchantmen and then the escorting warships, dividing the latter into the various classes — cruisers, destroyers and so on. With this completed, he set

about making as accurate as possible a sketch of the formation in which the convoy was sailing. The Luftwaffe boys would need to know that so that they could plan their attack approach. Air reconnaissance would have been simpler, but it was out of the question; a lone recce aircraft venturing within spitting distance of Gibraltar these days could not expect to last long.

Von Seydlitz worked quickly, for he was conscious that there was not much time. The convoy was passing through the Strait of Gibraltar unexpectedly early — some three days early, in fact — and he knew that the Luftwaffe had only a limited time in which to attack it with their new weapons before it drew out of range or came under the Allied fighter umbrella, or both.

At last, he folded up his notes and put them in an inside pocket of his jacket. He pushed his binoculars back into their case, which he slung over his shoulder, and then strode off purposefully towards the cottage he had rented in a nearby village. He had spent the last two weeks there, watching and waiting, and now his patience had been rewarded.

At the cottage, he started up a petrol-driven generator which provided electricity for his radio transmitter. The necessary preliminaries took only a minute or two, for the transmitter was already set up on a table and its aerial erected on a patch of clear ground at the back of the building. The Spanish authorities knew exactly what von Seydlitz was up to, but they made no attempt to interfere with him. They may not have condoned his activities, but at least they left him alone, which probably amounted to the same thing.

Rapidly, under his expert touch, the Morse key chattered out the message that was to spell the death of the convoy.

*

So far, things had gone well for Liam Conolly. With the others, he had returned to Fos-sur-Mer in the early hours of the morning and, together with Douglas, had crept forward to make a reconnaissance of the small village. All

traces of the previous night's battle had been removed, and so, it seemed, had the inhabitants, presumably rounded up and taken away for questioning. While the others took cover nearby, Douglas and Conolly searched each house in turn and came up with several articles of clothing which would make an effective disguise for the Irishman: a pair of baggy corduroy trousers, a tattered fisherman's jersey and a black beret that looked as if it had been used to shine boots. They also discovered a rusting bicycle which Conolly pronounced serviceable enough for the job in hand.

Conolly stripped off his overalls, which he handed to Douglas, and put on the French garb. Douglas asked him if he was taking his gun with him, and the Irishman shook his head.

'No, that would be a complete giveaway if I should be stopped and searched. If that happens I'll just have to act dumb and pretend I've lost my papers. I'll say I'm a foreign worker, or something. There must be plenty of those about in Marseille.'

Douglas looked dubious. 'Well, don't get caught, that's all,' he cautioned. 'Colette says there's a small lake a few hundred yards east of here; there should be plenty of cover round about. It'll be light soon, so we'll hole up there and wait for you. Remember — don't stick your neck out. Just make a quick reconnaissance of the airfield perimeter, or as much of it as you can see, and pick out any likely weak spots.'

'I know the sort of thing,' Conolly told him. 'I'd best be off now. I want to get some way up the road before it's fully daylight. Wait a bit, though — a workman needs tools.' He flicked the beam of his hand torch briefly round the kitchen in which they were standing, and spotted a broom and a long-handled shovel in a corner.

'Those will do nicely,' he grinned. '*À votre service* — Liam Conolly, soldier of fortune and road sweeper *extraordinaire*.'

A few minutes later, Conolly was pushing his bicycle out of the village, his broom and shovel over his shoulder. The road on which he was travelling was little more than a track, but he knew from a study of his map that it joined the main road that ran along the western edge of the Etang de Berre a few miles up ahead, before the town of Istres itself. He had no intention of going into the town, for that would be taking too much of a risk; his present route followed the airfield's southeastern perimeter for some distance, and he calculated that he might be able to see all he wanted from there.

He decided to keep on walking for a while. He was less likely to run into unexpected trouble that way, for he could easily push his bicycle off the road and get under cover. In the gathering daylight he was able to make out much of his surroundings; the road ran through flat, sandy ground, with the great expanse of the Etang de Berre over on the right.

After a while he heard the clear note of an aero-engine, somewhere up ahead. He mounted the cycle, resting the broom and shovel across the handlebars, and pedalled on. Now he could make out the shape of hangars and other buildings in the distance, off to the left of the road. He spotted coils of barbed wire, running diagonally across the countryside, and knew that this must be the airfield perimeter.

He paused, and tried to locate the source of the aero-engine sound. It seemed to come from the far side of the field, and he guessed that the German aircraft were dispersed well away from the road and prying eyes. With this in mind, he could see little point in continuing in his present direction.

The other way, where the perimeter fence ran across open country, there was little cover except for some sparse bushes and wiry grass that rose knee-high in tufts from the rocky ground. He reasoned, however, that if he stayed close to the barbed wire and kept low, its tight coils would mask him to some

extent from the eyes of anyone who happened to be looking this way through binoculars from across the airfield.

Hiding his cycle among some bushes, he crept close to the fence and set off alongside it at as fast a run as his bent-over posture would allow. The alarming thought suddenly occurred to him that the ground might be mined, but there was no time to worry about that now. He continued to run hard, pausing every hundred yards or so to watch and listen. The sound of engines still reached him, rising and falling, but there was no sign of any aircraft taxying; it must, he thought be, routine testing.

After half a mile, still keeping close to the fence, he saw something rising above the grass in front of him; two long lines of posts, straddling the barbed wire and stretching away on either side. He knew at once that these were the approach lights, funnelling in towards the end of the airfield's north-south runway; there was another runway, running from east to west.

And he saw something else, something that made him crouch low in the grass. A few hundred yards away to his left, several grassy mounds flanked the approach lane. One of them, he could swear, had just moved.

He left the shelter of the fence and crawled towards the mounds on all fours, taking care to keep his head below the level of the grass. After a few minutes he fancied that he could hear voices, so he raised his head to take a cautious look.

The mound that had moved was a 37-mm quick-firing Flak gun, mounted on a half-track. Its crew were moving around it, making adjustments to the camouflage netting. A thin spiral of smoke rose from nearby; breakfast was being cooked. Conolly felt his mouth start to water, and fought down a sudden desperate craving for a hot meal. Up to this moment he had not fully realized how hungry he was — how tired, for that matter.

Conolly quickly saw that the other grassy mounds were tracked anti-aircraft

guns, too, all of them cleverly camouflaged. There were six of them, three on either side of the approach lights, making a short flak line. He had no doubt that there were similar emplacements at intervals around the airfield, probably controlled by a central command post. The fact that the guns were mounted on tracked vehicles also meant that they could be rapidly deployed elsewhere on the perimeter to counter a ground assault.

He backed off through the grass and eased his way back to the perimeter fence, having first made a rough estimate of the number of troops at the Flak site. It looked like four per gun, with a few supporting personnel — say about thirty in all.

He still needed to see where the aircraft were. He continued his progress along the line of barbed wire, moving more slowly now because of the need to conceal himself from the gun crews. Eventually, with the guns well in the background, he was able to adopt his previous crouching run.

At last, peering through the barbed wire, he saw the first Dornier — or rather its nose, for the rest of it was hidden in a sandbagged and camouflaged revetment. A slight morning mist was now clearing rapidly, and through it he could see other, similar revetments. Tiny figures, presumably belonging to mechanics, were moving around them. Two or three vehicles that looked like fuel bowsers were in evidence near the hangars. Beyond the latter stood a line of smaller aircraft — the Focke-Wulf fighters brought in for air defence.

As far as Conolly could see, the bombers in their blast-proof revetments and the fighters beyond formed a rough semi-circle along the western side of the airfield, with the hangars and other airfield buildings in between them. To reach them from any angle would mean crossing a large expanse of bare ground, with no cover at all. Not even the most short-sighted of guards could fail to notice movement on it.

Thoughtfully, he doubled back along the fence, dropping down to a crawl

once more as he approached the Flak emplacement. The germ of an idea was beginning to form in his mind, but there was no time now to develop it beyond that; his priority was to get back to Douglas and tell the officer what he had seen.

The half-run, half-crawl back along the perimeter fence seemed to take him twice as long as it had done on the outward journey. At last he came to the narrow road and made for the bushes where he had hidden his cycle.

It was not there. The broom and shovel were still there, but the bicycle was gone.

With infinite care, crouching down and looking around him, he rolled up his right trouser leg and unsheathed the commando knife that was strapped there. An instant later, he froze as a man stood up in full view from concealment on the far side of the clump of bushes. He too held a knife, a long stiletto blade.

Conolly recognized him at once. It was the Frenchman Jean-Pierre, the man with whom he had fought shortly after arriving in France.

Jean-Pierre adopted a half-crouching stance and sidled round the bushes. He was the first to speak.

‘You have lost something, English pig? I have been waiting here for you and your friends. Now I am going to kill you and then locate the others.’

‘I’m an Irish pig, actually,’ Conolly said levelly. ‘So, you have changed sides, have you?’

The Frenchman spat. ‘I have no love for the English. Besides, when the Germans discovered the tracks of your aeroplane they said that they would pay well for information leading to your elimination. They were pleased to accept my services. They could not find you, but I told them that I would find you, and I was right. All night long I have waited here, knowing that you would come to the airfield. My task was only to keep watch on you and

inform the Germans that you were here. But then I recognized you. I could have killed you at once, but I decided to wait a while and see what you were up to. Now I will kill you.'

'You are a repulsive pile of excrement,' Conolly said. 'Clearly, your mother was raped by a mangy billy-goat.'

Jean-Pierre gave a snarl of rage and lunged forward like a striking snake. It was exactly the reaction Conolly had hoped for. He side-stepped swiftly and then pirouetted on his toes, swinging his knife in a low and short arc. The tip of the blade ripped across Jean-Pierre's shirt front and the Frenchman yelled out in pain. He turned to face Conolly again. There was a red mark across his ragged shirt, but Conolly knew that the damage was not serious.

He continued to throw taunts and insults at the Frenchman, knowing that the man, of limited intelligence, would lose his temper more and more until, with luck, he made a fatal slip.

Hatred and rage blazed in Jean-Pierre's piggy eyes. He came at Conolly again, weaving and feinting. He lunged, and the blade of his knife snickered so close past Conolly's face as he dodged the move that he felt the breeze from it. Careful, Liam, he told himself; this bastard is good, better perhaps than you give him credit for.

The two of them fought in silence now, thrusting and parrying one another's blows, their breath coming in short gasps. Try as he might, Conolly could not penetrate the other's guard. Once he thought he saw an opening, but mistimed his thrust and got a painful slash across the forearm. Only his borrowed baggy jacket saved him from more serious hurt.

They fought on a circle of trampled grass, specked with drops of blood. It was damp with dew and slippery. All at once Jean-Pierre, throwing caution aside, hurled himself at Conolly in a frenzy, making slashing motions with his knife. Conolly, taken by surprise by this unexpected manoeuvre, side-

stepped and curved his body to avoid the Frenchman's blade. The next instant his feet went from under him and he found himself on his back, sprawling partly among the bushes, his knife flying from his hand.

With a howl of triumph, Jean-Pierre brandished his knife and threw himself headlong at the prone SAS man. Conolly scrabbled frantically for his knife, and instead his fingers closed around a hard, round object. It was the haft of the shovel he had abandoned previously.

He thrust it forward and upward like a spear, using all his strength. By sheer good luck, the blade was pointing towards Jean-Pierre. It slammed into the Frenchman's stomach with a jar that tingled all the way up Conolly's arm and the man jackknifed, plunging head first into the bushes beside the Irishman. Conolly rolled clear, still grasping the shovel, and swung himself upright, wielding the shovel above his head in the same movement.

Jean-Pierre clawed at the bushes and tried to get to his knees. Half-rising, he turned to face Conolly. The hand holding the slim stiletto came up and Conolly knew in a split second that the man intended to throw it. He never got the chance.

Conolly brought the shovel down with all the power he could muster. The blade struck Jean-Pierre edge on in the centre of the face and he fell back poleaxed, spurting blood. Conolly pulled back the dripping shovel and struck again for good measure, the blade taking Jean-Pierre in the throat. More blood spurted like a fountain, then subsided into a thick stream.

Gasping with the exertion, Conolly looked down at the twitching body. The double blow had split the Frenchman's skull and almost severed his head from his neck.

Feeling a little sick, he dragged the streaming corpse under cover of the bushes and added to its concealment with handfuls of grass. His own wound was not serious; although it was still bleeding the flow was stopping

gradually as the blood congealed. He paused for a few seconds and looked around him, but as far as he could see no one seemed to have witnessed the struggle; the road to Istres remained deserted, and the German anti-aircraft crews were too far off to have seen anything.

He searched around, and presently discovered his bicycle where the Frenchman had thrown it, on the far side of the road. He did not intend to linger in these parts any longer. Mounting the rusty machine, he pedalled as fast as he could towards Fos-sur-Mer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The assembled Luftwaffe crews of Kampfgruppe 100 rose to their feet and sprang stiffly to attention as General von Falkenberg strode into the briefing room, closely followed by their commanding officer, Colonel Karl Preuss, and a small galaxy of staff officers. There was utter silence in the room, except for the rhythmic tramp of the newcomer's boots as they approached the raised dais at the far end of the room.

Von Falkenberg sat down in a chair to one side of the dais. Preuss nodded to the staff officers, who also sat down, and then faced the assembled crews, his feet planted at the regulation distance apart, his hands clasped behind his back.

'Be seated, gentlemen,' he said. The crews obeyed with a scraping of chairs and benches.

'We go tonight,' Preuss told them, somewhat dramatically. There was a buzz of conversation that was quickly stilled as he raised a hand for silence.

'The enemy convoy is approaching the Strait of Gibraltar somewhat sooner than we anticipated,' he continued. 'Our latest intelligence indicates that it is steaming at approximately eight knots and that its leading echelons will be abeam Gibraltar shortly before first light.'

He surveyed the faces of his crews for a few moments before going on. A few — pitifully few — had been with the Group for as long as himself, almost from its beginning. Many were newcomers, some already openly cynical like himself, but others fired with enthusiasm to die for the Fatherland. Well, he thought grimly, many might be granted that wish before the night was through.

‘This operation’, he told them, ‘involves a maximum-range flight of some thirteen hundred nautical miles, there and back.’ He used the term *Seemeilen* rather than kilometres, which most Luftwaffe units used out of habit. It was a throwback to his days as an airline captain.

‘You all know the Dornier’s maximum range with the kind of load we shall be carrying, so I don’t need to remind you that there will be no room for navigational errors. Neither will there be any time for dummy runs in the target area; we will have to get everything right first time. So, to make absolutely certain, we shall close to within five miles before launching our missiles.’

There was another subdued buzz, this time with a note of apprehension behind it. Once again, Preuss held up his hand.

‘We shall have one major factor in our favour. We shall attack at sunrise, just as the main body of the convoy is passing Gibraltar. As we shall be approaching from the east, the sun will be in the eyes of the enemy gunners. We, on the other hand, should be able to see our targets clearly. If the weather forecast holds good we should have a slight tailwind component to assist us on the outward flight. Nevertheless, we shall be airborne for approximately four and a half hours before the target is sighted, most of it in the dark. Everything depends on accurate timing; the last aircraft must be off the ground by 03.00. Now, before I go into more technical details, General von Falkenberg wishes to address you.’

Once again, the men in the room sprang to attention as von Falkenberg rose from his seat and came to stand on the edge of the dais. He did not invite them to sit down. Instead, he looked down his nose at them and delivered his monologue in what he considered to be clipped and precise tones, as befitted a senior Prussian officer.

‘Men,’ he cried, ‘the Führer expects that every man will do his duty!’

Preuss, who was only half listening, raised a sardonic eyebrow and almost allowed a smile to cross his face. He wondered whether von Falkenberg was a student of Napoleon's wars. After all, Cape Trafalgar was not so very far away from Gibraltar. Was it not the English admiral, Nelson, who had exhorted his men to do their duty before that battle? But perhaps the similarity between von Falkenberg's words and those of Nelson was merely coincidental. If not, the general had clearly forgotten that the English had emerged victorious from that encounter.

'You have the unique opportunity,' the general went on, 'to sweep the British and Americans from the seas! Never before have weapons such as these been placed in the hands of German warriors!'

From somewhere in the middle of the room there came a deep groan. Von Falkenberg glared, and so did one or two of the earnest newcomers to the Group, but the rest of the assembled crews maintained expressions of blank innocence. The general chose to ignore the interruption. He lowered his voice to what he believed to be a conspiratorial level. After all, one sometimes had to speak to these fellows man to man.

'Soon, perhaps very soon, the Allies will perpetuate their greatest folly of the war. They will attempt to land in France. Needless to say, they will be thrown back into the sea by the defences of our great Atlantic Wall. But we can turn their inevitable defeat into a massacre, a military disaster unparalleled in history.'

Preuss was wondering if von Falkenberg was aware of the events of a year ago, when the German Sixth Army had lost 100,000 men at Stalingrad. Fortunately, the general's talents did not extend to reading thoughts. He went on unperturbed, warming to his theme.

'The Führer has given his personal guarantee that, if you, the men of Kampfgruppe 100, succeed in destroying the Gibraltar convoy, he will order

the priority production of anti-shipping missiles in their thousands.'

It's a pity he hasn't taken that step already, Preuss thought. After we use up our stockpile there won't be any more, unless Hitler gets off his backside.

'So,' von Falkenberg continued, 'much depends on your performance tonight. If you succeed, Germany will owe you a great debt of gratitude. But if you should fail … '

He left the sentence unfinished and stalked back to his seat in triumph. Wearily, Preuss got up and took his place. For the second time, he told his men to sit down. That, he reflected, was exactly the kind of morale-boosting pep talk they could all do without.

Half an hour later, with the preliminary briefing over, the crews split up to carry out their individual duties before attempting to snatch a few hours' sleep. Preuss, in a rage, locked himself in his office and kicked a waste-paper basket across the room; von Falkenberg had just informed him that he would be flying with Preuss's crew 'to observe results'.

Outside, as the afternoon wore on, Istres became the scene of intense activity. The aircraft had already been checked over that morning, and their engines run-up, and now the ground crews worked flat out to ensure that every machine was fully serviceable for the night's operation. In the underground weapons store, armourers and specialist engineers checked and re-checked the complex systems of the Fritz-z missiles, which would be fuelled and mated with their parent aircraft later in the day.

The guards around the airfield perimeter were doubled and all gun crews placed on full alert. A few trustworthy French civilians, employed by the Germans as cleaners and handymen on the recommendation of the local Milice, were curtly told to leave the base as quickly as possible and go home.

One of them, who had quietly spent the last ten minutes listening to the conversation of two German pilots as he swept the corridor outside their

quarters, cycled along a towpath that ran beside the bank of a small river north of Istres. The waterway flowed from its parent river, the Rhône, from Arles to the Etang de Berre.

After a few miles, the cyclist paused to pass the time of day with a man who sat fishing by the bridge that crossed the river between Arles and Salon-de-Provence.

'Good day, monsieur,' he said. 'The fishing, is it good?'

The other shook his head. 'Not so good. How is it with you?'

The cyclist looked around carefully, then said: 'I have news, monsieur. The mission flies at three in the morning, perhaps a little earlier.'

The fisherman nodded. 'Thank you. You have made my wait worthwhile. Better go on your way now. But go carefully — the red flowers are hanging outside the hat shop in Arles.'

'Thank you. I shall take heed of your warning.' The man mounted his cycle and moved off up the road. The fisherman watched him go, then rapidly began to dismantle his tackle. Etienne Barbut had work to do.

Conolly, meanwhile, had encountered no further trouble on the way back to Fos-sur-Mer. Leaving his bicycle where he had found it, he had made his way down to the shore of the small lake and, after scouting around for some time, had eventually found Douglas — or rather had been found by Douglas, who had stayed in hiding until he was absolutely certain that it was the Irishman who was approaching. Conolly made his report to Douglas, who listened in silence and then quietly confessed that he was worried about their immediate future.

'You can see right across the lake from here,' he said, 'as far as the road that runs past this side of the Etang de Berre. Here, take a look through the binoculars.'

Conolly did so, and spotted three military trucks parked on the far side of

the lake. ‘See what I mean?’ Douglas asked. ‘They’ve been there for about an hour. They’re French, I think, rather than German. We counted forty or fifty bodies getting out of them. They moved off in both directions along the lake. My bet is that the Germans are still preoccupied with digging their blokes out of the tunnel that we sabotaged and have called on the Milice for help. They know roughly the area we’re in; I expect they’ve already searched the woods near Carry-le-Rouet.’

‘Do you think we ought to make a move, boss?’ Conolly asked him. Douglas shook his head. ‘No, we’ll stay put. There’s only one way to go from here, and that’s towards Istres. We’ll hide in the lake if we have to. Things will be easier after dark. At least we now know the layout of the target, thanks to you. I just wish we knew one or two things more — such as what time the Resistance people are going to launch their attack.’

Douglas passed a grimy hand over his eyes. He felt desperately tired, but dare not even lapse into a doze. That was a privilege he had accorded to the others, who were taking it in turn to snatch some sleep for a while, oblivious to the chilly and damp conditions among the reeds at the lakeside. Whoever had designed their overalls, he thought, had done a good job. It was quite possible to lie in an inch of water while wearing them and not get wet.

He handed over Conolly’s overalls. The Irishman gratefully stripped off his smelly French clothing and put on the one-piece garment, checking the assorted weaponry that was tucked away in the various pockets. ‘That’s much better,’ he grinned, reaching out for his MP-40, which Douglas had also kept safely for him. ‘I feel properly dressed, now.’

There was a sudden movement among the reeds and Stan Brough appeared, looking concerned.

‘I’m worried about Colette, sir,’ he said. ‘She’s not well. Will you have a look at her?’

Douglas nodded and followed the sergeant-major through the sodden reeds to where Colette lay some distance away, her head pillowed on her haversack. Her teeth were chattering and sweat stood out on her forehead. Nevertheless, she managed a weak smile as Douglas crawled up, and raised herself on one elbow. He asked her what was the matter.

'Nothing, really,' she told him. 'I seem to have caught a nasty cold, that's all. My legs are a bit shaky. It's nothing that a good meal and a hot drink wouldn't cure.'

'Can you hang on?' Douglas asked her anxiously.

She smiled again. 'Of course I can,' she said. 'In any case, if you think I can't keep up, you know what to do. You'll just have to leave me behind. Nothing, least of all a silly, sick woman, must be allowed to jeopardize the success of this mission.'

'Maybe some of this will help. I've been saving it for an emergency, and I guess this is one.'

It was Conolly who spoke. He had followed Douglas through the reeds and now, from an overall pocket, he took a hip flask. Unscrewing the cap, he poured a measure of liquid into it and handed it to Colette with the instruction to 'knock it straight back.' She did so and immediately gave a cough, her face reddening. It was neat cognac.

Conolly put the cap back on the hip flask and stowed it away again. 'There now,' he said, 'that'll keep the collywobbles away. And none of you blighters are getting any,' he added, looking darkly at Lambert, Barber and Olds, who were watching with more than just a passing interest. 'It's Colette's medicine, and that's that.'

The fiery liquor did much to restore Colette's spirits. 'I'll be all right,' she told Douglas. 'It's the waiting that's getting me down, that's all. As soon as the action starts, I'll be fine.'

‘It might start sooner than you think, miss.’ Brian Olds, who had been standing look-out, suddenly raised the alarm as his keen senses detected something. Quietly, Douglas asked him what it was.

‘I’m not quite sure, sir,’ Olds said in a whisper. He pointed. ‘It’s over there. I’m sure there’s something moving among the reeds, and heading our way. Not a man, though — too fast for that.’

‘A dog, would you say?’

‘Might be, sir. But if it is, he hasn’t much chance of scenting us, with all this water about. If he finds us it’ll be pure luck. We’re downwind of him, too.’

‘Well, you never know,’ Douglas said. ‘Knives out! No shooting, mind, no matter what.’

They waited in tense silence, flattened against the wet earth, their ears straining to catch any alien sound. After a while they heard a faint rustling noise. It grew steadily louder, and they turned their eyes expectantly in its direction, their knives at the ready.

The rustling stopped. A few yards away, immediately in front of Olds, the reeds parted to reveal a savage-looking muzzle and then a sleek black head, with pointed ears turned down slightly at the tips. The animal’s jaws parted, showing white, razor-sharp fangs. A deep growl rumbled in its throat and it slid forward another couple of feet until the whole of its body was in view. It was stocky and powerfully muscled, sleekly black on top and tan underneath.

‘Doberman,’ somebody whispered. ‘Nasty bastards.’

The dog growled again. Olds, who was the nearest to it, made a sudden crooning, soothing sound, then began to talk softly to the animal. The others could not hear what he was saying. Douglas watched the Doberman’s eyes, which were fixed unblinkingly on Olds. Every muscle in the SAS officer’s body was tensed, turning his frame into a coiled spring that was instantly

ready to go to Olds's defence if the dog unexpectedly attacked him.

Olds continued to talk to the dog in his low, soothing whisper. The tone of his voice had a mysterious trance-like quality about it, as though the trooper was invoking the ancient earth gods of his Anglian forefathers, the deities of oak and ash and thorn through which men, it was said in legend, could speak to dumb animals.

Still talking, he slowly reached out his hand towards the Doberman. The hound crouched low on its belly and sidled forward, inch by inch, its jaws closed now as it sniffed the air. Its muzzle snuffled around Olds's outstretched fingers and then, to the wonderment of the others, its tongue came out and licked them wetly.

Olds caressed its ears, crooning to it all the while. For two minutes he went on stroking it, then slowly withdrew his hand. The Doberman backed off and sat on its haunches, looking at Olds with its head on one side. Olds spoke to it again, more sharply this time, and it turned abruptly and bounded away into the reeds.

Douglas and the others let go their pent-up breaths in a collective whistle.

'Brian, you're a bloody marvel,' Conolly said. 'If I hadn't seen that with my own eyes, I would never have believed it.'

'Just a trick I picked up when I was a kid,' Olds said modestly. Douglas noted that there were beads of sweat on his forehead. 'Something an old gamekeeper taught me. It sort of hypnotizes them, or something like that. Puts 'em into a trance, like.'

'Well, I hope it forgets where we are when it comes out of it,' said Barber. 'Wonder if it works with women,' he added thoughtfully.

'All right,' Douglas reminded them, 'we aren't out of the wood yet. The Milice are still around somewhere and they can't be far away, or the dog wouldn't have been sniffing around here. So let's keep quiet, and wide

awake.’

They waited. Once, they thought they heard the sound of French voices, but a cautious peek above the reeds showed nothing. Towards the middle of the afternoon a high-winged spotter aircraft, a French type which Douglas could not identify, circled the little lake and then swooped low over the trucks that were still parked on the opposite side, as though dropping a message. Presently, through his binoculars, Douglas saw figures converging on the vehicles which, after a delay of a few more minutes, headed north on the road towards Istres.

Douglas wondered if the militiamen had been recalled to help reinforce the airfield’s defences before nightfall. It was his bet that the field would be most heavily defended on its northern perimeter, where the Germans probably considered the main threat from the Maquis would lie. That was exactly the situation he wanted.

He felt dejected, hungry and miserable, although he knew that he must not show it to the others, who almost certainly felt the same way. Fretfully, he looked at the sky and prayed for the onset of darkness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

They crept through the wet, coarse grass, following the line of the airfield perimeter, stopping every now and then to watch and listen. The flarepath was lit and, on the far side of the field, aircraft were running up their engines. Beyond the barbed wire fence, vehicles moved around the perimeter track at regular intervals, with a minute between each one; it was obvious that the base was being patrolled in strength.

During one pause, Douglas rolled back the cuff of his overall and peered at the luminous dial of his watch. It was 02.30 and, as more aero-engines added to the throbbing roar that echoed across the airfield, he realized that the German bombers must be getting ready to take off. There was no doubt in his mind now that the enemy had received word of the convoy's early passage into the Mediterranean, and were making ready to attack it. Time was critical, and there was less of it than he had anticipated.

Douglas made sure that Colette stayed close to him as they crawled on. She was keeping up valiantly, but he knew that she was under considerable strain and close to the point of exhaustion. For her, the next few minutes would be critical.

They paused again, and this time Conolly crept up to Douglas and tapped him on the arm, pointing ahead. After a few moments of searching the darkness, Douglas finally picked out the dark humps that were the 37-mm flak guns, mounted on their half tracks. The SAS men and Colette moved forward again with infinite caution until the guns were more clearly visible in the light cast by the airfield lights. Two helmeted heads were just visible behind the breech of the nearest gun, and Douglas guessed that the crews

were closed up and ready for action. So much the better: it would make them easier to deal with.

Douglas put his lips close to Colette's ear.

'Stay here,' he whispered. 'You're in no fit state to have any part in this. When you hear me yell for you, come up as fast as you can. Okay?'

'Okay,' she whispered back. 'Sorry to be such a nuisance.'

He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and, making sure that his MP-40 was slung firmly in place across his back, drew his long commando knife. Around him, the others were doing the same. The roar of the Dorniers' engines was very loud now, drowning out almost every other sound.

Douglas had already split his small force into groups of three, each group with the task of capturing a half-track and its all-important anti-aircraft gun. Stealth and surprise were the essence of the plan; the object was to seize the three nearest half-tracks and kill the crews without alerting the crews of the three guns on the opposite side of the approach lights. Three rounds of high-explosive 37-mm from the captured weapons should be enough to finish them off.

That was the first and all-important step. What followed afterwards would, Douglas was aware, be largely a matter of luck. With the German bombers getting ready to take off there could be no question of waiting until the French Resistance launched their diversionary attacks, even assuming that they were still capable of doing so. Douglas had no way of knowing whether the Germans had managed to send troop reinforcements to the Arles area by road, but he had already made up his mind to expect the worst. It looked as though the success or otherwise of the operation now depended entirely on himself, his remaining eight men, and of course Colette — although he no longer considered her to be in a fit state to take much part.

The three SAS groups now split up and crawled closer to their objectives.

Douglas was leading Olds and Lambert, Brough was accompanied by Barber and Sansom, and Conolly by Mitchell and Willings. As they crawled through the grass, Douglas snatched a glance across the airfield, through the barbed wire, and fancied he saw the navigation lights of an aircraft, moving round the perimeter track towards the takeoff point. Time was fast running out.

Suddenly, Douglas and the two men with him froze as a figure detached itself from the nearest half-track. There was a pause, then a cough; Douglas realized that the man must be urinating against the vehicle's tracks, for he was close enough to hear the raindrop-like spatter above the noise of the aeroengines.

Almost without thinking, he bounded to his feet and was across the intervening space in a few quick strides. His left hand went up round the German soldier's face, closing like a vice over the man's nose and mouth. His head came back and the blade of Douglas's knife slid in beneath his chin, thrusting upwards into the lower part of the brain. The soldier jerked twice and went limp.

Douglas lowered the body quietly to the ground and crouched for a moment beside the half-track's armoured side, together with Olds and Lambert. From this position they could not be seen by the other members of the gun crew, who were at the rear of the vehicle behind the gun itself. The dead soldier had not made a sound, and no one seemed to have noticed anything untoward.

Still keeping low, the three SAS men crept along the side of the vehicle, close to the tracks. Then, after a pause to take a deep breath, all three launched themselves simultaneously on to the gun platform.

The fight was brief, one-sided and bloody. Douglas found himself face to face with a German who was leaning against the breech of the gun and struck upwards with all his might, aiming for the spot just below the pale blur of the man's features. The soldier gave a choking gasp and Douglas kicked him

hard in the stomach, freeing the blade and at the same time sending the man tumbling off the gun platform.

Douglas swung round to lend assistance to Olds and Lambert, but it was not necessary. Their respective Germans, taken completely by surprise, were quickly despatched and dumped unceremoniously over the side.

From a nearby half-track, the one being attacked by Brough's team, came a short, high cry of pain and terror, then silence.

Douglas turned to Olds and said: 'Brian, get into the cab, quickly. Start up when I give the word. Lambert, give me a hand on the gun. There's already a clip loaded; the ammo racks are there, beside you. Stand by to reload when needed.'

Douglas slid into the gunner's seat on the left-hand side of the breech and lowered the gun's long barrel, using a handle to traverse the platform until the gun was sighted on the halftrack that stood directly opposite, on the other side of the approach lights. Someone must at last have realized that something was badly wrong; a voice, high and anxious, called through the darkness.

'*Was ist los da druben*? *Hab*' *Ich einen Schreigehört*?'

'*Nein*! *Es fehlt nichts. Alles in Ordnung*!'

Douglas recognized the voice that gave the reply. It belonged to Conolly, a sure indication that there were now four fewer live Germans in half-track number three. If he had any lingering doubt, it was dispelled when, a few moments later, he saw the dark outlines of the guns on the two neighbouring half-tracks also swivel round to point at the vehicles opposite.

He worked the lever that slipped a shell into the gun's breech. Afterwards, the weapon would fire automatically as long as he held his finger on the trigger. He sighted carefully, aiming for the spot just below the gun platform on the other half-track, feeling for it mentally, for the other vehicle was

nothing more than a dark shape.

He squeezed the trigger, loosing off a single round. The gun discharged its shell with a resounding crack and the barrel recoiled. A dull red spot appeared instantaneously on the side of the target. The next instant, the half-track exploded with a crash and a sheet of vivid flame as Douglas's shell penetrated its ammunition locker. Douglas and Lambert threw themselves down, shielding their heads, as white-hot fragments of metal spattered the countryside, A terrific shock-wave blasted out, jarring every bone in their bodies and almost lifting their own half-track from the ground.

His head reeling, Douglas resumed his position behind the gun and began to traverse the barrel towards the second enemy half-track, but Stan Brough's crew got in the first shot. Their shell exploded on the gun itself and was closely followed by another which exploded in the cab, wrecking it completely. In the flash of the shells the figures of the German gunners could be seen tumbling from the gun platform.

As Conolly's gun finished off the third German half-track, Douglas yelled to Olds to start the engine. A second or two later, he was startled to hear Colette's voice close at hand. She sounded a little plaintive.

'I thought you might have forgotten about me,' she shouted, looking up. 'Can I hitch a ride?'

'Get into the cab,' Douglas shouted back, 'and for God's sake keep your head down! This is likely to be rough.'

He leaned forward around the edge of the gun platform and called out to Olds, who had succeeded in starting the engine and who was now awaiting further orders.

'Get going, Brian! You know what to do.'

Olds reached out and helped Colette, who was having some difficulty, to climb into the cab. Then he found the right gear and sent the half-track

lurching round in a semi-circle until it was pointing directly at the perimeter fence.

‘Righto, miss,’ he said to Colette. ‘Let’s see how fast this thing will go. But be sure to brace yourself when we hit the fence, mind.’

The vehicle’s tracks churned up the soggy ground as Olds accelerated. The other two half-tracks were following in line astern. Douglas and Lambert, clinging desperately to the swaying gun platform, also braced themselves as the barbed-wire fence came at them.

The half-track ripped through it with a screech. Thick strands of barbed wire parted with a vicious twang and Douglas ducked as one of them whip-lashed against the gun, narrowly missing his head. Then they were through and heading out across the airfield, racing parallel with the main runway.

Suddenly, a series of flashes rippled across the far side of the field, beyond the buildings. Lines of tracer flashed through the darkness in both directions as a brisk gun battle flared up between the Maquis, attacking at last, and the German troops responsible for defending the perimeter.

Conolly, seated behind the gun in the third half-track, suddenly spotted a vehicle racing across the aerodrome to intercept them. By this time, there was enough light flickering across the base to identify it as a light armoured car, Type KFZ 222. He knew that it was armed with a quick-firing 20-mm cannon and a 7.92-mm machine gun, that it was much faster than the half-tracks, and that it could do considerable damage.

The KFZ opened fire first, streaks of fire spitting from its gun muzzle. The burst of 20-mm ripped over the top of the middle half-track, several feet too high. Forcing himself to keep cool, Conolly took careful aim and loosed off a whole clip of 37-mm at the armoured car, seeing the flashes as his shells peppered it. It veered away and swayed crazily across the airfield with smoke pouring from it, then stopped abruptly and burst into flames.

Douglas, who had been temporarily distracted by the brief gun battle between Conolly's half-track and the armoured car, had his attention drawn to what was happening up ahead by Lambert.

'Look, sir! There's an aircraft taking off!'

Lambert was right. At the far end of the runway, clearly visible between the lights of the flarepath, a Dornier was starting to accelerate. Douglas leaned over the edge of the gun platform again and instructed Olds to drive straight up the runway towards the bomber. Olds obeyed at once, the half-track swinging on to the tarmac and taking one of the flarepath lights with it. Olds jammed his foot down on the accelerator. Behind the cab, Douglas nestled down behind the gun and lined up the long barrel on the rapidly approaching Dornier, whose tail had now come up from the runway.

In the Dornier's cockpit, Karl Preuss, piloting the first KG 100 aircraft to take off, watched in wide-eyed horror as Douglas's half-track raced towards him. His right hand held the throttles wide open at maximum boost and his left held the control column firmly, keeping it pushed slightly forward. In the Dornier's nose, Sergeant Rainer Becher's quiet, unemotional voice read off the airspeed for Preuss's benefit. General von Falkenberg was sitting behind Preuss, looking ahead over the pilot's shoulder. Suddenly, he too spotted the half-track and let out a yell.

'I know!' Preuss shouted. 'Here goes!'

Using both hands, he hauled back the stick and literally wrenched the Dornier off the ground just as the airspeed indicator's needle reached the take-off speed mark. The bomber teetered into the air, its engines — bearing the heavy load of the missiles, as well as the weight of the aircraft and its fuel — fighting the pull of gravity and the drag of the airframe to achieve safe flying speed.

The half-track's gun flashed and a shell struck the runway somewhere

underneath the slow-flying aircraft. It wobbled dangerously and Preuss heard several metallic clangs from somewhere astern. He pushed the nose down slightly to restore the forward speed, then pulled back the control column again. The Dornier seemed to falter for a moment, then its propellers bit into the air and it began to climb steadily into the darkness.

Shaken, Preuss circled the airfield, looking down. Gun battles were in progress at several points on the perimeter, but what was more alarming was the sight of one aircraft after another bursting into flames on the ground. As he watched, a Dornier's missiles blew up in a great orange bubble of light, the explosion sending a visible shock wave rippling across the airfield.

'There must be something we can do,' Preuss whispered to himself, although the words were carried to the rest of the crew over the intercom.

'There is nothing!' Von Falkenberg's voice was harsh. 'Set course for the target immediately. That is an order!'

Reluctantly, Preuss turned away from the blazing airfield and headed out over the coast into the Mediterranean.

*

Callum Douglas swore violently as he saw his shell burst on the runway underneath the Dornier. Moments later, having had no time in which to elevate his gun barrel to the angle necessary for a second shot, he ducked as the aircraft's dark bulk swept low overhead in a thunder of sound.

There was no time to bother about the one that got away. Looking ahead, he saw more Dorniers, a long line of them, taxying towards the take-off point around the perimeter track. One of them was already lining up on the runway and Olds, without being told, headed straight for it. This time there was no mistake: Douglas fired a full clip of shells into the Dornier's dark fuselage and left it in flames, crumpled on a shattered undercarriage. A lake of burning fuel spread out around it and reached its missile warheads. They erupted in a

thunderclap of flame and sound that sent fragments of the aircraft hundreds of feet into the air.

Olds swung the half-track clear of the runway and drove at top speed parallel to the perimeter track. Douglas threw a glance to the rear and saw that the other two vehicles were following, their guns in action as Brough and Conolly raked the line of aircraft in their turn.

One or two of the German air gunners, quicker off the mark than the others, had clambered into their turrets and were returning the fire. Lambert slammed another ammunition clip home in Douglas's gun and he opened fire again, concentrating on the Dorniers that were shooting back. At this range, the effect of the 37-mm shells was devastating. They tore through the thin skins of the bombers, exploding in their fuselages and fuel tanks. Crew members who survived jumped down from the burning carcases and ran for their lives between spreading rivers of blazing petrol.

Douglas went on firing as fast as Lambert could reload. He saw some of his shells explode in the cockpit of a moving Dornier and the aircraft veered sharply out of line, its crew dead, its wingtip slicing through the tail of an aircraft in front. It went weaving across the airfield and Olds had to swerve sharply in order to avoid it as it passed in front of the halftrack. The Dornier crashed into the side of a hangar. A spout of flame shot from one of its engines and quickly spread along the wing. In its light, Douglas could see figures running from the hangar. Some of them carried guns and loosed off a few ineffectual shots at the speeding half-tracks.

Suddenly there were no more aircraft to shoot at. Douglas looked back again, the other two half-tracks were still chasing him, their guns blasting a few last rounds into what had, in the space of about forty-five seconds, become a long line of blazing wreckage. Everywhere, missile warheads and the highly volatile fuel in their propellant tanks were detonating, scattering

fiery debris far and wide.

Douglas shouted to Olds to keep going, straight towards the airfield's western perimeter fence. He could feel the heat from his overworked 37-mm gun wafting back into his face. Lambert slammed another clip of ammunition into place, saying that there were still several clips remaining.

Fire came at them from several points on the perimeter, and bullets clanged against the half-track's armoured sides. Douglas abandoned the 37-mm for the simple reason that he could see no clearly defined target, and instead loosed off a few bursts from his MP-4O in the direction of the enemy fire.

The half-track slammed through the barbed wire on the western side of the airfield, running the gauntlet of more enemy fire as it did so, and headed out into the open country beyond, still followed by the other two. Douglas was relieved that Brough and Conolly had come through all right, and wondered how the Maquisards were faring in their attacks on the northern and eastern fringes of the airfield.

A great pall of smoke, reddened by the flames that fed it, boiled upwards over Istres. As he clung to the sides of the swaying gun platform, Douglas could hear the klaxons of enemy fire tenders, screeching through the night as they converged on the conflagration. It would be hours before the Germans brought the blaze under control.

As soon as they were well clear of the airfield, lost in the darkness and with no sight or sound of pursuit, Douglas told Olds to halt for a few moments. He jumped down as the other two half-tracks drew up alongside and peered into the cab.

'Well done, Brian,' he said. 'How's Colette?'

It was the woman who answered, and Douglas noted that her voice was weak and shaky. 'I'll be all right,' she said. 'I'm glad that's over, though. What next?'

Douglas wasn't quite sure, but had no intention of admitting it. When planning the attack on the information supplied by Conolly he had worked out a rough escape route, but he had no idea what opposition they were likely to meet. His plans, at this point, did not extend much further than trying to get across the Rhône into the Camargue, where they could with luck lose themselves, and make their way to the south coast. He had no means of knowing whether the Royal Navy's launch would be there to take them off — no inkling, even, whether the Navy had been informed of the revised plan.

He quickly established that everyone in the other two halftracks had come to no harm, and then outlined his intentions to Brough and Conolly.

'If we keep going on our present heading,' he told them, 'we should hit the road junction I pointed out on the map earlier. The branch of the 'T' leads down to Port-St-Louis, just on this side of the Rhône. The road will quite probably be patrolled, especially at the junction and also at the place where it passes under a canal. We may have to fight our way through, so be alert. The junction is about two miles up front, and we won't rush up to it. Keep a hundred yards spacing, in case we run into trouble. Mount up.'

The half-tracks forged on, coping well with the soggy, low-lying ground. If the crossroads ahead were defended, Douglas was banking on the defenders expecting only an attack by the Maquis; he was taking a gamble that they had not been alerted to look out for three German half-tracks which had just shot up Istres. However, they would certainly know that something had happened; quite apart from the racket caused by the gunfire and explosions, the bonfire on Istres was lighting up the eastern horizon.

Suddenly, without warning, Douglas's eyes were seared by a brilliant light as three powerful flares burst high overhead, throwing the landscape into stark relief. Douglas closed his eyes and then opened them again, cautiously. What he saw made his stomach turn over.

The flares revealed the crossroads, less than two hundred yards ahead. And seated squatly in the middle of the junction, its gun pointed directly at him, was one of the biggest armoured fighting vehicles he had ever seen. Beside him, Lambert let out a gasp.

'What the blazes is that?' he asked. Douglas made no immediate reply, but clambered round the edge of the gun platform so that he could speak to Olds in the cab without shouting.

'Keep going ahead,' he told the driver, 'but slowly. We might just bluff this one through.'

Returning to his original position, he searched his mind for details of the enemy vehicle. 'It's a self-propelled tank destroyer,' he told Lambert quickly. 'A Porsche Ferdinand, by the look of things. Sixty-eight tons, and packing an 88-mm gun along with a 7.92-mm machine-gun. It's got about eight inches of armour at the front, and our 37-mm shells would just bounce off it.'

He was uncomfortably conscious that the half-tracks, from the Ferdinand's vantage point, would be starkly silhouetted against the false dawn of burning Istres. Above, dangling on their parachutes, the flares were still burning fiercely. By their light, on either side of the tank destroyer, he could see a number of helmeted heads which, presumably, belonged to German soldiers crouching in foxholes. They were now within fifty yards of the enemy positions. Suddenly, from somewhere near the end of the German line, a voice yelled: '*Los damit*!'

Douglas knew enough of German military commands to realize that this was the order to open fire. Before he could react, a light machine-gun chattered and glowing tracers streaked around his ears, bouncing off the armoured gun shield and ricocheting away into the night like deadly fireflies.

'*Nein*!' Another voice shouted. '*Feuer einstellen*!'

The machine-gunner was being told to cease firing. Douglas mentally

blessed the trigger-happy German soldier who, with luck, had just prevented them from driving into a trap.

‘Olds!’ he shouted, ‘full speed, and steer left!’

Olds complied immediately, and the half-track slewed around in a shower of mud. At that instant, an orange streak of flame spat from the muzzle of the Ferdinand’s 88-mm gun. The shell, a solid armour-piercing round rather than a high-explosive one, struck the turning half-track beneath the gun mounting, blasting away one of its centre wheels and slamming it, a twisted mass of red-hot metal, into the chassis. If the shell had struck a split second earlier, before Olds had started his turn, it would have passed through the engine and most probably killed the two in the cab.

As it was, both Douglas and Lambert were stunned and shaken by the fierce impact. Both fell to their knees on the gun platform, which was now buckled upwards and twisted on its right-hand side. A metallic echo resounded in the air, piercing the brain with its shrillness.

With an effort Douglas pulled himself together, dropping from the platform on the opposite side of the half-track to that facing the tank destroyer. He was followed by Lambert, who was bleeding from a gash where his forehead had made violent contact with the gun breech. The two of them hurried round to the cab, wrenched open the door on the driver’s side and hurriedly dragged out the two dazed occupants.

‘What happened?’ Colette asked faintly, shaking her head to clear it.

‘We took a shell from the tank destroyer — that’s the thing on the crossroads,’ Douglas told her. ‘The only thing we can do for the moment is stay on this side of the half-track and hope its armour is strong enough to stand any more shells.’

But the crew of the Ferdinand, having immobilized Douglas’s half-track, were no longer interested in it. Douglas heard the tank destroyer’s twin

Maybach engines roar, the sound accompanied by a harsh screeching as it swivelled rapidly on its tracks and sighted on Brough's half-track, which had also veered off to the left.

Both Brough and Conolly, whose half-track was keeping formation with the sergeant-major's, had now opened fire on the tank destroyer, but Douglas's prediction was right; their 37-mm shells exploded harmlessly on the Ferdinand's heavy armour plating. The only advantage they had was speed, and they tried to use it as best they could, zigzagging while still maintaining a brisk rate of fire.

But the German gunner in the Ferdinand was good. Crouching helplessly beside his own useless half-track, Douglas heard the tank destroyer's 88-mm bark again and saw the glowing red tail of a tracer round converge on the front of Brough's vehicle. It entered the cab, killing Sansom instantly. The half-track careered wildly out of control and, in the light of more flares sent up by the enemy, Douglas saw Brough and Barber jump clear and throw themselves flat. The abandoned half-track plunged on across country, steadily curving round until it headed back towards Istres, bearing its dead driver.

In the third half-track, Willings, who was driving, had been heading across the front of the German positions on Conolly's orders when the Irishman suddenly shouted to him to turn around. He did so, heading towards the spot where Brough and Barber were lying under the scant cover of some bushes. Positioning the vehicle between the enemy and the stranded SAS men, he slowed down briefly so that they could be hauled up on to the gun platform with the help of Conolly and Mitchell. Then, accelerating once more, he manoeuvred the half-track so that it was shielded from the Ferdinand's deadly gun by the hulk of Douglas's machine. He drove up nose-on to it, so that the vehicles formed two sides of a square, then jumped down, together with the rest of the crew. Given time, he knew that the Ferdinand's gun could

batter both vehicles to pieces, but they were relatively safe for the time being. Moreover, the half-tracks would provide cover if the German infantry attacked.

Douglas, Brough and Conolly looked at one another in the light of the flares. This time, there was no way out. The ground afforded scarcely any cover, and if they tried to run for it they would be cut down before they had gone twenty yards. All they could do was stay put and wait for the inevitable assault. When it came, they would try and take as many of the enemy as possible with them.

And Douglas, at that moment, made one of the hardest decisions of his life. When the end came, he resolved to put a bullet through Colette's brain before he went down fighting. He would not allow her to live merely to undergo the nightmare of torture before the enemy finally killed her.

The tank destroyer's engines roared again, accompanied by a rumbling clatter. Although they could not see it, they knew that its great bulk was beginning to move inexorably forward, bearing down to sweep the half-tracks aside and crush the life out of their former occupants.

In those moments, wild thoughts flashed through Douglas's mind. He wondered if he might be able to jump on to the Ferdinand and drop a grenade down its hatch, but knew in the same instant that he would stand no chance. Better to lead his men in a last, wild charge against the German infantry.

'Get ready, boys,' he said quietly. At the same time, surreptitiously, he moved the muzzle of his MP-40 close to Colette's head. He would have to close his eyes when he did it.

Suddenly, a storm of firing erupted from the German positions. This was it, then; the final assault. This was where it all ended. His finger began to tighten on the trigger of his machine-pistol.

Then he realized that no bullets were crackling around the half-tracks, and

that the shouts that were coming from the enemy were not battle-cries, but screams of pain and terror. He hurled himself to the rear of the sheltering half-track and looked around it, crouching on one knee. An extraordinary sight met his eyes.

The Ferdinand was some thirty yards away, still grinding slowly forward. On its massive armoured casing two men were balanced. In his right hand, each held something aloft — something with a small, flickering flame at one end. A moment later, as though on a given signal, one of the men wrenched open the Ferdinand's hatch — which no one had taken the trouble to fasten from the inside — and both hurled their missiles into the crew compartment.

Even above the roar of the Ferdinand's engine, Douglas could hear the frantic, high-pitched screaming from inside the tank destroyer as the Molotov cocktails turned its interior into an inferno. The men who had thrown them jumped down from the casing and ran alongside the still moving vehicle, unslinging Sten guns from their shoulders.

A man emerged from the hatch, screaming wildly, beating at the flames that engulfed him. A short burst of Sten fire caught him and he collapsed, hanging face down over the casing. Another man tried to push past the body and met the same fate. The two men who had thrown the petrol bombs turned and began to run quickly away from the Ferdinand, aware what was going to happen next.

The tank destroyer was almost on top of Douglas's halftracks when its stored 80-mm ammunition detonated with a shattering roar. The earth heaved and great chunks of armoured casing shrieked through the air. Douglas and the others flung themselves to one side as the blast wave caught the half-tracks, heaving them violently sideways. For an instant, it seemed as though one of them was going to topple over, but it righted itself and settled back on its tracks again.

Groggily, Douglas and the others got to their feet, Colette being helped upright by Brough. Apart from some sporadic single shots, the firing from the German positions had ceased. Advancing round the rear of the half-track, Douglas came face to face with a man carrying a Sten gun — one of those, he thought, who had thrown the Molotov cocktails. He stood silhouetted in the glare of the wrecked and fiercely blazing tank destroyer.

‘It seems we got here just in time,’ he said in a cultured English accent. ‘I am Auguste. You, I presume, are Captain Douglas?’

‘That’s right,’ Douglas said, shaking the man’s hand. ‘And I can’t begin to say how glad I am to see you.’

Auguste smiled in the light of the flames. ‘Quite all right, old boy. I see you did quite a job on Istres. No time to talk about that now, though; we’ve got to get going. German reinforcements are starting to pour into the area. That’s the bad news. The good news is that the Royal Navy MTB will be picking you up from the Camargue coast at first light — if you can get there in time. You’d better get your men together. There’s still a long way to go.’

‘We’ve still got one half-track,’ Conolly pointed out. ‘It hasn’t got much fuel left, but it’s good for another few miles.’

‘Excellent,’ Auguste said. ‘Incidentally, my men are holding the road as far as Port-St-Louis. We’ve also commandeered a barge to take you across the Rhône. Everything depends on how long we can hold off the Germans; they are already in Arles and are probably moving south at this very moment. Once you are across the Rhône and in the Camargue you’ll be safe enough; they can’t follow you there.’

‘But what about you and your men?’ Douglas wanted to know.

‘We’ll be crossing the river, too,’ Auguste said, ‘once we’ve seen you safely on your way. Afterwards, we’ll be dispersing northwards into Languedoc for a while until things quieten down again. Anyway, who

knows? We might be kicking the Germans out of France in a few months' time.'

'I hope so,' Douglas said. 'Anyway, thanks again for your help. Maybe we'll meet again in more favourable circumstances. One last thing — you'd better give us an escort of some sort, otherwise your chaps might get trigger-happy when they see a German half-track trundling down the road towards them.'

'Here's your escort,' Auguste told him, as a man came striding up to stand in the light of the blazing tank. He carried a German Mauser 98 rifle slung across his shoulder.

Colette, who had been leaning weakly against the half-track, gave a gasp of recognition and took a few short steps forward to embrace the man. It was Etienne Barbut.

'Tell him I'm glad to see he's alive and well,' Douglas instructed her. 'And now let's move, before things get unhealthy.'

Colette and Barbut climbed into the cab of the half-track alongside Willings, who once again volunteered to do the driving. Douglas and the remaining SAS men clambered on to the gun platform, where they were joined by two or three Maquisards, each armed with a Sten and wearing a bandolier into which were stuffed German 'potato-masher' stick grenades.

Willings drove past the shattered Ferdinand and over the crossroads, which were littered with dead Germans. Cheering Maquisards, holding their guns aloft, saluted the half-track and its occupants as it churned past, and some ran alongside for a while before dropping back.

The vehicle drove steadily on past more patrols, slowing down as each one was approached so that Barbut could call out to the Maquisards. Half an hour later, having passed under a canal, it came to another crossroads and its occupants climbed down. Barbut spoke rapidly with Colette, who translated.

‘This is as far as we go,’ she told Douglas, ‘at least in the half-track. The left-hand fork goes down into Port-St-Louis, the other follows the Rhône to Arles. We go on across country for a mile or so before reaching the river.’

As she finished speaking, there came a sudden outburst of firing from along the Arles road. It was still some miles away, Douglas guessed, but there was no telling how long it would be before the Maquisards who were holding the road succumbed to mounting enemy pressure. He indicated the Resistance fighters who had accompanied them on the half-track, and said to Colette:

‘Tell them we’ve no longer any use for the vehicle. It’s theirs. No doubt its firepower will come in handy. And tell Monsieur Barbut to come with us.’

After a further exchange of words, Colette turned back to Douglas in obvious distress.

‘It’s no use,’ she said. ‘I’ve pleaded with him, but he insists on staying. He says that his place is with the Maquisards.’

Douglas nodded, understanding. Wordlessly, he reached out and grasped Barbut’s hand, then turned away to lead his men across the mile of ground to the Rhône. Unseen by Douglas, Colette clung to Barbut for a few moments and kissed him before also turning away. No one, in the darkness, saw the tears that were coursing down her cheeks.

The ground was soft and boggy, and water reached over their ankles as they trudged on, the men taking it in turns to support the ailing Colette. At last they reached the river and waded through the marshy flats towards it, gazing with trepidation at its sluggish expanse. Douglas judged that it was at least half a mile across, which would not have presented a problem had it not been for one fact. There was no sign of the barge that was to have taken them to the far bank.

‘Something’s obviously gone wrong,’ Douglas said, ‘but we can’t afford to hang about here.’ He threw a glance upriver, where he could see flashes

twinkling in the darkness. The sound of firing from the Arles road was becoming more intense. ‘We’ll just have to swim for it, that’s all.’

A half-mile swim was well within the capability of all his men, but there was Colette to be considered. She looked at him, knowing what he was thinking.

‘Leave me,’ she said bravely. ‘I told you that I would be a burden to you. Leave me here.’

‘Not on your life,’ Douglas told her firmly. ‘You’ve come this far with us, and you’re coming the rest of the way. These overalls are designed to provide some buoyancy, and we’ll hold on to you.’

‘Do we ditch our weapons, sir?’ The question came from Mitchell, who was still burdened with his beloved radio set as well as his MP-40.

‘No, we don’t,’ Douglas told him. ‘We swim with them. You’ve all been trained to do that. Your wireless will have to go, though, Mitch.’

The Rhodesian signaller paused, then unstrapped the set, held it between his hands for a few moments, and finally hurled it as far as he could into the river. Without waiting to be ordered, he strode down the shallow bank and into the water. The rest followed suit, Douglas staying close to Colette.

From a hiding place among some bushes on the far bank, a man watched the swimmers’ progress through a pair of Zeiss night-glasses. He saw their heads bobbing up and down, and noted how one of the swimmers seemed to be supporting another. It should not be difficult to snare them, he thought with satisfaction, drumming his fingertips against the casing of the binoculars.

‘Shall we open fire on your signal, monsieur?’ The question came from one of the dozen or so militiamen who lay nearby, their carbines at the ready. The Gestapo man rounded on him furiously.

‘You idiot!’ He snapped. ‘How many times must I tell you, you will not

open fire at all! My intention is to capture those swine alive; I have planned for that ever since I discovered the tracks of their aeroplane, days ago. When they come out of the river you will surround them and take them prisoner. That is all.'

He resumed his vigil with the night-glasses. The others strained their eyes in the darkness, unable as yet to see anything at all. The roll of gunfire from the direction of Arles made a constant background noise.

The swimmers ploughed valiantly on through the Rhône's current, unaware of the fate that awaited them. The Gestapo man continued to watch them, speaking softly to himself, mentally urging them on. They were almost at the bank now, almost at the place where the water became shallow enough for them to wade ashore. Soon it would be all over. The Gestapo man glowed inwardly at the thought of the praise and promotion that would be bestowed on him for this night's work.

And soon over it all was, but not in the way he envisaged. The voice of the guns masked a closer sound, and the first indication the Gestapo man and the Milice had of the peril that was bearing down on them came when the ground suddenly began to tremble beneath their prone bodies. The Gestapo man released his binoculars and got to his knees, startled, and his last vision in this world was of the flying, razor-sharp hooves that cut him down.

The tide of white horses swept over the militiamen, and long machetes gleamed dully in the night as the *gardiens* slashed to left and right, sending the hated Milice screaming and scattering. None fired a shot; those who survived the murderous onslaught threw aside their rifles and fled into the darkness, or the temporary sanctuary of the river.

Douglas and the others, hearing the commotion, halted their progress and trod water, looking at the darkened river bank in alarm. Then a voice hailed them out of the night, and Douglas, exhausted as he was, kissed Colette's

soaked hair and laughed aloud in relief.

The voice was that of Raoul.

Hands reached out, a minute later, to drag them from the water. The horses stood passively, ignoring the trampled bodies of the militiamen.

‘Quickly,’ Raoul urged them. ‘Mount up and ride! Nothing can touch you now. You’ve done it, by God! The boat is on its way in. The *gardiens* will go with you, so that you don’t miss the place. Go now, and good luck!’

They dragged their soaked bodies on to the backs of the patient horses. Colette sat in front of Douglas, who held on to her firmly. The horses got into their stride, cantering through the marshes, their hoofbeats dulled by the soft ground so that they seemed for all the world like phantom creatures, sliding through the dark towards the coast, their manes and tails lifting with their rippling motion.

And in the Camargue, a new legend was born.

*

The Dornier droned steadily on in the darkness, skirting the Balearic Islands at 10,000 feet. Hardly a word had been spoken since take-off; even von Falkenberg was silent, although Karl Preuss sensed that the general’s mind was already probing all the possibilities of finding a scapegoat on whom to pin the blame for the disaster that had overwhelmed the remainder of KG 100 at Istres.

Preuss was not happy with the way the bomber was handling. The controls felt sloppy, and he suspected that the shell that had burst underneath the aircraft on take-off had caused some damage to the control cables in the rear of the fuselage.

Whatever they, the crew of the solitary Dornier, might achieve now would amount to little more than a pinprick, Preuss thought moodily. If they were lucky they might sink a couple of ships, but that was all. The Allied convoy

would still forge ahead to its destination, wherever that might be. Had it not been for the presence of von Falkenberg, he would have aborted the mission and turned back long ago.

He was worried about the fuel state, too. The engines seemed to be consuming more petrol than was usual. That was an item of information he intended to keep to himself for the time being; the morale of the crew must be low enough as it was, and he had no wish to burden them further with the knowledge that they might not make it back home.

The Dornier was fifty miles south-west of Formentera, still on course for Gibraltar, when the real trouble started. The first hint came with an urgent call over the intercom from the flight engineer.

'Sir, the starboard engine is starting to overheat badly. The temperature has been fluctuating for some time, but now it has suddenly gone into the red.'

Preuss acknowledged and throttled back the troublesome motor, applying some rudder to compensate for the aircraft's sudden tendency to swing. At the same time, he glanced across at the engine itself, leaning forward in his straps and craning his neck as he did so, for the wing and the engines were positioned well to the rear of the cockpit and it was not easy to see them from the pilot's seat.

What he saw made a sick knot of fear grip his stomach. The cowling of the starboard engine was glowing redly in the darkness.

Preuss ordered the flight engineer to shut down the engine and apply the fire extinguisher. Almost at once, the aircraft slowly began to lose altitude. From behind Preuss, von Falkenberg demanded to know what was happening.

'We've got the beginnings of a fire in the starboard engine,' Preuss told the general. 'I've had it shut down, which means that I can no longer hold altitude. I'm going to have to jettison the missiles and turn back.'

‘No!’ Von Falkenberg’s voice rose almost to a scream. ‘I forbid it! You must press on to the target at all cost!’

‘Can’t be done, General,’ Preuss said laconically. ‘We’d never make it. Rainer, get ready to jettison the weapons.’

In the nose, Rainer Becher’s hand hovered over the switches that would release the Fritz-z missiles. Without their weight, the Dornier might stay in the air long enough to make an emergency landing in neutral Spain.

‘No!’ von Falkenberg yelled again. ‘You heard my orders! Continue to the target. You forget that I too am a pilot, Preuss!’

‘Look out, sir.’ It was the navigator who spoke. Preuss half turned in his seat. Von Falkenberg was on his feet, and the pistol in his hand was pointing at Preuss’s head.

There was a sudden sharp crack and Preuss threw himself against the side of the cockpit, an involuntary cry bursting from him. Then tremors of heat and cold ran through his body as he realized that he was still alive.

He looked down. The upper half of Rainer Becher lay on the flight deck, his legs still in the nose compartment. He held a smoking Luger. General von Falkenberg lay on the floor, sprawled across the entry hatch that gave access to the flight deck.

The navigator came forward and bent over the general. A moment later a blast of freezing air roared into the cockpit as the hatch was opened. Then it was slammed shut again. When Preuss looked round, the navigator was back in his seat and the general was gone.

Becher jettisoned the missiles and the Dornier, although still losing height, was now losing it more slowly. Carefully, Preuss swung the nose round towards Spanish territory.

After a minute or two of silence, he said: ‘We’ve been together a long time. Long enough to get our story straight. About the general, I mean.’

‘The general?’ said the navigator. ‘I could have sworn he was on one of the other aircraft. Probably got blown to bits.’

‘Yes,’ said Rainer Becher. ‘What general?’

He spoke for all of them.

EPILOGUE

The news from Italy was not good. The Allied invasion force had gone ashore on the Anzio beaches on schedule and at first had met little opposition, but the Germans had reacted with unexpected swiftness and now, early in February 1944, the Anglo-American divisions were engaged in bitter fighting and unable to break out from the beach-head they had established. It seemed that the war would not be shortened, after all.

Douglas had told Colette none of this when he visited her in the military hospital on Gibraltar. She was recovering from a severe bout of pneumonia, and the doctors had stressed that she was not to be upset in any way. So he had sat there beside her bed and held her hand, and made small talk until she had drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

He walked slowly down the hospital steps, narrowing his eyes against the sun, lost in his own thoughts. He did not really see the tall figure ascending the steps towards him until a familiar voice greeted him.

‘Well, Douglas. And how is she?’

Startled, Douglas looked up and a moment later threw a hasty salute in the general direction of Brigadier Masters.

‘Improving, sir, thank you,’ he said. ‘But she has to take things very quietly for another week or two. She hasn’t to have any worries. I didn’t know you were here,’ he added.

‘Oh, I’ve a job or two to take care of in Gib,’ the brigadier told him cryptically. ‘By the way, it was a good show you put up in France. A very good show indeed, KG 100 won’t be troubling anybody for a long time, I fancy.’

Masters frowned suddenly. ‘You said that Colette has to take things easily — no sudden shocks, or anything like that?’

‘That’s right, sir. Why — is there something wrong?’

Masters put his hand in a pocket and pulled out a buff telegram envelope.

‘I came to give her this,’ he explained. ‘But maybe it’s not advisable just at the moment. Will you be seeing her again — when she’s a little better, I mean?’

‘Yes, sir. In fact, I understand we’ll both be going home on the same aircraft in a couple of weeks’ time, when my leave is over, I could have gone already, but I thought I would stay and — well, you know how it is.’ To his embarrassment, he found himself blushing.

Masters nodded. ‘So that’s the way of it,’ he said smilingly. ‘Well, good luck to you, Douglas.’ His expression grew sombre. ‘Maybe she’ll need all the comfort she can get,’ he said. ‘Give her this when she’s in better health, will you? Break it to her gently. It’s open, so you can read it.’

He handed Douglas the envelope. The SAS officer opened the flap and extracted the single message sheet. The few words stared up at him starkly. The signal was from SOE Headquarters in London, and was addressed to Colette personally.

REGRET INFORM YOU ETIENNE BARBUT CAPTURED AND EXECUTED BY GESTAPO. DEEPEST SYMPATHY.

And that was all.

Douglas turned his face away, full of emotion. ‘Damn,’ he said softly. ‘Damn it to hell. He was a brave man. None of us would have got away without him.’

‘He was much more than that to Colette,’ Masters said. Douglas looked at him, puzzled, and asked what he meant. There was genuine amazement in Masters’ voice. ‘You mean Colette never told you? Good God, man. Etienne

Barbut was her father.’

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