

THE LONE WOLF



Historical * Fiction * Thriller

by Michel Poulin

THE LONE WOLF

Historical fiction novel

By Michel Poulin

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND DEATH, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

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CHAPTER 1 – A NEW ASSIGNMENT

19:12 (Paris Time)

Saturday, February 1, 1941

Les Folies Bergère Cabaret

32 Rue Richer, 9th District

Paris, Occupied France

One of the French doormen at the entrance of the famous Folies Bergère Cabaret politely interposed himself as a young German officer was about to storm inside, obviously in a hurry. While his job was to prevent people from going inside the cabaret without paying the entrance fee, one had to be careful and diplomatic with German customers, in order to avoid some nasty backlash with the German occupation authorities.

"I am sorry, sir, but you will have to go first at the ticket counter." Said the man in German. Thankfully, the German officer replied in an equally polite tone.

"I came here to find a German officer, to give him an urgent message, not to watch the show, mister."

"In that case, I will escort you to the show room, sir. Follow me!"
Before leaving his post, the doorman signaled to one of his backups in French.

"Marcel, watch the door for a moment while I escort this officer in."
Letting the big, Marseilles ex-gangster in charge of the entrance, the doorman then led the young German naval officer inside the cabaret, bypassing the coatroom and walking inside the big, high-ceiling show room where dozens of customers were having supper while watching the female dancers on the large stage. The doorman smiled in amusement as the young Kriegsmarine officer, who was in his early twenties, slowed down his step and nearly stopped as his eyes fixed on the nude young woman presently parading on the stage: the dancers of the Folies Bergère never failed to get a reaction from male customers, be they French or German. He however politely reminded the German that he was not here for the show.

"You may now look for the officer you are seeking, sir."

"Uh, yes, indeed." Said the young man, taking with difficulty his eyes from the nude dancer and starting to scan the room. He saw quickly enough his target, a tall,

medium-built man in his late twenties wearing the going out uniform of a Kriegsmarine kapitänleutnant, sitting at a table with a pretty redhead woman. Going in quick steps to that table, he stopped at attention beside it and gave a military salute to the officer.

“Kapitänleutnant Otto Kretschmer?”

“Yes?” Replied the officer, whose face would pass as that of a quiet university student if not for his uniform, while returning the salute. “What is it, Leutnant?” In response, the newcomer took a sealed envelope from an inside pocket of his uniform vest and handed it to Kretschmer.

“Leutnant Hugo Schmelling, from the staff of Admiral Dönitz. The Admiral has tasked me to find you and to give you this as quickly as possible.”

Now both curious and a little annoyed at being hounded like this on one of his precious days off between war patrols at sea, Kretschmer took the envelope and, opening it, extracted from it a single sheet of paper folded in three. Reading quickly what turned out to be an official order, the submarine commander looked up sharply at the messenger.

“Admiral Dönitz wishes to see me at his office in the Paris headquarters of the Kriegsmarine, first thing tomorrow morning? Do you know what this is about, Leutnant Schmelling?”

“No, Kapitänleutnant! I only know that it concerns an urgent and confidential matter.”

“Very well! You can tell Admiral Dönitz that I will be at his office tomorrow morning at eight. Dismissed!”

Schmelling saluted again, with Kretschmer saluting back before the young lieutenant pivoted on his heels and walked away, escorted by the French doorman. The redhead woman sitting at the table then cautiously asked a question to her dining companion. Having been arrested last year by the French Police on behalf of the German authorities, to then be released thanks to the intervention of the Irish Chargé d’Affaires in Paris, Margaret Kelly Leibovici was anxious not to appear too inquisitive about the affairs of a German officer, however gallant and decent he was.

“They are recalling you already, Otto? But, you told me just one hour ago that you still had over a week of leave left.”

Otto Kretschmer gave a wry smile to the most pretty Irish woman and famous dancer nicknamed ‘Miss Bluebell’, who directed the no less famous dancing troupe of ‘Les Bluebell Girls’, which performed nightly at the Folies Bergère.

"I thought so as well, Margaret, but it seems that something has happened to cause the good admiral to send for me. I suppose that I could blame that on my present title of 'submarine Ace of aces'. However, don't worry about our supper together: I fully intend to take the time to finish it and then watch your girls dance."

Margaret smiled warmly at that: Otto knew that she was married, to a Jewish man no less, with one toddler son and another child on the way, and had not tried once to profit from his fame or standing as a highly decorated German officer to try enticing her into a date. From all that she knew of him, Margaret considered Otto Kretschmer to be both a decent, humane man as well as a brave and competent naval officer. It also helped that Otto was in no way what you would call a Nazi fanatic. He was also a cultured man who spoke fluent English, thanks to past university studies in England before the war, on top of a quite passable French.

"That will please me most, Otto."

07:53 (Paris Time)

Sunday, February 2, 1941

Headquarters of the Kriegsmarine in France

Château de la Muette, 16th District

Paris

Having been introduced by an aide into Admiral Dönitz' office in the opulent Salle Roger Ockrent of the Château de la Muette, an 18th Century style palace built in the 1920s and presently occupied by the Kriegsmarine, Otto Kretschmer stepped forward and stopped at attention in front of Dönitz' work desk. He then saluted him in a military manner while announcing himself in a strong voice.

"Kapitänleutnant Otto Kretschmer, reporting as ordered, Admiral!"

Dönitz, a tall and thin man with a severe expression, returned his salute and showed him a nearby, comfortable looking chair.

"Please, make yourself comfortable, my dear Kretschmer."

The commander of the U-Boote arm of the Kriegsmarine waited until Kretschmer was seated before speaking again, looking at him thoughtfully.

"You must be wondering what caused me to fetch for you when you still had over ten more days of shore leave left, so I will go straight to the point. Simply put, I need the best submarine commander I have in order to fulfill a highly classified task that has the

potential to heavily impact this war in our favor. For that, however, you will have to leave your faithful U-99 and take command of a new submarine.”

Not a little shocked by that announcement, which sounded pretty much like an order rather than like an offer, Otto gave a confused look to his commander.

“But, what kind of mission could it be that my U-99 could not do?”

“Actually, taking command of our newest submarine and shaping it and its crew for war patrols is what has the potential to impact the war, my dear Kretschmer.”

“Uh, I’m afraid that you lost me there, Herr Admiral.”

Dönitz, his expression most serious, then bent forward, resting his forearms on top of his desk while staring at Kretschmer.

“What I am saying is that your new command, the U-800, is the prototype of a new class of submarine with vastly improved capabilities compared to our present Type VII and Type IX submarines. It is a truly revolutionary design with performances you could only dream of right now. Because it is so revolutionary, it will need a commander able to exercise maximum initiative and tactical flexibility, in order to get the most out of it. You are such a commander, Kretschmer. You also have a lot of experience of combat operations at sea, experience that I expect you to use to analyze the true capabilities of that prototype submarine.”

“And...where is that wonder prototype submarine, Admiral? When do you expect me to sail in it?”

“It is presently being completed at the Germaniawerft Shipyards in Kiel and will be ready for launch in about three weeks. That will give you the time to assemble your crew and starts its theoretical training in Kiel, before the sea trials of the U-800 in the Baltic and the pre-patrol training at sea of your crew. Then, when you will deem both your boat and crew ready for combat, you will leave on a long-distance combat patrol in the coastal waters of Newfoundland and Canada, in the Western Atlantic.”

That made Kretschmer think furiously as he measured the risks of such a mission. The enemy had plenty of aircraft stationed on Newfoundland and along the Canadian East Coast, something that made submarine patrols in those waters quite a risky affair. There was also the question of the distances involved, which would mean cruising ranges well in excess of the autonomy of a Type VII submarine like his old U-99. Presently, only Type IX submarines had the kind of range that allowed them to deploy to the Canadian coastline without using refueling at sea.

“What can you tell me about that new submarine, Admiral?”

In response, Dönitz picked up a file on his desk and presented it to Otto, who briefly got up to grab it before sitting back down and opening it. It was stamped 'Top Secret' on its cover and contained a few pages of texts and drawings, along with a few photos. As Otto's eyes widened on reading the content of the file, Dönitz spoke again, his tone grave.

"Kretschmer, I had to fight hard to convince the Führer to let me build this prototype. I also burned a lot of political favors in order to overcome the opposition of many big industrialists and Party officials who wanted to protect their pet contracts and projects. If you don't prove the worth of this prototype at sea, in combat, then the U-800 will probably end up being the sole boat of this new class. The future of the U-Boote arm and possibly the outcome of this war are thus in your hands."

Otto looked up briefly from the file at those last words, understanding that his admiral meant what he had just said.

"You can count on me, Admiral. Uh, may I ask who designed this new boat? This is totally revolutionary."

"It definitely is, my dear Kretschmer. The man who designed this submarine is actually a naval engineer who approached me personally about a year ago with the complete plans for the U-800 already in hand. Basically, that engineer, who could easily be called a true genius, had been tinkering about future concepts for submarines and also about some remedies of his own for the various problems we had been encountering with our submarines and torpedoes. He had however been a bit too forceful while exposing his ideas to his earlier employers at the Blohm und Voss Shipyards in Hamburg and had been fired as a result. He then had worked on his own time to produce the plans for the U-800 and for a few other things before approaching me. He was actually able to convince me of the worth of his ideas and I thus hired him as a civilian technical consultant for the U-Boote arm, so that he could have access to the Kriegsmarine' resources. He is now supervising the completion of the U-800 in Kiel."

"I see! He must be a truly exceptional designer, if I can go with what I see here."

"He is, but he is also a bit difficult to work with, something not uncommon with top geniuses. He has by the way helped us recently to correct the design faults that were causing our torpedoes to misfire or miss their targets so often in the recent past. I however kept that in-house and had our torpedo mechanisms modified under the table, so that those damn idiots at the Ministry of Armaments' Torpedo Department, who had

been refusing to acknowledge that our torpedoes were mostly duds, wouldn't interfere and prevent us from modifying our torpedoes."

Otto rolled his eyes as he remembered those frustrating months at the start of the war, when nearly half of fired torpedoes would either refuse to detonate on impact, explode prematurely or simply miss their target by passing too deep under them.

"Thank God for that man! Those defective torpedoes cost the lives of too many of our submariners."

"Amen to that! Now, thanks to him, we will have reliable torpedoes for our submarines. That is in fact one major reason why I gave him my support for producing the U-800."

Otto nodded in understanding, then resumed his reading. After a couple of minutes, he looked back at Dönitz, convinced by what he had just seen.

"Admiral, if this new design fulfills even half of its promises, then I promise you the most successful war patrol you will have ever seen. Could I in turn ask you a favor? Would I be allowed to pick men from my U-99 to help form the crew of the U-800?"

"Hmm, I would be harsh to refuse you that, Kretschmer, in view of what I am asking of you. However, don't go overboard: poor Kapitänleutnant Bremmer will need some crewmembers with experience if he is to have any success with the U-99."

Otto grinned at that.

"I will try not to be too greedy, Admiral. When should I be going to Kiel?"

Dönitz then gave him a large envelope in response.

"Here are your new orders, along with a directive from me that will facilitate your dealings with the personnel department, so that you could select your new crew. You will also find in this envelope your travel and requisitions authorizations, plus a detailed list of the crew requirements for the U-800. Once you will have selected and assembled your crewmembers, you will go as a group to Kiel to start studying the U-800 and train on it. Be in Kiel in no later than two weeks from now. We will decide later on when you will be ready to go to sea for the first war patrol of the U-800. I expect great things from you, Kretschmer."

As Otto was getting up from his chair, most satisfied and eager, Dönitz gave him another envelope, a smile on his face.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. You will be commanding the U-800 with a rank commensurate with what I am expecting of you, Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer. Your

new rank is effective from yesterday. Make sure that you report to Kiel with the proper uniform.”

Caught by surprise by this, Otto froze for a short moment before saluting, a grin on his face.

“Thank you, Herr Admiral! I will not disappoint you.”

“I know that you won’t, Kretschmer. And, please: do try to report on the radio from time to time when you will be on your next war patrol.”

Chuckling at that, Otto pivoted on his heels without replying to Dönitz, then walked out of his office.

CHAPTER 2 – U-800

17:16 (Berlin Time)

Wednesday, February 13, 1941

Construction Slip Number 5, Krupp's Germaniawerft Shipyard

Kiel, Baltic coast, Germany

Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, Otto's second in command, looked around with bewildered eyes as his new commander guided him and the 64 other designated crewmembers of the U-800 into the covered slip sheltering their new boat.

"Uh, were are all the shipyard workers, Kapitän? Shouldn't the evening shift be taking over now from the day shift?"

Otto gave the tall, aristocratic officer a resigned look.

"Believe it or not but there is no evening shift. There is also no night shift or weekend shift, just a day shift. I was also shocked on learning this the first time I came here, but it seems that our industries are still on peacetime production routine."

"Peacetime production routine, Kapitän?" Nearly exploded Franz Streib, the designated third watch officer. "The British sure aren't on peacetime routine these days. This is nonsense!"

"I certainly agree with you on that, Franz. However, decisions concerning that matter are way over our pay grades. The good side of this is that we will be able to visit our new boat in relative quietness. Thankfully, Doctor Gustav Premingen, the designer of the U-800, seems to have a higher sense of work ethics than his colleagues in Kiel: he will be the one giving us the tour of our new boat."

"I can't wait to meet that man, Kapitän." Said Von Wittgenstein. "He must be a true genius and visionary, judging from what you told us about the U-800."

"And I am sure that he will be happy to meet you, Ulrich." Replied Otto Kretschmer with a malicious smirk. When the face of his first watch officer reflected confusion at that reply, Otto got closer to him and whispered in his ear.

"I can't swear about this, but I believe that he is gay."

Otto then laughed briefly at the reaction of his subaltern, who recoiled in disgust.

"You can't be serious, Kapitän!"

"I am, Ulrich. However, that man, gay or not, has designed a revolutionary submarine that could just help us crush the British Navy and starve the British into submission, thus winning the war for us. So, please be polite to Doctor Premingen and do your best to ignore any advances he may make towards you. I'm serious about this, Ulrich."

"Uh, very well, Kapitän. I will do my best to be open-minded during this visit."

"Excellent! Aah, I believe that the good doctor is waiting for us at the entrance of the construction slip."

Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, like the rest of the crew, focused his attention at once on the thin, nearly ascetic man in his fifties with balding salt and pepper hair standing besides the two Kriegsmarine armed sailors guarding the entrance to the slip containing the U-800. Doctor Premingen was of medium height, wore thick glasses and was the perfect image of the scientist with no social life, something that was going to be called a 'nerd' decades in the future. Getting to him first, Otto Kretschmer shook hands with him after returning the salute of the two sentries.

"Doctor Premingen, it is nice to be able to meet you again. As promised, I have brought my whole crew with me, so that they could visit their new boat."

"And I will be happy to guide them around, Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer. If you will all follow me inside."

Premingen then opened wide the door guarded by the sentries and walked inside a cavernous space hidden from the outside world by large canvas tarps laid on its sides and ceiling. The 64 men of Otto's crew stopped nearly at once at the sight of the big shape filling the construction ship. Herman Spielberger, the second watch officer, let out an exclamation as he stared at the hull of the submarine.

"Mein Gott! I have never seen anything like this before! It is shaped nearly like a sperm whale, except for that big topside kiosk, which looks like a truncated dolphin fin."

"That shape, which is admittedly very different from that of our other submarines, is meant to offer the least hydrodynamic drag possible in the water. In this, I indeed inspired myself from the shape of marine mammals and fish." Replied Premingen, sounding like a schoolmaster teaching a class of new students. "The whole premise of my design was to produce a true submarine that would operate mostly under water, rather than a submersible that would only dive to hide or attack."

"But, once submerged, its battery capacity would severely limit its endurance under water, no?"

“True, and that still applies with my U-800. I however mostly got over that problem by using two things. Firstly, I adapted to the U-800 an invention from Dutch naval designers: the schnorchel. A schnorchel is basically a vertical tube sticking up from a submerged submarine and through which the diesel engines of that submarine can get their needed air, with a second tube used to evacuate the exhaust gases from the diesels. Now, the Dutch had not developed that concept in a manner I considered satisfactory, so I tinkered with it in depth while adapting it to my U-800. Instead of folding down on top of the upper deck of the submarine, something that made the schnorchel tube rather fragile and both slowed down the submarine and created much extra hydrodynamic drag, I designed a telescopic model of it. That model, which incorporates separate tubes for diesel intake, diesel exhaust and crew air ventilation, telescopes out of the top fin structure and is surrounded by an hydro-dynamically shaped sleeve that both reduces greatly the drag when deployed and also masks the schnorchel head from enemy radar via a special rubber coating. The main problem associated with schnorchels, mainly the tendency of the diesels to suddenly suck in the air inside the submarine when their intake heads are temporarily covered by high waves, was eliminated by the use of a two-stage diesel air intake system where the incoming air is first compressed inside a large tank, from which the diesels then extract the volume of air they need, and this without impacting on the ventilation air for the crew. The U-800 will thus be able to navigate at periscope depth most of the time, using its schnorchel to either run on diesel power or to recharge its batteries out of sight of enemy planes and ships.”

As the officers and men of Kretschmer’s crew looked at each other on hearing that, Premingen went on.

“Secondly, about the limit imposed by batteries, my solution was simpler and was one of brute force: I simply packed as much batteries as I could inside the U-800, in order to boost the endurance on batteries while deeply submerged. While your old Type VII submarine packed 108 battery cells inside its hull, the U-800 contains a total of 906 battery cells. Despite its displacement being four times that of a Type VII and being longer and beamier, the battery capacity of the U-800, allied with a much more streamlined and hydro-dynamically efficient shape and more efficient propeller, will allow it to attain top speeds under water of at least twenty knots and to have a submerged endurance undreamed of in other types of submarines.”

"TWENTY KNOTS SUBMERGED?!" Exclaimed Von Wittgenstein. "But, with that kind of speed, we could outrun many of the British convoy escort ships. And what kind of endurance are we talking exactly, Doctor Premingen?"

"My calculations showed that the U-800 should have a deeply submerged range of at least 400 nautical miles at a speed of five knots on batteries, enough to safely pass a danger zone like the Bay of Biscay undetected. That figure is however purely theoretical and I was very conservative in my estimates. It will actually be your job to find out the true performances of the U-800, gentlemen. With this said, let's go inside and see what this beast is made of."

As Premingen turned around and started walking towards a wooden staircase built beside the hull of the U-800, Von Wittgenstein noted the closed outer doors for eight torpedo tubes, visible under the chin of the bulbous bow of the submarine. That was twice the amount of bow torpedo tubes in his old Type IX submarine! The U-800 was already promising to be a formidable war machine.

With Otto Kretschmer and his crewmembers following him closely, Premingen climbed the staircase at a measured pace, then crossed the wooden bridge linking the top of the staircase to the upper deck casing of the U-800. Still followed by the crowd of submariners, he went to what appeared to be a large empty well on the forward part of the hull and pointed at the bottom of the well.

"What you see here at the bottom of this well is the pressure hull of the U-800, made of forty millimeter-thick steel plates. That will give it an operational depth capability of 350 meters and a calculated crush depth of 500 meters."

Otto Kretschmer couldn't help exclaim himself then, most favorably impressed by those numbers.

"Mein Gott! This means that we could safely dive to a depth that enemy depth charges can't reach. If we get the time to dive deep, then we will basically be invulnerable to enemy weapons."

"That is correct, Kapitän. As for the well itself, it will house the main 10.5 centimeter deck gun when retracted for submerged navigation, with a hydraulically-powered deck cover plate then preserving the smooth profile of the hull. The gun platform itself, which will also support an armored, waterproof box containing ready-to-fire shells, will rise in seconds and emerge in the open air when needed for surface combat. A similar but smaller well on the stern upper deck will house a quadruple 20mm

anti-aircraft cannon gun mount, while one vertical silo atop the kiosk will contain and protect a single 20mm cannon mount. With its eight bow and four stern torpedo tubes, plus 44 lateral launch tubes for TM Series sea mines, the U-800 will be about the most powerfully armed submarine in existence, gentlemen.”

The designated chief gunner of the U-800, Fritz Lent, gave a surprised look at Premingen.

“This submarine will carry sea mines as well as torpedoes?”

“It will! My goal when designing the U-800 was to produce a long range submarine able to bring war to the enemy’s coasts, including North America. With it, you will be able to attack and harass enemy convoys right from the start, when they emerge from Canadian ports or from Newfoundland’s ports.”

While impressing the crewmen of the U-800, that declaration also somewhat threw a cold shower over them: operating close to the Canadian coast would put them well within the range of all the patrol aircraft based on Canadian soil or in Newfoundland, making such missions quite risky.

After showing to the submariners the forward hatch hidden under the deck casing and used to load fresh torpedoes aboard the submarine, Premingen then walked to the central fin, rising over six meters above the upper deck, and opened a large, heavy steel hatch cut in its frontal surface. Otto Kretschmer saw the designer hesitate for a moment before going through the hatch, prompting him to ask a question in a worried tone.

“Are you alright, Doctor Premingen?”

“Er, yes, Herr Kapitän. To be honest, I suffer from a mild case of claustrophobia. This may sound ludicrous for someone designing submarines but I can’t help it.”

“That is nothing to be ashamed of, Doctor. Many people I know suffer from claustrophobia.”

Seemingly arming himself with courage first, Premingen then stepped through the heavy hatch, followed closely by Kretschmer and his men. They found themselves nearly cramming to capacity what appeared to be a circulation space, with one large deck hatch, an access ladder and what looked like a lift cage visible to them.

“Immediately aft of this compartment is the control room, which is presently empty. If you and your crewmembers could proceed downstairs, Kapitän, I will show to you and your officers the officers’ mess and cabins, situated one deck below.”

“Very well, Doctor.” Said Otto before looking at his senior NCO. “Oberbootsmann Lent, have the men come down one level and then wait for a moment.”

“Yawoll, Herr Kapitän!”

Now intensely curious, Otto followed Preminger down the access hatch, ending up in a sort of circulation space with a number of doors and one passageway visible. They then went to the first doors visible along the short passageway, which were actually closed with curtains rather than with door panels. The first door proved to be that of a small cabin with a single captain’s bed, with what looked like a folded up spare bed frame and mattress above it. Otto estimated its surface to be about six square meters, which was utter luxury for a single man cabin aboard a U-boote. Hell, separate cabins were in fact unheard of in U-bootes! His own ‘cabin’ on his U-99 had been a simple private space closed off by a curtain. That space had been in fact less than half the volume of the cabin Preminger was now describing.

“This is one of eight cabins reserved for the officers of the U-800, not counting the captain’s suite. They are still not fully furnished but each such cabin will contain two personal lockers and one small work desk and chair, while the bunk bed includes four drawers under it and a reading lamp at its head. Near the entrance of this passageway, you will find a toilet stall and a shower stall, plus two sinks, all reserved for the officers.” Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, like the other six officers of the crew, grinned with contentment and exchanged approving looks with his comrades on hearing that: ‘comfort’ and ‘privacy’ had been up to now meaningless words aboard submarines, even for officers. As for the usual living conditions of the non-commissioned crewmembers, the word ‘Spartan’ did not even start to describe them in a realistic manner. In fact, ‘squalid’ would have been a better word.

The visit of the adjacent officers’ mess and captain’s suite cemented the contentment of Otto and of his officers, with the officers’ mess proving to be nearly as spacious as the one found on a frigate or destroyer, while the captain’s suite included a sleeping cabin, a work office and a private bathroom, the lot occupying an incredible eighteen square meters of deck surface. Otto couldn’t help remark on that to Preminger.

“Did your claustrophobia push you into being this generous with internal spaces, Doctor? Isn’t such use of the available space going to impact negatively on the combat and propulsion systems?”

“On the contrary, my dear Kapitän! Your missions at sea may go on for months at a time and anything that will preserve the moral and physical wellbeing of your crew can only benefit the combat efficiency of your boat. As for the combat and propulsion systems, you will soon find out that I didn’t neglect them, on the contrary. I just used my imagination to find more efficient ways to pack things inside a submarine without it looking like a sardine can, which our Type VII and Type IX are. Granted, most of the other designers and the managers of this shipyard called me names on seeing what they characterized as an ‘atrocious waste of internal space’, but Admiral Dönitz, who has experienced the living conditions at sea of submariners, understood and accepted my point of view about this, especially after he saw what I did with the combat systems. Well, I would like to show your men now how they will be accommodated, Herr Kapitän. We can visit the central control room, above our heads, once you will have seen the rest of the boat.”

“You are the guide, Doctor: you decide where we go. It is not as if we won’t be spending a lot of time soon exploring this boat and getting to know it in detail.”

“True! We will thus go next to the crew accommodations, situated forward and one deck down.”

Getting the rest of his crew to follow behind his officers, Otto followed Preminger down a wide access ladder, ending up in a large and spacious compartment filled with long tables with fixed swiveling chairs, a number of counters and storage cabinets.

“This is the crew mess, where your men will eat. Up to 44 men will be able to sit here at a time and eat in proper conditions. No more eating while sitting on a torpedo. We will now go forward to the upper crew quarters.”

Moving forward through a watertight hatch, the group ended up in another spacious compartment containing fourteen double bunk beds with drawers, 28 individual effects lockers and one small round table with four chairs. Otto nodded in approval as he looked around the compartment, while his sailors were left aghast with admiration.

“Not bad at all, Doctor! The men will be plenty satisfied with such facilities.”

“This is just one of the two main crew dormitories, Herr Kapitän.” Said proudly Preminger. “There is another dormitory below this one, with a total of 32 bunks. You also have a space with four bunk beds reserved for your more senior NCOs.”

“Better and better.” Said Otto. Preminger led the group further forward in a compartment nearly filled with two huge steel casings.

“The upper torpedo storage room. The two casings you see are torpedo storage carrousel, each containing up to twenty torpedoes. The mechanism and hatch you see between the two carrousel are the loading tray and the forward torpedo loading hatch. Above us, retracted under the weather deck, is a loading crane meant to facilitate the handling of torpedoes during reloading operations on the surface. With the four movable torpedo tubes loading trays and the eight forward launch tubes, this will give you a total of up to 52 torpedoes in the bow section. In the stern section, you will find four launch tubes, plus a storage rack for twelve torpedoes, for a total aft of sixteen torpedoes. You thus have a total capacity of 68 torpedoes aboard, Herr Kapitän, enough to decimate a whole convoy by yourself.”

“Incredible! Something tells me that the British will get to positively hate this submarine.”

“That is the whole point of my design, Herr Kapitän. Let’s go aft now.”

Going through the upper dormitory and stepping inside the crew mess, Premingen guided the group to the back of the mess, where they found a fairly spacious infirmary with four medical beds and an operating table, plus an enclosed, fully equipped kitchen. Otto couldn’t resist calling loudly for his designated senior cook, Matrosen Obergefreiter Dieter Hannig.

“HEY, SMUTJE¹, COME ADMIRE YOUR NEW KINGDOM!”

Hannig, a jovial Bavarian young man who had worked before the war in his Munich family restaurant, quickly waded through his crewmates and joined his captain at the entrance of the kitchen. His lower jaw dropped wide open as he eyed the twelve square meter surface of what was going to become his work space.

“Mein Gott! I will actually be able to walk across my kitchen, rather than bump from one corner to the other. There is even a refrigerator!”

“There is actually ready pantry on the next deck below, along with a cold room, a walk-in freezer and a dry foodstuff storage room: easily enough volume to store up to four months of food.” Said Premingen. “. What many called ‘an extravagant waste of space’ was simply in my mind the correct answer to a major deficiency of our submarines, namely their lack of all around endurance and crew amenities.”

¹ Smutje : ‘Coal’ in German. Familiar nickname given to the cook aboard German submarines in WW2.

“And you were more than justified to design the U-800 the way you did, Doctor Premingen. This will work miracles for the crew morale and fitness during long war patrols. What next?”

“Since we have already seen most of the forward compartments, I propose that we go examine next the aft compartments containing the propulsion systems and auxiliary machinery.”

“Excellent choice! Lead us, Doctor!”

With Premingen still in the lead, the group went aft through a narrow tunnel and emerged in a spacious, high-ceiling compartment nearly filled with three big diesel engines and a sort of large tank situated above the diesel engines and connected to them by pipes. Narrow gratings decks allowed men to circulate around the top part of the diesels and also allowed the group to go further half to the next compartment.

“The diesel room, containing three M.A.N. M6V 40/46 turbocharged engines totaling 6,600 shaft horsepower. Those diesels can either turn directly the propeller via hydraulic clutches and gearboxes, or be connected to three electric motors that can function either as generators or as motors, depending on which shafts they are connected to. There are in fact a total of seven SSW 365/30 motors, situated aft of this compartment, that can provide a total of 13,055 kilowatts of propulsive power to the propeller.”

“Over thirteen megawatts of electrical power for propulsion?!” Exclaimed the designated chief engineer of the U-800, Oberleutnant Werner Jentz. “But, that amount of installed power is completely unheard of!”

“True, and it will help propel the U-800 at speeds underwater that you could only dream about right now.”

The rest of the tour took another hour and showed to Otto and his crewmen many more surprises and innovations due to Preminger's genius. Now confident that they were going to have the ultimate tool for their tasks to come in the war, they returned after their guided tour to the Kriegsmarine barracks near the port, where they passionately discussed and commented as a group what they had seen. Then came time to go sleep, as they were scheduled to start tomorrow a long period of over seven months of theoretical learning and practical training, in order to be able eventually to use with maximum efficiency their new, revolutionary but also quite complex vessel. In the

meantime, the war went on, as ferocious and bloody as before. Barely over a month later, Otto Kretschmer got the painful news that his old boat, the U-99, had been lost at sea, with many of his ex-crewmen killed in action, while a good friend of his, Joachim Schepke, was lost the same day with the whole crew of his U-100, sunk by a British destroyer. More losses followed in the next few months, while the British received more and more aid from the United States, some of it barely covert. It soon became evident to Otto that the U-800 was going to be sorely needed soon in the fight at sea if the German submarine arm was to prevail in the long run in the Atlantic.

CHAPTER 3 – FIRST WAR PATROL

01:14 (Berlin Time)

Wednesday, October 1, 1941

Open bridge of the U-800

Kiel harbor, German Baltic coast

Otto Kretschmer stood in the open top bridge of the U-800, with the side windows of the giant, transparent canopy covering the bridge opened to let in fresh air, while two coastal patrol boats escorted his submarine up the sea channel that would lead it to the Strait of Skaggerak and the North Sea. He had a last look at the darkened port of Kiel as his newly commissioned submarine sailed out of it for its first war patrol. Soon, he and his crew were going to be able to prove to Admiral Dönitz that all the months and efforts spent on preparing the U-800 for war had been worth it. Leaving Kiel at night to ensure maximum secrecy, he was planning to exit the Baltic Sea and then turn northwest to go to Bergen, on the Norwegian coast, for a quick refueling stop. With his fuel tanks full, he was going to then run at schnorchel depth past the British Isles and skirt Iceland by the North before turning southwest, thus avoiding the giant minefields the British had sown between Iceland and the British Isles. Once northwest of Iceland, he was going to be able to take a direct heading towards his first selected target: the Canadian port of Halifax, which was the departure point of most of the allied convoys heading towards Great Britain. Turning around in the tight space of the top bridge, he glanced at the three men on watch duty inside the thick, transparent dome of the forward armored watch tower, situated behind him in the middle of the forward open bridge. With the base of its transparent dome a bit above the level of the steel bulwark of the top bridge, that watch tower gave to its occupants and to the Zeilsaule C33 optical night director mount inside a clear view around the ship, be it from the surface or from a depth of 350 meters. His watchmen thus no longer had to stand inside an open steel tub during North Atlantic storms, when giant waves could and did often wash over the bridge, with unlucky watchmen sometimes washed overboard. The armored watch domes atop the central fin of the U-800, one forward and one aft, had been one design concept from Premingen that Kretschmer had believed at first to be totally goofy and a waste of time and resources. He however had very quickly changed his mind as soon

as he had been able to experiment with its use during the sea trials of the U-800. The simple fact was that, up to now, all submarines became blind once submerged below periscope depth and then only had their hydrophones left to them to detect and locate other ships and submarines, with detection ranges being quite limited. However, Preminger had a stroke of genius after hearing an experienced diver who worked in the port of Kiel talk about how he could clearly see all the ships floating above him while he was walking on the bottom. With the sunlight illuminating the surface of the ocean, anyone below, down to a reasonable depth and with decent water clarity, could easily see the bottom of ships floating on the surface, along with submarines sailing past at shallow depths. One could even distinguish the contours of the bottom in shallow, clear waters, if you were able to observe from a dry structure or dome under the surface, like from the round hat of a diver or the watch domes of the U-800. Otto now knew that he could post his submarine on the bottom, in silent watch near a major port, and visually acquire the ships going in and out of that port while staying nearly undetectable. He had tried just that a few weeks ago, posting himself outside of Kiel harbor and tracking the ship traffic above him while three Kriegsmarine destroyers and two coastal submarines vainly tried to find him. Otto had as well found one other good use for those underwater watch domes: supporting the morale and the mental balance of his crew by giving his men a vantage point they could use when not in combat situations to relax while admiring the sea around them, the way tourists could when scuba-diving for pleasure. Otto himself had spent many occasions admiring the external view around his submerged submarine, watching schools of fish swim around and even spotting dolphins on one occasion. One sailor even had floated an idea about promoting underwater sightseeing tours after the war.

After three hours of navigating his submarine past the various defensives minefields and obstacles protecting Kiel and with the U-800 now well along the sea channel leading towards the Strait of Skagerrat, Otto had his Third Watch Officer, Leutnant zur See Franz Streib, take over from him on the open bridge. Walking around the armored watch dome tower and going through the armored hatch on its side, he carefully closed it back before going down the ladder leading to the 'Zentral', the control room from where the submarine was helmed and directed. The station of the helmsman was another innovation that had broken with tradition, it actually looking more like an aircraft pilot's station than like a submarine's helm. The chief helmsman of the U-800,

Matrosen Obergefreiter Peter Schültz, could himself be said to be an oddity. Previously a Luftwaffe seaplane pilot, Schültz had transferred to the Kriegsmarine after being wounded during a mission, becoming an helmsman on a fast torpedo boat. His previous experience as a pilot had attracted Otto's interest because the U-800, through its conception and design, handled a lot more like an aircraft than like a normal U-Boote when submerged. In fact, Otto was fervently hoping that the unprecedented capabilities of the U-800 were going to both mystify the British and help him and his crew survive this war patrol and the next ones after. Satisfied that things were well under control, Otto then walked down the control room, going to the navigation plot table situated aft of the two periscopes of the submarine, plotting his latest position. In less than twenty hours, they would have to turn sharply to the West-southwest, once they would have cleared the northern tip of Denmark, in order to go down the Strait of Skagerrak and finally emerge into the North Sea. From there, things were going to be more delicate, due to enemy reconnaissance flights and patrols, and he would then continue his trip submerged, using his schnorchel and proceeding on diesels to Bergen at twelve knots. The submerged speed of the U-800 had been another agreeable surprise during its sea trials. While Otto's old U-99, a Type VII submarine, could attain a maximum speed underwater of only 7.5 knots, in contrast to its surfaced top speed of 17.5 knots, the U-800 had surpassed the most optimistic expectations of even Doctor Premingen, attaining the incredible top speed on battery power of 31 knots under water. It could also navigate with its schnorchel deployed at up to fourteen knots, thanks to the hydrodynamic shroud of its schnorchel, while keeping the top of its fin five meters below the surface. Apart from having a lot larger battery capacity and much more powerful electric motors than a Type VII, the U-800 had a much more streamlined and hydrodynamic hull, which drastically cut down submerged drag, while its revolutionary centerline ducted propeller system had proved vastly more efficient than the classic two small side screws of past U-boats. The single down side had been the top surface speed of the U-800. While its teardrop shape made it very efficient for underwater travel, it was less ideal for surface navigation, being limited to a speed of 13.5 knots on the surface while using the diesel engines. That was however a minor point to Otto, who had quickly understood that the old tactics of attacking convoys at night on the surface were outdated with a submarine like the U-800. He could now in fact outrun most escort ships except fleet destroyers and cruisers while approaching submerged on battery, with his unusual endurance on battery allowing him to escape after an attack by going deep,

under the maximum depth of enemy depth charges, and then drive away on silent cruise.

Seeing little else for him to do at the time, Otto activated the nearest intercom box and called his watch officer on the open bridge.

“Leutnant Streib, this the Captain: I am going to rest for a few hours in my cabin. You now have the boat until next watch.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän!”

Going to the deck hatch just aft of the chart table, Otto went down its ladder and stepped in a narrow compartment sandwiched between his cabin and the officers’ mess at the level of the upper casing. Taking two steps and opening the door of his cabin, he entered it and crossed his small office to go to his sleeping cabin, where he removed his officer’s cap, putting it in one of the three lockers of the cabin, before removing as well the thick leather coat he had put on to go out on the open bridge. Grabbing a book from the shelf above his work desk, he sat down with a sigh of contentment in the padded easy chair of his sleeping cabin, intent on reading a bit before catching some sleep. He smiled to himself as he thought about how such comfort contrasted with what he had to put up with on his old U-99.

10:27 (Iceland Time)

Tuesday, October 7, 1941

Control room of U-800

480 km northeast of Iceland

North Atlantic

“Hydrophones watch to Kapitän!”

Otto Kretschmer, studying the chart of Iceland and its surrounding waters at the navigation plot table in the control room, keyed the intercom.

“This is the Captain! What do you have?”

“Sir, we have distant but powerful screw and machinery noise coming from the West-southwest, from Iceland. It is coming towards us.”

“Cargo ship or warship?”

“Definitely warships, sir: many of them and some of them big. I would need however that we go silent before I could have a better feel for those noises.”

“Very well, we will go silent. Stand by!” Replied Otto before switching to general intercom. “Attention all hands! We have warships approaching. Engine room: shut down the diesels, retract the schnorchel and switch to batteries, then reduce speed to five knots. Helm: hold steady on present course and stay at periscope depth. Electronic warfare section: scan for possible enemy emitters nearby. To all: we go to silent routine now!”

Next, instead of using the intercom again, Otto walked aft to the hydrophones and sonar section, situated only a few paces away on the same level of the armored kiosk. There, he stood just behind the chair of the chief sonar operator, Oberfunkmaat Günter Grote, and waited patiently as the technician listened on with his headset while also looking at the cathode screen showing the noise signals received by their main passive hydrophone array in the bow. A clear spike on the display showed that a powerful noise source was approaching from their eleven O’clock. After maybe two minutes of intense listening, Grote spoke softly, his eyes still on the display tube.

“I classify the contact as a group of warships heading northeast towards Norway and coming out of Iceland, Herr Kapitän. They are going quite fast, at least twenty knots, and two of them are really standing out: we probably have two major warships with half a dozen escort ships. From their heading and their rate of approach, I would say that they will cross our path just ahead of us: we thus could easily ambush them, sir.”

“How big are those two big ones, Grote? Can you identify them?”

“Give me one moment, Herr Kapitän.”

Otto knew better than harass his sonarman by insisting on having an immediate answer and he thus waited patiently. Less than a minute later, Grote looked up at him, a smile on his lips.

“We have a big jackpot here, Herr Kapitän: one battleship, possibly KING GEORGE V Class, and one fleet aircraft carrier of the ILLUSTRIOUS Class, escorted by one possible light cruiser and five or six destroyers.”

That announcement immediately sent Otto’s brain in high gear. The combined full load tonnage of the two bigger warships alone was around 68,000 tons, something to make any U-boot captain salivate. On the other hand, their escort ships could prove very problematic if he didn’t handle the situation properly. There was also the matter of why such a powerful force could have been in Iceland and why it was heading towards

Norway. At the minimum, and irrespective of the result of any encounter, he would have to radio to Admiral Dönitz' headquarters with information about this enemy battle group.

"Excellent job, Grote! Give me an intercept course for that enemy group and advise me as soon as you will be able to figure out their deployment."

"Should I ping them on active sonar, Herr Kapitän? That would give us their range and one single ping shouldn't put them on alert."

"Negative! I will not take any chances with such a powerful opponent. Just an intercept course will do."

"Understood, sir! I would pick Heading 342 as the direction they are coming from, with an approximate distance of forty nautical miles between us as of now."

"Thank you!" Simply said Otto before walking back into the control room and shouting orders.

"HELM, STEER TO HEADING 350! KEEP SPEED AT FIVE KNOTS AND HOLD PERISCOPE DEPTH."

Next, he contacted the forward and aft torpedo rooms by intercom.

"Torpedo rooms, load half of the tubes with G7a compressed air torpedoes and the other half with G7e electric torpedoes. Be ready to reload with the same mix once we will have fired our first volley. All hands, this is the Captain: close all the hatches and go to silent routine!"

Otto then waited while his men went to work to prepare for battle. While topping up his supplies, fuel and ammunition before leaving Kiel, he had to decide about the quantity and type of torpedo load, something that had not been evident. Germany had started the war with the G7a compressed air-propelled torpedo as its standard submarine torpedo. The G7a was a fast weapon, reaching speeds of up to 44 knots, with a range that could be varied, from 6,000 meters at 44 knots to 14,000 meters at thirty knots. It however left a visible trail of bubbles in its wake. Worse, it had shown to be a dud too many times, its warhead detonator exploding prematurely or simply refusing to explode, while a faulty depth setting mechanism often made it run under the target ship and miss. In order to eliminate the wake problem, the electric-powered G7e had been developed just before the war, but had not proved to be a success. Its top speed was an anemic thirty knots, less than the speed of many existing destroyers and warships, with an equally disappointing range of 5,000 meters. To add insult to injury, the G7e suffered from the same detonator and depth mechanism defects than those of the G7a. Thanks to the pressure from irate submarine commanders and to the heavenly help of Doctor

Premingen, the detonator and depth setting faults were now mostly things of the past. However, that had still left the Kriegsmarine with its most recent torpedo model being too slow and short-legged, apart from needing to be pre-heated before launch in order to ensure maximum range out of its batteries. As a result, quite a few U-boat commanders still used the G7a, mostly during night attacks. Otto was one of those commanders and he thus had decided to load aboard the U-800 a mixed load of G7a and G7e torpedoes, with the idea of using the faster G7a at short range against warships while reserving the G7e for the slower merchant ships. As a result, he now had 44 G7e and 24 G7a torpedoes aboard, four times the load of his old U-99.

"Hydrophone watch to Kapitän! We are now nearly across the path of the oncoming enemy fleet. I can make one light cruiser leading in file the battleship and the carrier, with six destroyers sailing in two parallel columns on the flanks. In our present position, we should end up sandwiched by the center line of heavy warships and the starboard column of destroyers."

"Thank you! MACHINES ALL STOP! UP PERISCOPES! TORPEDO OFFICER, START PREHEATING THE G7es IN OUR LAUNCH TUBES. SET ALL TORPEDOES IN OUR TUBES TO THE SHORTEST ARMING DISTANCE SETTING."

Otto then moved to the watch periscope and started scanning the horizon to the Southwest. He had to scan for only a short moment before he saw the characteristic smoke trails of ships' funnels in the distance.

"THREE SEPARATE GROUPS OF SMOKE TRAILS ON THE HORIZON, BEARING 350! APPROXIMATE DISTANCE: FIFTEEN NAUTICAL MILES. HERR VON WITTGENSTEIN, START MANNING THE FIRING SOLUTION CALCULATOR!"

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!"

"TORPEDO ROOMS, CONFIRM THE STATUS OF OUR TUBES!"

"Bow torpedo room: four G7a in odd numbered tubes and four G7e torpedoes in even numbered tubes loaded and ready to fire. Arming mechanisms set on distance of 100 meters."

"Stern torpedo room: two G7a in odd numbered tubes and two G7e torpedoes in even numbered tubes loaded and ready to fire, set for 100 meter arming."

"Excellent! Now, we just let the enemy approach and get within range. TO ALL, COMPLETE SILENCE ABOARD FROM NOW ON! I WILL KILL THE FIRST IDIOT WHO WILL FLUSH THE TOILET!"

A concert of laughs greeted his joke before the submarine became about as quiet as a tomb, standing still in the water just below the surface of the sea. Otto flipped a switch on his watch periscope, lowering its head below the surface, and went to the attack periscope, which had a narrower field of view but also more powerful optics. It also happened to have opposite his viewing ocular an optical elbow that gave the same view as he had to a photographic camera fixed to the viewing base. That way, he could take pictures of the ships he targeted, something very commonly done by U-boat commanders. It was just that Premingen's foresight had made him incorporate a camera on the base from the start, instead of having to hurry up and put it in place at the last moment. Doing first a complete tour of the horizon in order to ensure that no British ship was going to catch him by surprise, Otto then concentrated his sight on the center group of funnel exhausts visible in the distance.

"First bearing on central enemy column: 343!"

Otto then lowered his periscope head under the surface and waited patiently a few minutes before raising it again and announcing a second bearing on the central group of smoke trails. Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, supervising the fire control calculator technician and standing at the tactical plot table, nodded his head after a few seconds.

"I confirm that the central enemy column will pass just in front of us, Herr Kapitän. Their general heading puts them on the way to the area of Narvik, in Norway."

"That makes sense: we have quite a few ships in Narvik, ships that would be worthy targets for such a British force."

Four more quick and discreet visual checks followed in the next forty minutes, confirming that the enemy fleet was heading straight to them and that the U-800 was going to effectively be sandwiched between the bigger warships and their starboard side screen of destroyers. Having suddenly an idea, Otto quickly climbed up to the forward underwater watch dome, emerging there to find a stunning view of the underside of the surface of the ocean. It was quickly evident by the waves he could see crashing down and by the poor sunlight level that the weather was quite bad on the surface. That was to his taste, as that could only degrade the performance of the British ASDIC sound detection sets of the escorting destroyers. Using his binoculars and looking out through the glass dome, he was able to see after a few minutes the shape and wake of the underside of an approaching ship. Seeing that it was going to sail past his submarine, Otto then looked to his left, soon detecting what had to be the lead destroyer of the

starboard column: it was going to pass at some distance behind the waiting U-800. Content with that, Otto used the gyro horizon pointer inside the watch dome to transmit the respective headings of the lead destroyer and lead heavy ship. That lead ship soon was close enough for Otto to be able to examine in detail its underside.

“Zentral, from Captain: I can now confirm visually that the lead ship of the central column is an ARETHUSA-Class light cruiser, while the lead destroyer of the column that will pass in our back appears to be a TRIBAL-Class destroyer. The light cruiser is in turn followed by the battleship, with the carrier tailing. Helm, pivot quietly the boat on the spot and be ready to follow closely in parallel line the heavier units. Start increasing slowly our speed and increase our depth to thirty meters.”

A crazy plan was now developing inside Otto’s head. While it was audacious to the point of near madness, it would provide him with excellent protection from the escorting British destroyers, thanks to the deafening noise levels produced by the battleship and the carrier, noise that would all but render useless the ASDIC sets of the destroyers. As for the battleship and carrier, he knew very well that they had no ASDIC sets of their own, being too noisy to be able to use any. Already, the screw and machinery noise from the British heavy warships reverberated strongly inside the submarine, forcing him to raise his voice a bit when he gave his next order. He could now see the underside of the leading light cruiser as it passed twenty meters above his position.

“Helm, steer two degrees to port and raise speed to twelve knots: we are going to take position under the central column of enemy ships.”

“Aye, Herr Kapitän.” Replied on the intercom the helmsman, sounding not too reassured. Otto waited until his submarine was right under the cruiser’s stern before giving a heading correction and placing the U-800 between the cruiser and the following battleship. The enemy ships being a bit faster than him for the moment, going at fifteen knots, Otto waited for the battleship to get ahead of him, with the carrier now only 600 meters behind him, then had his helmsman match speed with the British. The underside view he now had of the two major enemy units was truly stunning, prompting an order from him on the intercom.

“Herr Leeb, bring quickly a second camera to the forward underwater watch dome. Bring plenty of films with you as well.”

“Uh, understood, Herr Kapitän.”

"Herr Eberbach, I want you to gradually bring us up to periscope depth. However, make it as discreetly as possible and make sure that we don't break the surface. Take all the time you need to do that."

"Yes, Herr Kapitän!"

By the time that Maschinen Obergefreiter Wolfgang Leeb came up to the forward underwater dome with his camera and films, the U-800 was only fifteen meters below the surface of the sea, with the stern of the KING GEORGE V a mere 150 meters dead ahead and with the bow of the carrier visible only 400 meters behind. Leeb couldn't help stare at those incredible sights while setting up his camera.

"Mein Gott, Herr Kapitän, this must be seen to be believed. Do you want shots of those two ships taken now?"

"Yes, but take only one shot of each ship for the time being. I suspect that you will then have more spectacular shots to take soon. I will now go down to the Zentral." Going down the ladder again and returning to his attack periscope, he looked at his second in command as he was about to raise the head of the periscope above water.

"Ulrich, we will fire two of our G7a torpedoes loaded in our bow tubes at the propellers of the battleship, then will fire our two G7e loaded in our stern tubes at the bow of the carrier, on my command. Be ready for very quick follow up snap shots after that."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän! I am ready."

"Then, stand by to fire tubes one, three, ten and twelve."

"Tubes one, three, ten and twelve ready to fire."

His heart now beating hard with excitement, Otto flipped the switch on his periscope viewing base, raising the optical head above the level of the strong waves at the surface. He already had his eyes on the ocular when the stern of the KING GEORGE V, barely 180 meters ahead, nearly filled the periscope's field of view.

"Target ahead, heading 359 relative, distance 180 meters! Match bearings and fire tubes one and three!"

"Firing tubes one and three!"

Pivoting around at once, Otto centered his sights on the bow of the British carrier, which was bobbing up and down in the waves.

"Target astern, heading 003 relative, distance 500 meters! Match bearings and fire tubes ten and twelve!"

"Firing tubes ten and twelve! Torpedoes on the way!"

Pivoting around again, Otto anxiously centered back the battleship in his sight, hoping for success. It was highly unlikely that, with this agitated sea and the long, wide wake created by the battleship, any of the destroyers or the carrier could spot his periscope quickly enough to react in time. At such a short range, and with the battleship's beam being over 31 meters wide, there was practically no chance of his two G7a torpedoes missing...and they didn't! They took barely three seconds to accelerate and cover the distance, passing under the stern of the big ship and hitting near where the propeller shafts came out of the hull. Their twin explosions either ripped away or distorted all four propeller shafts and jammed the rudders, on top of blowing open huge holes in the bottom side of the stern. The torpedo explosions also nearly raised the stern of the KING GEORGE V out of the water, fracturing the stern section and making it buckle. The 43,000 ton battleship was already doomed before its captain even understood what was happening. Repressing a scream of triumph, Otto pivoted again and watched the carrier as it still came towards him, shouting at the same time an order.

"HELM, REDUCE SPEED TO FIVE KNOTS! WE DON'T WANT TO COLLIDE WITH THAT BATTLESHIP NOW."

"AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!" Replied Peter Schültz, tense and fully concentrated on his compass, attitude display and depth gauge. Another two underwater explosions were heard seconds later from astern, making the crewmembers cheer.

On the 25,000 ton British aircraft carrier HMS VICTORIOUS, nobody was cheering now as its crewmembers were brutally shaken and projected forward by the explosion of the two G7e torpedoes from the U-800. With the carrier travelling at the time at a speed of fifteen knots, the two large holes suddenly blown open in its bow immediately started admitting hundreds of tons of seawater, which rushed in with even greater force due to the forward speed of the ship. Instead of coming back up after digging down in the bottom of a wave, the VICTORIOUS continued on nearly level, burrowing into the waves, with powerful water geysers from the bow holes bursting inside the forward aircraft hangar and submerging dozens of panicked aviation mechanics and ordnance technicians. The unlucky carrier never had a chance to recover from that blow, as two more torpedoes slammed in it as its helmsman was trying to turn to port to avoid the now dead in the water KING GEORGE V dead ahead. Those two more torpedo hits sealed the fate of the carrier, opening three more major

compartments to the sea. As for the battleship, a second salvo of torpedoes, this time four G7e's, holed its port aft side, opening its machinery spaces to the sea.

On the light cruiser HMS PENELOPE and on the six escort destroyers, the lookouts and officers of the watch at first believed that the KING GEORGE V and the VICTORIOUS has somehow hit sea mines. The second salvos of torpedoes then told them the truth. All eyes on the cruiser and the destroyers then searched for the German submarine or submarines that had mounted such a dastardly ambush. However, those eyes all turned toward the flanks of the formation and not towards the stricken ships, except for a few lookouts tasked with assessing the damage to the two capital ships. In the case of the KING GEORGE V, those lookouts soon had only a tragedy to report: its stern section breaking away, its port side ripped open and with all power gone, the battleship quickly developed a severe list to port, to finally capsize and sink in less than ten minutes. At about the same time, the VICTORIOUS' bow started sliding under the waves as the 'Abandon Ship' order was given to its crew. The only British that managed to see briefly the periscope head of the U-800 was a lookout on the destroyer HMS PUNJABI. The captain of that destroyer, transported with rage, then gave the order to turn hard to starboard, towards the gap between the two sinking warships, and to prepare to drop a pattern of depth charges in the water. His second in command, a young navy lieutenant, however shouted at once at his commander.

"SIR, WE CAN'T DROP DEPTH CHARGES THERE AND NOW! WE HAVE HUNDREDS OF OUR MEN SWIMMING IN THE OGAN: OUR DEPTH CHARGES' CONCUSSIONS WOULD KILL THEM ALL!"

Watched by the shocked members of his bridge watch, the destroyer captain nearly screamed back at his lieutenant before freezing with an haggard look on his face, realizing what kind of monstrous mistake he had been about to commit.

"Er, belay that last order of mine. All engines stop! Lower the lifeboats in the water! Signal to PENELOPE: German submarine sighted between our two sinking ships. We are conducting rescue at sea operations."

No more torpedoes struck the British force afterwards, while no German submarine was either seen or detected in the area despite five of the six destroyers searching frantically with their ASDIC sets active. The VICTORIOUS sank half an hour after the KING GEORGE V. Unbeknown to the British, the U-800 was still right there,

close to its two victims, but holding silent and immobile at a depth of eighty meters. Wolfgang Leeb was thus able to take some dramatic and stunning pictures as the hulks of the battleship and of the aircraft carrier sank past the U-800, heading for the sea bottom. With photographic proof of its exploit now in hand, Otto Kretschmer then resumed his long trip towards Halifax, escaping silently at five knots from the enraged British destroyers as the latter dropped depth charges at anything suspicious in the area.

CHAPTER 4 – REACTIONS

11:09 (London Time)

Wednesday, October 8, 1941

Prime Minister's official residence

10 Downing Street, London

United Kingdom

"OVER 2,400 MEN DEAD OR MISSING? WHAT ABOUT THE GERMAN SUBMARINES WHO CAUSED THAT DISASTER?"

Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, shrank as Prime Minister Churchill reacted as badly to the bad news as he had predicted. The old admiral, sickly and worn out by his heavy responsibilities as the head of the Royal Navy, answered Churchill in a subdued tone.

"Actually, Mister Prime Minister, we have reasons to believe that a single German submarine was involved in that attack. That submarine unfortunately evaded the extensive search launched afterwards by the six escort destroyers of our battle group."

Churchill in turn gave Pound a dubious look.

"A single submarine? How could you say that, in view of the mayhem caused off Iceland? At the minimum, the Germans had to be aware in advance of our Operation E.J. in order to be able to ambush our battle group the way they did."

"We actually intercepted a short and rather terse radio message from a German submarine that was sent a few hours after the attack. ULTRA² managed to decode it this morning."

"And what did that message say, Admiral?"

"It was sent by a U-800, to the headquarters of Admiral Dönitz in France and said that it had sunk the KING GEORGE V and the VICTORIOUS after encountering them northeast of Iceland while they were apparently heading towards Norway. The

² ULTRA : Codename for Top Secret British decoding operation used to decypher the German high level messages sent via ENIGMA encryption machines.

message ended with the sentence 'am now resuming mission.' There were no further messages intercepted from that U-800 after that, Mister Prime Minister."

"What type is that U-800?"

"We don't know, Mister Prime Minister. This is the first mention made of the U-800 anywhere in the radio traffic we have intercepted to date."

Both discouraged and frustrated, Churchill went to his office chair and sat on it, then looked up gravely at Pound.

"So, one lone German submarine managed to get to Iceland without being detected, somehow crossed path with our battle group and sank our two warships before escaping and continuing on with an unknown mission. It sounds as if this German submarine commander thought of sinking our ships to be just a side note to its main mission. In a way, it makes the whole thing even more disturbing. Do we have an inkling of what may be the main mission of this U-800, Admiral?"

"We can only guess about that, Mister Prime Minister, but an obvious possibility would be that this submarine will go down to Newfoundland and the Canadian East Coast to harass our shipping in that area. With the skill shown by the commander of that U-800, I would take such a possible threat very seriously. However, with a minimum of ten torpedoes expended against our battle group, that U-800 probably has half a dozen or less torpedoes left aboard, so that should limit any future losses to us. Uh, what degree of censorship do you want put on the news of the loss of the KING GEORGE V and of the VICTORIOUS, Mister Prime Minister?"

"The news won't come out until I decide otherwise, Admiral." Replied coldly Churchill. "The one thing that you can tell around is that I want that U-800 found and sunk!"

In contrast, the same news were greeted with jubilation in Berlin and quickly exploited widely by the German propaganda machine. However, Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels was intelligent and smart enough not to divulge anything about the U-800 or Kapitän Kretschmer, simply saying that a U-boot had sunk the two British capital ships off Iceland. As for Admiral Dönitz, apart from being overjoyed by that major success, which would do much to put him and his U-boote arm in the good graces of the Führer, he was relieved to see that his risky bet of supporting Doctor Premingen against the Nazi hierarchy was being vindicated. He was tempted to send further orders by radio to Kretschmer but finally decided not to. For one, his wily

submarine commander would most probably not answer him. For another, Kretschmer had just proven that he could take good decisions and show initiative without help. Dönitz thus simply let Kretschmer in peace and wished him well mentally for the rest of his mission. The only Germans dismayed by the news of the sinking of the KING GEORGE V and of the VICTORIOUS were the few U-boote commanders who had been hoping to grab the title of 'U-boot Ace of aces' from 'The Tonnage King', with their prospects having just grown much dimmer.

16:36 (Iceland Time)

Friday, October 10, 1941

Control room of the U-800

Submerged and on schnorchel

Off the East Coast of Greenland

The navigator of the U-800, Leutnant zur see Franz Streib, pointed on the chart to Otto Kretschmer the update position he had just calculated.

"I can confirm to you that we are within the surface stream of the East Greenland Current, which hugs the East Coast of Greenland and flows south-southwest. My latest sextant measurement showed that the current is actually adding a good two knots to our true speed relative to land. We are thus sailing at a true speed of twelve knots, Herr Kapitän."

"Excellent!" Replied Otto, grinning. "This will both save us many tons of fuel and speed our arrival off Halifax. What about the Labrador Current, which we should encounter in three days off the coast of Labrador?"

"That one will be even more of an help to us, Herr Kapitän, as its stream speed is rated between six and ten knots. We could thus either greatly cut our travel time by keeping our current diesel power up and thus sail down the coast of Labrador at true speeds of sixteen to twenty knots, or we could throttle down our engines once inside the Labrador Current and keep a true speed of twelve knots, while saving dozens of tons of fuel and becoming extremely quiet, with our engines outputting only enough power to add five knots or less to the current's speed. Which would you prefer, Herr Kapitän?"

Otto thought carefully his answer, speaking only after a few seconds spent examining the chart laid out on the navigation plot table.

"The waters around Newfoundland are bound to be lousy with patrol aircraft and warships, especially after the raucous we made off Iceland. Being fuel efficient and quiet suits me just fine, Franz. Just make sure that we don't slip out of the current's stream during our trip down the coast."

"You can count on me, Herr Kapitän."

"I always do, my dear Franz. I'm going to go down to the crew mess, to see what our good cook has listed for supper on the menu."

Streib nodded his head at that: the subject of the quality of food aboard a submarine was no trivial matter, as the crew morale depended a lot on it. Up to now, Matrosen Obergefreiter Dieter Hannig had been performing at his customary masterful culinary level, producing a variety of meals as appetizing as they were nourishing. Streib however had to recognize that the exceptional facilities found aboard the U-800 had to help greatly Hannig in his job.

Using the deck hatch situated forward of the control room, Otto climbed down two decks and stepped on the level of the upper deck, inside the crew mess compartment and a few steps away from the entrance of the kitchen. Otto couldn't even call that kitchen 'small', as it was positively gigantic compared to the standard found on other submarines. An appetizing smell immediately caught his nostrils, smell that pulled him inside the kitchen, where he found Hannig and his assistant, young Gustav Bouhler, at work in front of their ovens and stoves. Both cooks came immediately to attention on seeing Otto, who waved at them to relax.

"At ease, men! I was just coming to see what you were putting on the menu for diner this evening."

Hannig, a slightly overweight and definitely easy-going man, grinned to Otto and opened the door of one of his electric ovens to show him the big skillet inside, releasing a wave of tempting odors into the kitchen.

"The men should be pleased tonight, Herr Kapitän: I have broiled lamb with mint sauce on the menu, accompanied by boiled potatoes and cabbage and with freshly baked bread with butter to go along. There is as well a cake as a dessert for the finale. We also still have fresh milk for our beverage bar, on top of hot coffee, tea and apple juice."

While utterly impressed by the composition of the menu, Otto couldn't help eye Hannig with some suspicion.

“My dear Smutje, could you tell me where you found all those ingredients for this fantastic menu? I never saw fresh lamb on the menu in the past on other submarines.” Hannig grinned again while wiping his hands with a cloth towel.

“Herr Kapitän, if I told you, you could then become implicated in things that could be deemed to be criminal affairs by the Kriegsmarine.” Understanding at once what Hannig was alluding to, Otto approached him and put a friendly arm around his shoulders, a smile on his face.

“Please do tell me about that, my dear Smutje. You know that I am a curious man, do you?”

“Uh, as you wish, Herr Kapitän.” Said Hannig, now sweating a bit more. “To make a long story short, I was watching the ground support personnel in Kiel as they poured hundreds of tons of diesel fuel into our tanks. I then thought that a few hundred liters less of that diesel fuel wouldn’t really hurt us during our long patrol, while a better scale of rations would certainly help the morale of the crew. So, I filled a few fuel cans with diesel fuel and, along with a few of our men who come from the Schleswig-Holstein region around Kiel, toured the farms belonging to their families, relatives and friends in a requisitioned truck. I then bartered that diesel fuel in exchange for things like fresh meat, eggs, butter, milk, sugar, wheat flour and apple juice.”

“I see!” Said Otto, his grip firming up around Hannig’s shoulders and his smile appearing even more forced. He let the cook stew in his juice for a couple of seconds before showing a true smile and patting Hannig’s back.

“I admire men with initiative and imagination, my dear Hannig. Keep up the excellent work!”

Otto then left the kitchen, allowing the poor Hannig to blow air in relief.

CHAPTER 5 – HUNTING GROUNDS

19:41 (Halifax Time)

Wednesday, October 15, 1941

Control room of the U-800

In ambush position 200 kilometers east of the port of Halifax

Canadian coastal waters, Atlantic Ocean

All the crewmembers aboard the U-800 were tense as the watch officer, Leutnant zur see Hermann Spielberger, called the depth while their submarine slowly approached the bottom of the sea, 200 kilometers east of the port of Halifax. The U-800 finally touched the silt of the bottom, first with its bow undersurface, then with its stern, doing it less roughly than feared by many.

“We have bottomed out, Herr Kapitän. Our depth under the keel is 110 meters.”

“Very well!” Said Otto before activating his intercom box. “To all the crew, this is the Captain! We are now resting on the bottom at our chosen listening and ambush location east of the port of Halifax. I intend us to lay silent on the bottom, using battery power, to listen for worthy targets for our torpedoes. Such targets should abound in this area, so I urge you to take the maximum of rest until further notice. We will stay at minimum stations, except for the hydrophones and sonar section, which will run on four hour full rotations. Keep all noises to the minimum and save power as much as you can. That is all for the moment. Captain out!”

Otto then looked at Spielberger, who had been standing behind the man controlling the ballasts.

“Herr Spielberger, I am going to my cabin to rest. You now have the watch. Wake me up if any significant target is detected in the next hours.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän!”

Otto then left for his cabin, hoping mentally that his choice of ambush position, astride the usual transit route out of Halifax for the convoys regularly sailing to Great Britain via Iceland, would soon provide him with some juicy targets. He couldn't know that he had missed by only a few days a very lucrative target indeed, Convoy TC 14, a large troopships convoy loaded down with soldiers from a Canadian Army division being sent

to England. Another large target, Convoy HX 154, had sailed over this exact point a mere three days ago, on its way to England with hundreds of thousands of tons of war supplies. However, as Otto already knew, the convoys providing the lifeblood to Great Britain in this war ran every few days with regularity. With his chosen ambush position so close to Halifax, the next convoys to pass by would not have had time to alter their routes, as they often did to avoid the German submarines detected in mid ocean by patrol ships and aircraft. A convoy to England, counting dozens of cargo ships and tankers escorted by a handful of warships, was thus bound to come by in the next few days.

08:45 (Halifax Time)

Thursday, October 16, 1941

Bridge of the M.S. MANCHESTER EXPORTER

Sailing out of Halifax Harbor, Nova Scotia

Canada

Rear-Admiral Francis Watson, standing on the open bridge wing of the 5,227 gross tons cargo ship MANCHESTER EXPORTER, watched the other 55 ships of his convoy as they started slowly forming into their assigned positions after emerging from the mouth of Halifax Harbor. Within one hour, the convoy should be truly on its way, first towards the American naval station in Argentia, Newfoundland, where the convoy would meet with the American destroyer flotilla tasked to escort it across the high seas. Then, the convoy would steam to Iceland, where the escort duty would be taken over by British warships for the last leg to Liverpool. However, Watson had right now a grand total of two Royal Canadian Navy corvettes and one convoy rescue ship to escort one passenger ship, 29 cargo ships and 23 tanker ships up to Argentia. That was quite meager indeed in terms of initial escort force, but Watson knew that dozens of bombers and reconnaissance aircraft based around Halifax constantly patrolled the surrounding waters, looking for German submarines. He thus believed that his convoy would be quite safe until it actually started the Newfoundland-Iceland leg of its fifteen day trip to England. Right now, his main concern was to put some order in his ships and to keep that order despite the typically poor weather and bad visibility of this season.

15:08 (Halifax Time)**U-800, in bottom ambush position**

“Oberleutnant, I believe that I have something big coming our way.”

Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, attracted by the call from the hydrophones listening section, went in quick steps to Günter Grote’s station.

“What do you have, Herr Grote?”

“What sounds like a convoy, Herr Oberleutnant. It is still quite a distance away, but the noise I get in my hydrophones must be a convoy freshly out of Halifax: I can hear dozens of different ships, all going at slow screw revolutions. If indeed it is a British convoy and is going at their typical nine to ten knots of speed, then it should pass over us in a few hours.”

“Anything else around us?”

In response, Grote showed to Von Wittgenstein a dozen other spikes on his panoramic passive hydrophone array’s display, all much smaller in noise intensity than the one he just had reported.

“This area is quite busy in terms of ship traffic, something expected from the Halifax region, Herr Oberleutnant. This spike, to compass heading 105, actually sounds like a small ship, possibly a corvette, patrolling around while pinging periodically his ASDIC set. We are however far out of his detection zone.”

“Very well, I am calling the captain in on this.”

Von Wittgenstein then keyed the intercom box fixed to a partition of the sonar room.

“The Captain is requested in the sonar room. I say again, the Captain is requested in the sonar room.”

It took only three minutes for Otto Kretschmer to show up in the cramped compartment.

“What do you have, Herr Grote?”

“A possible convoy heading our way, Herr Kapitän.” Said the hydrophones specialist before telling Otto in detail what he was hearing. At the end, with his eyes on the passive hydrophone array’s display, he nodded and gave a few orders.

“I go with the possible convoy coming at us. It should arrive near us just after sunset, so we will have the cover of darkness for us. In two hours, we will quietly come up to periscope depth and will then cautiously raise our electronic warfare mast, to see if there are any active radars near us, then will go back down to a depth of thirty meters to

wait for that convoy. Have the crew go quietly to battle stations in two hours, just before we get off the bottom.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän!”

Two hours later, as ordered by Otto, the U-800 slowly rose from the seafloor, its crew ready for action, and went up to periscope depth. Otto was again in the sonar section, adjacent to the electronic warfare section, for the occasion. He let his specialists listen to their instruments first and report on their own time. The head of the radio/EW department, Josef Knocke, reported first to his captain, some excitement in his voice.

“I am detecting two sets of metric wavelength radar to the East, Herr Kapitän, probably escort ship sets. Their signals are still weak and are way below detection level to see us.”

“The initial noise signature coming from Halifax has both grown bigger and wider, Herr Kapitän.” Added Günther Grote. “I can now confirm it as a convoy heading west. It should be here in two to three hours.”

“Good! Herr Von Wittgenstein, retract our EW mast and make our depth thirty meters. The crew will then have a last hot meal in rotation, before the cooks shut down their stoves and secure their kit for battle. I want the battle stations fully manned in ninety minutes.”

Then letting his subaltern distribute his orders, Otto went to the navigation plot table in the control room to refresh his mind about this part of the ocean, thinking about his attack plan and about the possible ways the enemy could react to it.

20:52 (Halifax Time)

Bridge of M.S. MANCHESTER EXPORTER

Convoy HX 155, 130 kilometers south of Cape Breton Island

Rear-Admiral Watson chose to stay inside the bridge of his convoy’s flagship because of the cold rain driven hard by the winds. Due to the bad weather and obscurity, he had the ships of the convoy tighten up a bit together, but his convoy was still measuring a good eight kilometer wide by three kilometer long, plodding along at ten knots in the night. His two armed escort ships respectively led the two outer flank columns of merchant ships, while Watson led the center column in the MANCHESTER

EXPORTER. This was not the first convoy he was leading, by far, but the weight of responsibility of his job was heavy indeed, with close to 2,000 lives and hundreds of thousands of tons of precious war supplies and fuel depending on him. Watson was reflecting mentally on that when a sudden flash of light coming from port made him twist his neck and grab his binoculars. The giant fireball now rising in the night air made it at once painfully obvious what had happened, even before the noise of a powerful explosion reached his ears: one of his tanker ships had been hit! From the position of the fireball, it had to be the M.S. REGENT LION, a 9,551 gross registered tons tanker loaded up with high octane aviation gasoline. Watson, who knew perfectly well that there were no friendly minefields in this area, shouted at the bridge signaler as a series of fireballs consumed the unfortunate tanker.

"SIGNAL TO HMCS DRUMHELLER AND HMCS SUMMERSIDE THAT WE HAVE A PROBABLE GERMAN SUBMARINE WITHIN THE CONVOY AND THAT THE REGENT LION HAS JUST BEEN HIT. TELL THE HMCS DRUMHELLER TO CHASE FOR THAT SUBMARINE."

"AYE, SIR!"

Just as the signaler had just answered Watson, a second explosion reverberated in the night, followed closely by a third one. This time there were no fireballs, as the second ship to be hit had to be the M.S. EMPIRE EVE, a 5,979 gross registered tons cargo ship loaded with grain. Watson's hair nearly rose on his head: could there be a whole pack of German submarines within his convoy? Submarine attacks this close to Halifax were unheard of up to now. Now this? Two minutes later, the bridge signaler approached the rear-admiral with a short message.

"Sir, the EMPIRE EVE signals that it was hit by two torpedoes and that it is now sinking. They are abandoning ship."

"Christ! Direct the COPELAND to stand by to retrieve the crew of the EMPIRE EVE."

"Right away, sir!"

Watson then walked to the plot table at the back of the bridge, intent on writing an urgent message to Halifax to signal this attack on his convoy. He barely had time to write half of his draft message before an explosion lit the night again. This time, the fireballs that went up meant that another tanker had been hit and was burning. Watson swore when he saw that it had to be the SAN CIRILO, a 8,012 ton tanker loaded with gasoline. Adding a couple of lines to his draft message, Watson then handed it to the bridge

signaler for transmission and went out on the open bridge, braving the cold rain to better see what was happening to his convoy. Just as he was raising his binoculars to his eyes, another explosion was heard, this time coming from the second convoy column to starboard. Running to that side of the open bridge, Watson saw huge flames come out of a ship's silhouette two kilometers away: it had to be the Norwegian tanker SLEMDAL, a 7,373 tons ship loaded with gasoline. Now convinced that he was dealing with a whole pack of German submarines, Watson ran to his tactical short range radio and grabbed its microphone.

"SUMMERSIDE, this is MANCHESTER EXPORTER. We have multiple submarines hitting the convoy. Go down our starboard flank and find those subs!" Waiting just long enough to get an acknowledgment from the Canadian corvette, Watson then returned on the open bridge to anxiously examine the dark sea around his ship. Three minutes later, it was the turn of the G.S. WALDEN, a 10,627 ton British tanker loaded with gasoline and paraffin, to go up in a fireball. Now becoming nearly desperate, Watson went to the tactical radio again to see how his two corvettes were doing. He was in radio conversation with the HMCS DRUMHELLER, with the captain of the corvette giving him a verbal report, when the man's voice was cut out in mid transmission. A few seconds later, two closely linked explosions were heard from the port flank of the convoy. Watson lowered slowly the microphone in his hand, struck hard by that latest blow.

"Christ Almighty!" Could he only say in a weak voice.

21:37 (Halifax Time)

U-800, at periscope depth amidst Convoy HX 155

"ALL TUBES ARE NOW RELOADED, HERR KAPITÄN!"

"Excellent!" Said Otto, standing besides the tactical plot table in the control room. "We can now resume our attacks on this convoy."

"Which side do you want to strike this time, Herr Kapitän?" Asked Ulrich Von Wittgenstein. Otto pointed at the starboard columns of the convoy plotted on the tactical trace.

"First, we hunt down and sink that second corvette. With the enemy armed escorts all gone, we will then be free to methodically destroy the rest of the convoy at our leisure during the night. I know that this sounds cruel and ruthless, but that is what

war is about. Every ton of ammunition or fuel that this convoy can bring to England could cause German deaths in the future. It is either them or us.”

Ulrich could only nod his head at that: he knew that Kretschmer was no heartless fanatic and that he had in fact a big heart. However, he was right about the reality of war. One could show humanity and mercy when appropriate in war, but not weakness.

23:50 (Halifax Time)

Captain’s cabin of U.S.S. ROE (DD-418)

At quayside in U.S. Naval Station Argentia

Newfoundland

“Sir, Sir, wake up! There is an urgent message for you.”

Lieutenant Commander Scruggs woke up groggily from his barely started sleep to see his signals officer bending over his bunk in the dark cabin. Chasing his fatigue as best he could, he pulled away his blanket and swung his legs out to sit on the side of his bed.

“Please switch the light on, so that I can read this message.”

“Right away, sir!”

The sudden light from the overhead lamp made Scruggs blink as he took the message offered by his subaltern. However, the content of the message was enough to fully wake him up in a big hurry.

“WHAT? Convoy HX 155 is under attack by german submarines south of Cape Breton Island and has already lost twenty merchants ships and its two escort ships? Jesus Christ! Sound general quarters for the whole flotilla, Mister Burnett. I will be on the bridge in five minutes.”

As the young sub-lieutenant left his cabin at a near run, Scruggs got up from bed and went to his locker to take his uniform out of it and get dressed. He still had trouble believing that message: German submarines had never operated this close to Halifax before. To have a whole pack of them here was truly shocking news. What actually shocked him the most however was the fact that the convoy his flotilla of five destroyers and one stores ship was supposed to escort between Argentia and Iceland was being butchered right under his nose. Four minutes later, he was running inside his destroyer’s bridge and shouting orders to get the flotilla to sail out of port as soon as possible.

00:24 (Halifax Time)

Convoy rescue ship M.F.A. COPELAND

Convoy HX 155, south of Cape Breton Island

Captain William Milner, master of the Merchant Fleet Auxiliary COPELAND, had tears in his eyes as a pitiful few survivors from the cargo ship CORTONA were being hoisted aboard from one of the motor boats launched by the COPELAND to pluck the men swimming in the frigid waters. In the preceding three and a half hours, his ship had been overwhelmed by the number of men to be saved from sunk or sinking ships all over the convoy and his onboard facilities were already overloaded, with more than 200 shivering survivors, many wounded or burned, clogging his internal decks. A distant detonation, quickly followed by an explosion, made him jerk his head towards the East while anger and hatred replaced his sadness. Those bloody German submarines, knowing that they didn't have to fear armed escort ships anymore, had apparently been operating on the surface for more than two hours now, using their deck guns to administer the 'coup de grâce' to torpedoed ships that refused to sink. That was in fact a standard German submarine tactic, as they had a limited number of torpedoes stored aboard and thus used their deck guns to save on their main armament. German submarines also typically liked to attack on the surface at night, where they could outrun merchant ships and conduct more precise attack. Judging from the carnage Milner had seen up to now, there must be at least four or five German submarines at work around the decimated convoy.

Taking the German submarines off his mind, Milner then went down to the specially equipped personnel accommodations built in his modified cargo ship, to see if he could find more space for the still growing number of survivors picked up by his ship. He was talking with the exhausted surgeon who had been treating the wounded when an intercom announcement froze his blood.

"CAPTAIN TO THE BRIDGE! CAPTAIN TO THE BRIDGE! A SUBMARINE IS APPROACHING US!"

Swearing at his young bridge officer for announcing out loud like this such a terrifying news that could easily start a panic, Milner ran out of the infirmary and climbed his way to the bridge, where he was greeted by a near hysterical Sub-Lieutenant George Wells.

"SIR, WE HAVE A SUBMARINE APPROACHING ON THE SURFACE TO OUR FORWARD PORT SIDE. ITS DECK GUN IS MANNED."

"First off, Lieutenant, you will stop shouting and you will calm down. Now, have you sent a radio message yet to signal that surfaced submarine to Halifax?"

"Er, no sir!"

"Then, do it! Don't forget to include our present position at the same time."

"Yes sir! Right away, sir!"

As his young subaltern disappeared inside the radio room aft of the bridge, Milner grabbed an intercom microphone and spoke in it.

"Captain to gunners! Captain to gunners! Hold your fire until I give permission to open fire on that approaching submarine. It may yet pass us without attacking when it will see that we are engaged in rescue work. Right now, the safety of the survivors we picked up is more important than trying to seek revenge on that submarine. Captain out!"

The experienced Mate First Class at the helm gave him a cautious look on hearing the announcement.

"You think that this German would spare us, Captain?"

"As much as you and I may be hating the Germans right now, Mister Simpsons, the truth is that not all Germans are heartless bastards. I in fact knew quite a few German merchant marine officers before the war who proved to be quite decent fellows. Let's hope that the captain of this submarine proves to be a decent one as well. I will however go make sure that there is no misunderstanding between us."

Walking out on the port open bridge wing of his ship after grabbing a megaphone, Milner eyed for a moment the dark mass floating low on the surface as it slowly approached on a parallel reverse course. It was barely visible in the half moonlight but the shape of its kiosk immediately attracted Milner's curiosity: it was unlike any picture of German submarines he had seen in intelligence recognition books or photographs. Instead of being very low and sprinkled with rails and anti-aircraft gun platforms, the kiosk of that submarine was nearly twice the normal height of a German submarine kiosk and was well rounded, with no rails or other protuberances to break its smooth shape. There was however the familiar shape of a deck gun on the forward deck of the submarine, with sailors manning it, while a smaller gun mount was visible on the aft deck. Taking a sudden decision, Milner went to a nearby signal lamp mounted on a swivel mount

hooked to the bridge's bulwark and started sending a visual message, using the universal maritime alphabetical code.

'TO APPROACHING GERMAN SUBMARINE, WE ARE A RESCUE SHIP ENGAGED IN RESCUE WORK. WE WILL NOT FIRE IF YOU RETURN THE FAVOR.'

Milner then waited anxiously for the German's response, fervently hoping that the answer would not be an explosive shell. If that happened, his two 20mm automatic cannons would fare badly against such an opponent. To his relief, the return message came via signal lamp.

'TO RESCUE SHIP. WE WILL NOT ATTACK YOU IF YOU DON'T FIRE ON US. SINCERELY WISH YOU GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR WORK.'

Milner, pleased by that answer, however hurried to send another message.

'PLEASE PASS THE WORD TO THE OTHER SUBMARINES NOT TO ATTACK US.'

There was a slight delay this time before the signal lamp atop the submarine's kiosk blinked again.

'WHAT OTHER SUBMARINES?'

That answer left Milner open-mouthed with shock and disbelief as the German submarine sailed away in the darkness.

"Bloody hell! This must truly be the Devil's boat!"

17:44 (Halifax Time)

Convoy rescue ship M.F.A. COPELAND

On approach to Sydney Harbor, Cape Breton Island

As his ship was coming into sight of the port of Sydney, on the northeast coast of Cape Breton Island, William Milner eyed dubiously the Royal Canadian Navy corvette escorting the COPELAND to port. Two such warships had proved no match for the formidable predator that had decimated Convoy HX 155, so it was doubtful that one corvette would do him much good if that German submarine attacked again. Milner fervently wished that this would not be the case, as his internal decks and compartments were crammed with over 300 survivors, one third of them wounded. His ship had spent the whole night and most of the morning fishing out men from the water or linking up with lifeboats full of shivering sailors and passengers around the site of the convoy's attack. Unfortunately, Milner's sailors had mostly found dead men, frozen stiff in the frigid water.

With Rear-Admiral Wilson having died in the sinking of his convoy flagship, the MANCHESTER EXPORTER, and with their two escorting warships also sunk, the surviving ships of the convoy had quickly started to panic and break rank under the relentless enemy attacks. Some had continued on towards Argentia, while others had fled towards Sydney or had even turned tail and headed back to Halifax, something never seen before and that was sure to rattle quite a few admirals at the Admiralty.

Milner was studying the chart showing the approaches to Sydney Harbor when his radioman came to him with a printed message. The shaken look on the man's face told Milner at once that it had to be bad news. Taking the sheet of paper offered by the radioman, he read it quickly and immediately felt his blood freeze in his veins: Halifax was announcing to all ships that it was now temporarily closed to maritime traffic due to sea mines blocking its entrance channel. That had been found out the hard way in the morning, with two ships hitting mines and sinking in the middle of the channel before the Halifax authorities had understood what was happening. Minesweepers were now claimed to be working on clearing those mines, which had no doubt been laid by a German submarine, but the closure of Halifax Harbor, even for only a day or two, was bound to impact significantly on the convoy activity between Canada and England. Ironically, Milner learned later on that one of the two ships that had been sunk by mines was one of the cargo ships that had panicked and turned tail to seek refuge back in Halifax.

16:08 (London Time)

Saturday, October 18, 1941

Royal Navy Admiralty, London

United Kingdom

The faces around the large conference table already reflected a mix of discouragement, incredulity and worry even before Sir Percy Noble arrived and took his designated place at the table. The admiral at the head of the Western Approaches Command, which was charged with the safety of British shipping between Canada and Great Britain, suspected that the news about the disaster that had struck Convoy HX 155 had already started to percolate through the Admiralty. Unfortunately, what he had with him was not going to cheer them up. Sir Dudley Pound acknowledged his arrival

with a nod of the head, then looked around the table at his senior commanders and staff officers.

“Now that Admiral Noble has arrived from Liverpool, we may start this emergency meeting, gentlemen. As you may already know, a disaster has befallen Convoy HX 155 two nights ago, soon after it had left Halifax and as it was on its way to Argentia, where its American destroyer escort force was waiting. Admiral Noble will now brief us on the latest information about that calamitous event. Admiral Noble...”

“Thank you, Sir Dudley!” Said Noble before getting up and going to the big map of the Atlantic pinned to one wall. Grabbing a wooden pointer, he then started to speak from memory, leaving his info file near him on a chair.

“Gentlemen, Convoy HX 155 left Halifax Harbor in the early morning of the sixteenth, last Thursday, with 53 merchant ships, two escorting Canadian corvettes and one convoy rescue ship, and headed for Argentia in Newfoundland. At about 21:00 hours, local time, the first ship to be attacked, a tanker, was torpedoed and blew up in flames. Then, more ships were sunk at a rapid pace, implying that a whole group of German submarines was at work. Both corvettes were sunk one after the other prior to 22:00 hours, basically leaving the convoy defenseless. From then on, ships were torpedoed one after the other during the following hours, with some reportedly finished by gunfire from the surface. The convoy rescue ship COPELAND, while engaged in rescue work in the dark, saw a German submarine approach on the surface at around 00:25 hours. That submarine however did not fire on the COPELAND after the master of our ship signaled that he was a rescue ship. The submarine then left. This part is where things become murky, gentlemen. When the skipper of the COPELAND asked that submarine to advise the other German submarines around not to attack his ship, the response was that there were no other submarines around. Furthermore, the captain of the COPELAND, when debriefed in detail in Sydney, stated that the submarine he saw was like none he had seen before, even in picture or in silhouette recognition booklets. I will cover that matter more in detail in a moment, so please reserve your questions about this. After the commodore of the convoy was killed in the sinking of his ship, the convoy started to panic and break up, but not before a total of 34 merchant ships were lost from either torpedoes or gunfire.”

A wave of exclamations and remarks greeted his last sentence, forcing Sir Dudley to call for silence.

“Please, gentlemen, let Admiral Noble finish his presentation: there is quite a lot more yet.”

“Thank you, Sir Dudley. The bad news don't stop there, gentlemen. The next day, on the seventeenth, two ships that were either entering or exiting Halifax Harbor blew up on mines in the entrance channel and sank. The Harbor Master then had no choice but to close the port to traffic until minesweepers could clear the entrance channel. That work, which has cost us one minesweeper to date, is still ongoing and is expected to be completed by tomorrow, at which time Halifax will be declared open again to maritime traffic. You will understand that such a temporary closure, however short, will impact considerably on our convoy schedule and constitutes a severe blow to our war effort. Just the loss of those 34 merchant ships, 23 of which were tanker ships transporting fuel, is a painful blow to us, as we just lost about a quarter million tons of fuel, supplies and equipment.”

This time the admirals and senior officers sitting around the table managed to stay quiet, but the looks on their faces told Noble that they didn't like one bit the news he was giving.

“Now, on the business of that lone submarine that approached the COPELAND, the opinion of my staff is that no single German submarine could cause so much mayhem by itself. For one, over forty torpedoes were fired at the convoy, and I am talking only about the ones that hit. This represents the torpedo stowage capacity of at least three German submarines. Furthermore, at least twenty sea mines were sown at the entrance of Halifax Harbor, something that represents the load of one more submarine. Finally, the speed at which our ships were sunk militates in favor of an attack by multiple submarines. What the German submarine commander signaled to the COPELAND may have been simply an attempt at playing mind tricks on us. I will now take your questions, gentlemen.”

“Do we have an idea about how much time there was between the attack on the convoy and the mining of Halifax Harbor?” Asked Vice Admiral Max Horton, the commander of the British submarine arm. Noble considered carefully his answer before replying to Horton.

“If you consider that the attacks on the convoy died down at about one in the morning and that laying mine in the entrance channel of Halifax Harbor after sunrise would be insanely dangerous, thanks to the shallow depths in the channel, then Halifax could not be mined later than six or seven hours after the end of the attacks on our ship.

To cover the distance between the convoy ambush area and the entrance to Halifax Harbor in such little time would imply speeds of about twenty knots or more.”

“Thus an impossibility for one single German submarine to attack both places in the same night, the more so since our forces around Halifax must have come to full alert that night and would have forced the submarine sowing the mines to work underwater rather than on the surface.”

“I concur with your assessment, Sir Max. There is still the matter of that apparently new model of submarine seen by the COPELAND, but we have very little to go on about that.”

“What we have aplenty is evidence that our convoy protective measures around Halifax were grossly insufficient, Sir Percy.” Cut in Vice Admiral Tom Phillips, the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, his tone harsh. “To have 53 merchant ships be escorted only by two corvettes, and Canadian ones at that, sounds to me like either negligence or incompetence.”

Noble eyed with barely disguised contempt the vice admiral, whose ego was as big as his stature of 160 centimeters was small. Phillips was disliked by many at the Admiralty for his political opportunism and for being considered as a ‘desk admiral’ with a rigid mind and little imagination.

“Admiral Phillips, nobody is going to deny that we have a cruel shortage in destroyers and other escort ships. However, trying to blame someone as a consequence of that shortage will not help us one bit. As for our Canadian sailors, may I remind you that 153 of them died two nights ago. Don’t play politics on the back of my sailors! What we need to prevent the reoccurrence of such a disaster is more escort ships assigned to Halifax. I suggest that we should now find where we will get those extra ships, preferably destroyers rather than simple corvettes.”

Phillips was about to raise his voice at Noble but Sir Dudley Pound shut him up with an authoritative gesture of the hand.

“Sir Percy is right, Admiral Phillips. Now is the time to find solutions, not scapegoats. Let us now discuss where we could find those extra warships for Halifax.”

18:02 (Azores Time)

Saturday, October 25, 1941

Kriegsmarine supply ship M.S. CHARLOTTE SCHLIEMANN

At anchorage off Corvo Island, Azores (Portugal)

“Do you see anything?”

“No, Herr Kapitän! If our submarine doesn't show up soon, before sunset, it will have difficulties finding us.”

Kapitän Hans Rothe, captain of the supply ship CHARLOTTE SCHLIEMANN, nodded at that opinion given by his lookout. The island of Corvo was part of the Azores, a possession of Portugal, which had declared its neutrality in this war. Corvo was tiny, measuring only a bit over six kilometers by less than four kilometers, and sat right in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It would be easy for a submarine to miss it, especially at night. However, the U-boote Command of Admiral Dönitz obviously believed this particular resupply mission to be important, having taken the trouble of sending covertly via a Spanish cargo ship a large shipment of torpedoes, sea mines and shells, all packed in anonymous crates. Those torpedoes, mines and ammunition, along with fresh and canned foodstuff, had been delivered to the Spanish port of Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands, where the CHARLOTTE SCHLIEMANN had been at anchor most of the time since the start of the war two years ago. Transferring the ammunition and foodstuff aboard from the Spanish ship under the cover of night, Rothe had then waited for the coded message that would tell him when to leave Las Palmas to deliver his cargo to a U-boote at a pre-designated point designated in the message. He had received that said message seven days ago and had then left Las Palmas, arriving off Corvo early this afternoon and weighing anchor one kilometer off the only settlement and port on the island, Vila do Corvo. Since then, he had been anxiously waiting for the submarine he was supposed to resupply, hoping that no British warship would show up in the meantime. A startled shout from a lookout posted on the side of his ship opposite the coast of Corvo suddenly made him run to that side of the open bridge.

“KAPITÄN, BIG BUBBLES ARE RISING TO THE SURFACE JUST OFF OUR STARBOARD SIDE.”

Under the incredulous eyes of Rothe, the top of a submarine kiosk started appearing from the depths, to break through the surface of the water a mere ten meters beside his ship. The whole top deck of a submarine was soon through the surface and into the open air. With his crewmen running to the starboard side railings to look at the apparition from the deep, Rothe examined the newcomer from bow to stern: it was certainly no type of submarine that he had seen before. For one, the shape of its kiosk was a lot smoother than that of Type VII and Type IX boats, while the hull itself wasn't

shaped like that of a surface ship, but was round in section, except for a narrow flat upper deck supporting the tall central kiosk. Overall, it was a big boat, bigger than even a Type IX and over a hundred meters long, with a beam of approximately eight or nine meters.

“Mein Gott! This must be a secret model!”

The purpose of his mission here then came back to his mind as a large hatch opened on the frontal side of the base of the kiosk, with a man wearing the white cap of a submarine commander coming out and stepping on the forward deck of the boat before looking up and shouting.

“AHOY, CHARLOTTE SCHLIEMANN! I AM KORVETTENKAPITÄN OTTO KRETSCHMER, CAPTAIN OF THE U-800. I BELIEVE THAT YOU HAVE TORPEDOES, FUEL AND FOOD FOR ME.”

“WE CERTAINLY DO, KAPITÄN KRETSCHMER. YOU MAY CLIMB ABOARD MY SHIP, SO THAT WE COULD DISCUSS YOUR SUPPLY NEEDS.” Replied Rothe before twisting his head and shouting at his second officer. “START UNPACKING THE TORPEDOES AND MINES! MAN THE DECK CRANES! PASS A FUEL LINE TO THE U-800!”

As his men hurried to obey his orders, Rothe went to the starboard amidships access ladder, which was being lowered while ropes were being thrown to the submarine to pull it close and secure it alongside the supply ship. Two minutes later, a man in his mid to late twenties with a friendly face arrived at the top of the access ladder and saluted Rothe.

“Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer, requesting permission to come aboard.”

“Permission granted!” Replied, returning the salute before shaking hands with Kretschmer while smiling to him. “Kapitän Hans Rothe, master of the CHARLOTTE SCHLIEMANN. Welcome aboard!”

“Thank you! May I ask how many torpedoes and mines you have for me, and of what model? I just expended most of my fish and all my pills a week ago. Right now, I have a grand total of two G7a and one G7e left aboard and zero TMC mines.”

Rothe grinned as he took out of a pocket of his woolen coat a folded paper document, presenting it to Kretschmer.

“I believe that we will have plenty enough for your needs, Kapitän: I got a big delivery via Spain before leaving Las Palmas. Here is the manifest of the cargo I got

then. I was told specifically that all of it was to be reserved for your exclusive use. So, you must have been quite active, to expend your torpedo and mine loads like this?"

Kretschmer made a nod then, his expression sober.

"I was, and I cost thousands of lives to the British. I managed during the first phase of my patrol to sink the battleship KING GEORGE V, the aircraft carrier VICTORIOUS, two corvettes and 34 merchant ships of various types."

Rothe was nearly tempted to call him a liar on that, but it would have been grossly inappropriate, on top of being rude. Besides, Kretschmer seemed very serious indeed.

"Uh, how many torpedoes can you store exactly inside your U-800, Kretschmer?"

"If I fill all my tubes and all my storage racks, I can pack 68 fish, while I have 44 lateral launch tubes for TM Series sea mines."

"Sixty-eight torpedoes?! That's unheard of!"

Kretschmer, who had started studying the cargo manifest, briefly looked up from the document to answer Rothe with a straight face.

"That's because the World has never seen a submarine like the U-800 before, Herr Rothe. If Admiral Dönitz had a dozen boats like the U-800, then the British would lose the war at sea."

CHAPTER 6 – WINSTON’S SPECIAL À LA KRETSCHMER

09:28 (Halifax Time)

Wednesday, November 5, 1941

Control room, U-800

Ninety kilometers southeast of Halifax

“They are definitely warships, Herr Kapitän, about ten of them, including three big ones of at least cruiser size. They seem to be patrolling at slow speed off the Halifax Harbor entrance channel. One of them is actively pinging its ASDIC in a search pattern. From the frequency of the pinging, I would say that it is not a British set.”

“Hum, probably Americans then, since the Canadians use British ASDIC equipment.” Said softly Otto Kretschmer, standing over his hydrophone array operator in the sonar section. He then turned his head towards the adjacent electronic warfare section. “Do you have anything on your detectors, Hoth?”

“I have one metric band search radar sweeping from that group of warships, Herr Kapitän, and it is an American set, judging from the frequency of the pulses. I have as well a couple of British ship radars to the northeast, but quite distant.”

Otto mentally analyzed for a moment that information, then looked at Leutnant Streib, who was manning the watch periscope. They had travelled back from the Azores mostly on schnorchel, with their watch periscope and EW mast above the surface in order to detect any approaching possible threat.

“Leutnant Streib, what do you see around us?”

“Nothing but fog thick enough to slice with a knife, Herr Kapitän.”

“Very well! Helm, continue on present heading but reduce speed to ten knots. We will further reduce speed when close to those American warships.”

“Reducing speed to ten knots, aye Herr Kapitän!”

“What would such a group of American warships do here, off Halifax, Kapitän?”
Asked Franz Streib, curious.

“There are a couple of possibilities, including that those warships may have escorted some high value ship or ships to Halifax. They also could be on their way to Iceland as escorts for a convoy. Thus, they could be departing in the following days

while screening an important convoy to England. If that's the case, only a troop convoy would merit such a strong escort in my opinion."

"And would we have the right to attack them, according to international law, Herr Kapitän?"

Otto's expression hardened somewhat, as the question touched something he felt quite strongly about.

"Yes, we would! The Americans may still be officially neutral in this war, but they are inside the territorial waters of a declared combatant state and, if they really are going to escort British or Canadian soldiers, will be perfectly legitimate targets for us. The same applies if they attack us in Canadian waters, as we would have the right of self-defense. Those Americans have been playing quite an hypocritical game up to now, providing war supplies and equipment to the British and even escorting British convoys at sea while claiming to be neutral, but I will not hesitate to remind them of the realities of war if they give me an excuse to attack them. Too many German lives have been lost due to the war assistance they are giving to the British."

Many heads nodded at those words around the control room. In truth, many in Germany believed that Great Britain would have been defeated by now and the war put to an end, if not for the huge logistical and financial support given to the British by the Americans.

While keeping a vigilant acoustic, radar and radio listening watch, the U-800 silently made its way towards Halifax at ten knots until down to forty kilometers from the American flotilla, which appeared to be slowly going along a long oval circuit. With the American radar signal now becoming dangerously strong, Otto decided that it was time to become really discreet.

"Machines, stop the diesels! Switch to batteries! Retract the schnorchel and our masts! Helm, slow down to five knots! Make your depth twenty meters as soon as the schnorchel is secured! Rig for silent running!"

The few German sailors who had not yet put on their special felt slippers over their boots did so then, in order to cut as much the noise they made. Soon, the U-800 turned into a silent ghost slipping through the dark blue waters. Otto then chose to climb up to the forward underwater watch dome, to watch visually for the sight of any ship coming close to his submarine. With the sunlight diluted by the surface fog still enough to light the ocean to some degree, the bottom of the hull of any ships approaching the U-800 would be visible from below, something that Otto fully counted on. As his hydrophone

operators warned him that the bearing of the American ships was now changing at a growing rate, a sure sign that they were getting quite close, Otto raised his binoculars to his eyes and started scanning the surface of the ocean from below. It took him less than a minute to spot a number of gray shapes on the surface, shapes that were further highlighted by the white wakes made by the ships as they cut through the waves.

"Helm, reduce speed further to two knots! Turn starboard to heading 340 and go to depth of thirty meters."

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!"

With his submarine now on a reverse parallel course to the path of the American flotilla, Otto was soon able to detail from less than eighty meters the underside of the American ships as they passed by him at a speed of twelve knots, their own screws and machinery noise drowning the little noise made by the submarine and making it nearly impossible to detect him, short of direct active sonar pinging. Armed with a ship visual recognition book, Otto was able to classify with fair accuracy the type and size of the warships parading above him. What he saw made him frown.

"A fleet light carrier, two heavy cruisers and seven destroyers? A simple supply convoy certainly wouldn't rate such a strong escort, especially for the carrier."

That made him think furiously about the significance of the presence of such a powerful group of American warships here, just off Halifax. He knew well that American ships already routinely escorted British supply convoys between Newfoundland and Iceland, but these escort forces consisted only of destroyers up to now. If those American warships were really here to escort a British convoy towards England, then that convoy had to be exceptionally important, which meant that he, Otto Kretschmer, wanted badly to hit it. With this in mind, he thought about the best location for his submarine to be when that British convoy would come out. That, however, was a difficult decision to make, as both close and remote locations from the harbor had advantages and disadvantages. There was also the problem that he didn't know when that convoy would come out of Halifax. However, those American warships wouldn't keep circling around off Halifax, burning a lot of fuel, if that convoy was not due to come out soon. Finally taking a decision, Otto made his helmsman turn directly towards the entrance channel of Halifax Harbor, about sixteen kilometers away by now, while increasing speed to six knots.

The U-800 was only a few kilometers from the entrance channel when Otto got a warning by intercom from his hydrophone operators.

"Herr Kapitän, we are just now picking noises of anchors being pulled up and engines starting straight ahead. From the noise, I would say that we have at least three or four very big ships ahead, pretty close to us. They must have been at anchor outside the harbor."

"At anchor outside the harbor?" Said Otto, puzzled. If those ships were due to go to England under escort, then weighing anchor outside a port didn't make any sense, even if you took account of the thick fog. One would simply wait inside the harbor for the fog to dissipate, then would come out. However, 'very big ships' could only mean 'troopships' to Otto, if they were not warships. If those big ships turned out to be warships, meaning possibly battleships, then Otto wanted to know it quickly, in order to be able to decide what to do about them. Either way, his original plan to lay on the bottom near the entrance channel, so that he could quietly slip under an outgoing convoy and thus lose himself among the loud noise generated by the ships, still sounded good to him. Now concentrating his attention ahead and above, Otto soon started seeing the propellers and hull bottom of a large ship. Giving a series of orders by intercom to his helmsman, he made his submarine veer to starboard, then to port, so that he could be a few hundred meters off the side of that ship. To his astonishment, he soon found out that the said ship was enormous, over 200 meter-long, and was no warship. It had to be a passenger liner, probably converted to transport troops by the thousands. Furthermore, five other large ships, two of them as big or bigger than the first one, were also pulling up anchor and starting their engines nearby. Otto's heart jumped in his chest when he understood that he was looking at a troop convoy with a capacity to carry a whole army division. Unable to resist the temptation and wanting badly to confirm his suspicions, he gave a series of quick orders from his position in the underwater observation dome.

"Herr Streib, have all our tubes ready to fire on short notice and stand by at the fire control computer. Have us come slowly to periscope depth: if this is what I think, we may have to shoot torpedoes from close range at multiple troopships."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!" Replied the Third Watch Officer, excitement detectable in his voice.

As his crew got ready for combat and as his submarine slowly rose to periscope depth, Otto suddenly realized that something was wrong: the big troopships were now entering the harbor entrance channel, not leaving Halifax! Completely confused by that, he nonetheless waited for his submarine to be just under the surface, then slid down the ladder to the control room to go take position at the attack periscope, raising its optical head just above water with the flip of a switch. The ship that he saw less than 400 meters was easy enough to recognize for a naval officer like him.

“Mein Gott! We have the passenger liner SS Washington, painted in gray war livery, just in front of us. I can also see the SS Manhattan and the SS America, all painted in gray, plus three smaller liners. They are now making their way into Halifax Harbor.”

First lowering the head of his attack periscope before someone aboard the big liners saw it, he then looked at his watch officer.

“Change of plan: we are not attacking at this time, as those ships are going in Halifax, probably to go load up with British or Canadian troops. We will instead quietly take some distance, so that we could take a safe watch position far enough to be able to use our schnorchel and thus conserve battery power for a future attack. Dive to a depth of 25 meters and take Heading 085, speed of five knots.”

“Depth of 25 meters, Heading 085 at five knots, aye, Herr Kapitän!”

With many crewmembers probably wondering by now what was going on, the U-800 quietly slipped away from Halifax, leaving the American warships flotilla to its starboard side. Those American warships however broke off their waiting circuit and then also entered Halifax harbor behind the troopships, confirming to Otto that they were here to escort the converted liners.

Once he was in what he considered a safe but good watch position, Otto made his submarine stop and assembled his officers in the officers' mess for an impromptu command meeting. After telling his officers what he had seen of both the American escort force and the six converted liner ships, he looked around the table of the mess at his officers.

“We now have what seems to be a group of American liners converted into troopships and escorted by a very strong American escort flotilla that includes an aircraft carrier, with the liners probably going to load up with British or Canadian troops in Halifax. Just the strength of the escort flotilla is enough to convince me that this

American convoy is of great importance to the British. If it would be a purely American convoy, with American troops onboard, then it would be unlikely to stop like this in Halifax, as all the ships I saw have more than enough range to make it to England or the Mediterranean from American Atlantic Coast ports without the need to refuel in Halifax. What do you think, my friends?"

"I agree with you, Herr Kapitän." Said Ulrich Von Wittgenstein. "This must be an American convoy about to load up with Canadian troops heading for England. It would thus be our duty to do everything possible to stop such a convoy from getting to England."

"Could these American liners be going to deliver troops to Iceland instead?" Asked Herman Spielberger, the second watch officer. Otto shook his head at that.

"Who would waste a whole army division just to defend Iceland? That would be stupid."

"What if those troops to be loaded in Halifax were headed to somewhere else than England?" Cut in Werner Jentz, the chief engineer. "The British Empire is vast and it has plenty of potential trouble spots around the Middle East, India and Asia."

"Hum, that is actually a very good point, Werner." Said Otto, thoughtful.

"Shouldn't we alert our command headquarters in France about this convoy, Herr Kapitän?" Asked Gustav Munchausen, the assistant engineer officer, attracting a dubious look from Otto.

"Do you know how many radio direction finding stations there could be in and around Halifax, not counting those American warships offshore? If we radioed a message now, we might as well pop up a flare to signal our position away."

"Didn't you know why our captain is nicknamed 'Silent Otto', Gustav?" Joked Ulrich Von Wittgenstein while elbowing Munchausen. "He likes to be invisible...to everybody."

"Well, with this said," cut in Otto, "I've made my mind to wait here at schnorchel depth until those big troopships come out of Halifax. Then we will attack them, ideally before their escort ships can form around them, and while they are still in Canadian waters."

"What if those American warships attack us then or afterwards?" Asked Werner Jentz. Otto answered at once, his expression firm.

"Then we will exercise our right of self-defense. Those American liners will be transporting enemy soldiers to an enemy land, which makes them legitimate targets of

war, irrespective of any hypocritical protests President Roosevelt could make afterwards.”

Otto and his crew then settled in for a possibly long wait, the EW mast and watch periscope of the U-800 popping out at intervals and with its schnorchel mast raised during nighttime in order to replenish the batteries. The next day, on November sixth, they heard and saw a big, strongly escorted British convoy pass by, coming from the East, and then enter Halifax Harbor. The British transport ships were actually escorted by a very powerful American escort fleet consisting of one battleship, one fleet carrier, two light cruisers and a full destroyer squadron. That American escort force left as soon as it reached Halifax, handing over convoy protection duty to the task group led by the carrier USS RANGER. Such an escort arrangement, with the United States supposedly being still a neutral state in this war, was both completely out of the ordinary and highly irregular according to the international laws of war. That would normally have pushed most submarine commanders to immediately fire up a radio report back to France, to alert Admiral Dönitz about this. However, Otto Kretschmer suspected that doing such a thing would probably signal him to the enemy and attract a whole fleet on top of him. The British transport ships left Halifax three days later with a much smaller escort than the one that had accompanied them from England,. Otto was tempted for a moment to attack those British ships but refrained from doing so, now certain that a big prize was going to eventually come out of Halifax in the next few days. He now knew that those British troops would not be sailing on the American troopships to go to England, since they had just come from there. Werner Jentz's suggestion that they would be heading towards some distant part of the British Empire sounded more and more like the correct guess.

07:32 (Halifax Time)

Monday, November 10, 1941

U-800 control room, waiting position off Halifax

“Kapitän! We have multiple ships noise coming from the mouth of Halifax' entrance channel: ships are coming out.”

“What do we have on radar and radio listening?” Asked at once Otto while approaching the sonar section. The operators in the next compartment shouted their answer.

“Nothing yet on radio, Herr Kapitän, but that American surveillance radar from the carrier USS RANGER can be heard weakly now.”

“Very well, this is the moment that we had been waiting for. Leutnant Spielberg, call the crew to battle stations! Machines: cut the diesels, go to battery and retract the schnorchel. Helm, take Heading 304, speed: ten knots at depth of twenty meters. We are going to take our preselected ambush position. Hydrophones, are the American destroyers pinging their ASDIC sets on active?”

“Affirmative, Herr Kapitän! However, the way they are accelerating now to clear the entrance channel, they won’t be able to hear much on passive mode, while their pinging will be quite ineffective.”

“I won’t complain about that. Leutnant Spielberg, make sure that both our forward and aft underwater watch domes are manned and vigilant.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän!”

With its own radiating noise much less than that of conventional U-bootes, thanks to the ducted propeller, noise insulation and raft-mounted engines of its design, the U-800 glided nearly silently to its chosen ambush position a few hundred meters southeast of Rockhead Shoal, outside of Halifax’ entrance channel, where the bottom lay at a depth averaging 35 meters. The American warships passed by the U-800, unaware of the submarine, while speeding towards what looked like an assembly point about twelve kilometers south of the port. The acoustic signature of the U-800 was anyway soon drowned out completely by the noise from the powerful machinery of the carrier USS RANGER and of the heavy cruisers USS QUINCY and USS VINCENNES, coming out single file behind the destroyers. Otto was thus able to get to his selected ambush point undetected and wait there at periscope depth, but with the top of its periscopes left just under the waves. The first of the big converted American liners started coming out of the entrance channel maybe fifteen minutes later, a Canadian destroyer in the lead. However, that destroyer, unlike the American ones, was not pinging his ASDIC set on active mode and did not detect the U-800. Otto shook his head at that: while the British Navy had been fairly quick in learning its lessons from the blows given by German submarines, the Royal Canadian Navy was still quite amateurish, hampered by

inexperienced crews, insufficient training and inadequate equipment. In contrast, Otto had been at the command of submarines for more than two years now and had conducted twelve war patrols, notwithstanding the present one. His crewmen were all veterans with at least two war patrols under their belts, while he had personally selected the officers of the U-800, training them and the crew for months as a whole. Otto also had a good four days to think about his attack plan, while he had quite a good knowledge of the ships that were to become his targets.

One of the watchmen in the forward underwater observation dome was the first to call a warning by intercom to Otto, who was standing by at the attack periscope.

"Herr Kapitän, we have the SS WASHINGTON coming out of the entrance channel, followed about 600 meters behind by another liner. They are going at about eight knots at this time and should pass approximately 600 to 700 meters from our bow."

"Understood! Attention, all hands! We will execute the attack plan we rehearsed as discussed. We will fire our bow tubes first, using G7e torpedoes. Fire control solution team: stand by for my inputs and commands! Trim and ballasts control, be ready to compensate for rapid torpedo fire."

That last command, which would sound superfluous to the uninitiated, was actually very important. With torpedoes each weighing over a ton and a half and with submarines' trim balance and depth keeping being very sensitive to any change of mass, each torpedo firing had to be compensated for by admitting an equivalent mass of water in properly located trim tanks. With rapid ripple fire, trimming was even more critical, to avoid the submarine breaking accidentally the surface of the ocean at the time of maximum danger. Thankfully, Otto's men were old hands at that game and were fully ready. As the watchmen in the forward dome signaled the coming out of the third liner, Otto raised the top of his periscope out of the water for a few seconds, just long enough to register and announce out loud the bearings of the three big liners about to pass in front of him in single file. Lowering his periscope head while his fire control solution team entered that data in their electro-mechanical calculator, Otto waited another twenty seconds, then raised again his periscope head and registered the new bearings for his three first targets, lowering again his periscope head after that. Ulrich Von Wittgenstein spoke up less than fifteen seconds later.

"Fire solutions ready!"

Raising his periscope head for the third time, Otto pointed it at the port side of the SS MANHATTAN, which was third in line and furthest from his submarine.

“First target, bearing 043 relative, fire Tubes One and Two!”

The submarine shuddered slightly twice as the two G7e electrically-propelled torpedoes were ejected in quick succession from their launch tubes in the bow. With one crewman clocking their running time, Otto pointed his attack periscope at the second farthest liner, the SS AMERICA.

“Second target, bearing 021 relative, fire Tubes Three, Four and Five!”

The U-800 shuddered again, three times, and Otto pointed at his nearest target, the SS WASHINGTON. From the mere distance of 700 meters, he was able to see that it had been renamed the ‘MOUNT VERNON’.

“Third target, bearing 005 relative, fire Tubes Six, Seven and Eight!”

As soon as his three last bow tubes had fired, Otto lowered his periscope head and shouted commands.

“HELM, STEER PORT TO HEADING 240, SPEED TWENTY KNOTS AND DEPTH OF FIFTEEN METERS! HERR VON WITTGENSTEIN, START CLOCKING THIS RUN AND WARN ME AFTER FOUR MINUTES! MINES LAUNCH TUBES CONTROL, BE READY TO EJECT TWELVE MINES IN RAPID SEQUENCE ON MY COMMAND! SET THEM ON BOTH MAGNETIC AND ACOUSTIC TRIGGERS! FORWARD TORPEDO ROOM, RELOAD OUR BOW TUBES AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN!”

As the U-800 sped through the water, its crew tense and ready to react to anything, the men in the forward torpedo room started reloading the eight bow torpedo tubes, working the controls of their two huge chain-driven torpedo carrousel, each containing twenty torpedoes. The elevating loading trays of each vertical pair of tubes came up to pick up fresh torpedoes from the bottom feeding openings of the carrousel, with a torpedo dropping a couple of centimeters on each tray before the latter lowered to line up with an opened torpedo tube. Hydraulic rammers then pushed the fresh torpedoes in their assigned tubes. The whole procedure took less than eight minutes but was barely starting when the distant, muffled noise of underwater detonations started to be heard in quick succession, making the German submariners briefly shout in triumph. Otto Kretschmer had just used a tactic an artillery officer would call a ‘time-on-target fire mission’. Firing in succession his torpedoes at his targets in order of diminishing distance from his submarine, he had thus ensured that his torpedoes would all hit and

explode at around the same time, not giving a chance to the enemy to react to the first explosions and also giving the impression that many submarines were attacking the convoy at once. Otto himself briefly shouted with joy as all of his eight torpedoes ran true and hit their respective targets, exploding on impact. Briefly raising his periscope head out of the water, he gave a quick look at his three victims: all three liners were now distinctly slowing down quickly and were even starting already to develop a list to port. He saw as well the three other liners of the convoy, aft of the stricken liners and coming out of harbor in single file. He was going to be able to take care of them soon enough. First, however, he had to secure his back against the American and Canadian escort ships. Turning his periscope around, he was able to quickly acquire visually the old Canadian destroyer that had been leading the liners, which was now performing a hard turn to port maybe two kilometers ahead. As for the American destroyers, four of them were also turning towards the harbor entrance but they were a good five kilometers away and would take some time to arrive on the scene.

"Fire control team, possible next target, bearing 010 relative. Sonar, give me one active ping to get the distance for that next target!"

Less than four seconds later, the U-800 used its advanced low frequency active bow sonar for the first time in combat.

BONG

The low frequency sound pulse, much more powerful than the ones from the standard British and American high-frequency sonar sets of the time, started sending back echoes within seconds as it painted in succession the American and Canadian ships around the U-800, giving a complete and accurate tactical picture to Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, who hurried to record and plot it on his tactical plot table. At the same time, the sonar operator shouted his information towards Otto.

"RANGE TO TARGET AT BEARING 010 RELATIVE: 1,700 METERS!"

"THANK YOU, SONAR! HELM, BE READY TO TURN NINETY DEGREES TO STARBOARD AT MY COMMAND! MINES FIRE CONTROL, YOU WILL START SOWING TWELVE MINES AT ONE HUNDRED METER INTERVALS AS SOON AS WE TURN TO STARBOARD."

"AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!"

Maybe a minute later, with the Canadian destroyer rushing in at high speed, Von Wittgenstein spoke up.

"Four minutes on the clock for our run, Herr Kapitän!"

"Thank you! HELM, TURN NINETY DEGREES TO STARBOARD NOW! REDUCE SPEED TO FIVE KNOTS! MINES CONTROL, START EJECTING YOUR MINES IN FIVE SECONDS!"

As the U-800 started turning hard to starboard, rolling in its turn like an aircraft and forcing its crewmembers to grab solidly something fixed to the deck, the operator at the control panel of the 44 sea mines launch tubes, whose outer doors on the flanks of the submarine were already opened, started ejecting his two-ton sea mines at intervals of 45 seconds. While the U-800 was spewing its deadly eggs, Otto pointed his attack periscope at the incoming Canadian destroyer, which was apparently rushing in blind and was going to pass to the starboard side of his stern.

"Target, bearing 206 relative, mark!"

"Bearing entered!"

Otto waited a few seconds, during which he kept his periscope head under the surface, then popped his periscope up again.

"Target, second bearing 198 relative, mark!"

"Bearing entered... Fire solution in!"

"Match bearings and fire Tubes Nine and Ten!"

Otto gave another order just after the two torpedoes had left their stern tubes.

"Stern torpedo room, reload immediately Tubes Nine and Ten with two G7a high speed torpedoes!"

He then waited nervously for the results of his two last torpedoes. To his chagrin, only one hit the Canadian destroyer, but a quick look with his periscope up showed him that this particular opponent had been severely hit at the level of his engine room and was slowing down. There were however four American destroyers bearing down towards him at 35 knots. *'Good! They won't hear a thing on their sonar at that speed and will probably grenade blindly around.'* Thought Otto, who concentrated his attention next on the liners of the convoy. The three biggest ones, which he had hit on his first salvo, were definitely in trouble, with developing lists to port and speed down to only a few knots. The three other liners of the convoy were however accelerating and passing to starboard of the stricken liners, squeezing past them in the relatively narrow navigation channel and obviously trying to get out of the constricting waters of the harbor approaches and nearer to their waiting American escort ships. Otto sighted his

periscope at the liner trying to push ahead and was able to read its name, painted on the bow.

“In a hurry to slip away, LEONARD WOOD? Not so fast!”

Otto waited a couple of minutes more, time to complete the sowing of his twelve first sea mines, then had his helmsman turn to starboard again to go down the approach to the entrance channel of Halifax Harbor. With the big, 21,900-ton LEONARD WOOD coming nearly straight at him, Otto had an easy job of firing two torpedoes down the throat of the liner. Hitting the forward section of the hull just aft of the bow and on the starboard side, the explosion of the two torpedoes created huge holes in the bow section, with the forward speed of fourteen knots of the ship making even more furious the rushing in of water. The unfortunate ex-SS WESTERN WORLD literally dug down under the waves, its watertight doors giving up in quick succession under the water pressure. The more than 1,800 British soldiers of the 18th Infantry Division aboard the liner were quickly scrambling to survive as their ship sank rapidly by the bow.

While still going towards the entrance of the harbor, Otto turned his periscope to aft, sighting in the Canadian and American destroyers, the biggest immediate threats to him. The old Canadian four-stacker destroyer was apparently out of the fight, listing severely and nearly immobile in the water. That left four much more modern American destroyers bearing down on him at full speed. He however had a bad surprise waiting for them.

“Helm, turn to starboard, Heading 080. Stay at five knots and a depth of fifteen meters. Sea mine control, start sowing another twelve mines now, as a second layer of our improvised minefield.”

With its periscope head again below the surface, the U-800 sailed across the bows of the sinking LEONARD WOOD and MOUNT VERNON, returning towards its original attack position while sowing mines behind it. Suddenly alerted by his watchmen in their underwater watch domes that a liner was trying to pass between the SS MANHATTAN and SS AMERICA, Otto raised and pointed his periscope head, just in time to see the ex-SS AMERICA ram the side of the ex-SS PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT, which had turned across its bow and miscalculated its turn in the panic of the moment. That was just to Otto's taste, who hurriedly pointed his submarine to port and fired two torpedoes at the now wounded ex-PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT. That left intact only one troopship, the smallest one. That liner, last in line, had turned hard to port and was speeding past

the stern of the ex-SS AMERICA. With no other ships in the way, it now had a fair chance to make it to the open sea and its escort ships. Otto however left it no chance, firing a spread of three torpedoes at it from less than 500 meters. Its starboard side ripped open and with its engine rooms filling with water, the ORIZABA quickly came to a stop, taking a heavy list quickly. Nearly stopping his submarine, Otto did a quick tour of the horizon with his periscope to reassess the situation. All the troopships were now hit and either sinking or heavily damaged, while the American destroyers were still not on the scene and wouldn't be for at least another three minutes. Knowing that he had to ensure the complete destruction of the troopships, Otto started firing additional torpedoes in them, distributing his torpedoes according to the degree of damage already sustained by each troopship. The MOUNT VERNON and WEST POINT ended up being hit by a total of seven torpedoes each, the WAKEFIELD getting a total of five torpedoes, the JOSEPH T. DICKMAN and LEONARD WOOD three torpedoes each and the ORIZABA capsizing and sinking after a fourth hit. By now, the frigid waters of the harbor approaches were covered with thousands of men desperately swimming on the surface or rowing in lifeboats.

The crewmen of the forward torpedo compartment were still frantically refilling their eight launch tubes when a muffled but powerful underwater explosion at some distance alerted Otto to the threat looming in his rear. Pointing his periscope towards the open sea, he grinned on seeing that one of the American destroyers had just hit a sea mine and was now limping in the water, a gaping hole in its side. However, three more American destroyers, seeing the fate of their leader, had veered hard to starboard at once, potentially avoiding the U-800's minefield, and were quickly passing across the bows of the sinking LEONARD WOOD and MOUNT VERNON, intent on sweeping the approaches to the harbor and find the submarine(s) which had caused such mayhem to date. However, Otto was in no mood to make life easy for them. In fact, he was now resolved to give a stinging lesson to those hypocritical Americans, now that he had a good excuse to do so. Ordering his mines operator to eject in succession his last sea mines, Otto made his helmsman come out from the harbor's approaches at silent speed, getting to deeper waters where he could better maneuver and hide. Their sonar sets hopelessly filled with the loud noises of metal ripping apart, watertight doors giving up and ships breaking up and sinking, the American destroyers searched in vain for over forty minutes, not finding a single submarine while being witnesses to a military disaster

of the first order for both Great Britain and for the United States. The only thing they got out of their search was to see the destroyer USS TRIPPE hit a mine and break in two, with the unfortunate ship sinking in minutes and taking most of its crew down with it.

10:31 (Halifax Time)

Bridge of the destroyer USS WAINWRIGHT (DD-419)

Destroyer screen of U.S. Task Force 14, off Halifax

United States Navy Captain Thomas C. Kinkaid, Screen Commander of the secret Task Force 14, was both frustrated and furious. His destroyers had done everything by the book and had taken all the possible precautions against an attack by German submarines, yet this had happened. It should not have been possible, not with the number of ships and planes that had been patrolling those waters constantly for days and weeks. His destroyers had reacted at once to the first torpedo hits and had come at full speed to close off the approaches to Halifax Harbor and then had thoroughly searched the area with their sonar sets, in vain. With a submerged top speed limited to 7.5 knots, the German submarines that would have been inside that zone should not have had time to escape. Also, no radar or visual contacts had been seen on the surface for miles around. It all sounded like pure sorcery. However, as impossible as this sounded, the United States was still stuck with both a military disaster and a political mess on its hands. First, there was the loss of six American liners, three of them the biggest and most prestigious in the American civilian fleet, plus the loss of the USS TRIPPE and the damaging of the USS MCDUGAL. Then, there was the business of German submarines finding and hitting an American naval convoy full of British soldiers embarked at a Canadian port. Task Force 14 was a secret operation that directly violated the American Neutrality Act passed by the Congress and signed by President Roosevelt. Roosevelt had secretly arranged the operation with Prime Minister Churchill, in order to help the British prime minister send badly needed reinforcements to the Middle East and India. The U.S. Congress and the isolationist elements in the United States would go bonkers once news of this would come out. There was not even a chance that such a disaster could be hidden for more than a few weeks from the American public now, not when such prestigious liners had been sunk and considering the number of witnesses to it around Halifax.

The noise of a series of distant explosions then made the 53 year-old Kinkaid snap his head around towards the carrier USS RANGER, which had just turned into the wind a few kilometers to the south in order to launch aircraft that would hunt for the German submarines that had attacked the convoy. The old naval officer's hair nearly rose on his head and his eyes and mouth opened wide on seeing no less than four huge water geysers that had just risen along its port side. Three more geysers had also erupted along the side of the USS ROWAN, the destroyer tasked with escorting the aircraft carrier. The destroyer survived the torpedo hits for less than a minute, breaking up in two and sinking as Kinkaid frantically regrouped his three other destroyers still intact and ran to the help of the stricken carrier and of the two heavy cruisers of the task force, which had no anti-submarine defenses by themselves whatsoever. Two more torpedoes hit the USS RANGER a minute later, igniting the aviation gasoline vapors from the carrier's ruptured aviation fuel tanks and pipes and putting it ablaze from end to end. The commanders of the cruisers USS QUINCY and USS VINCENNES understood the lesson and didn't slow down or stop to help rescue survivors from the RANGER and the ROWAN, realizing that they would then become perfect targets for the German submarines obviously still lurking in the area. They instead went to full speed and started zigzagging in order to avoid any torpedoes fired at them. That left the surviving destroyers of Captain Kinkaid alone to both secure the zone around the burning carrier and rescue the survivors.

The next two hours were both stressful and heartbreaking, with the destroyer men fishing out hundreds of sailors from the USS ROWAN and from the USS RANGER. Many of the survivors from the latter sported hideous burns from the flaming aviation fuel of the carrier, while hundreds of men were already beyond help, either having drowned or having frozen to death in the frigid November waters off Halifax. The heavy cruisers QUINCY and VINCENNES then decided that it was safe enough after all that time to approach and join the rescue effort. Dozens of Canadian ships were on their part rescuing the survivors from the troopships near the harbor's entrance. Kinkaid radioed at once to the cruisers to stay away as a precaution, but was ignored by the captain of the VINCENNES, and the two cruisers continued to approach while slowing down. To the renewed fury of Kinkaid, a German submarine nearby proved him right and promptly fired four torpedoes at each of the cruisers as they were stopping to put their boats in the water, hitting both ships solidly. The subsequent intense anti-submarine sweep

launched by Kinkaid found nothing and only cost him the USS RHIND, hit and sunk by two torpedoes before it could even gain speed to join the sweep. The cruiser QUINCY sank twenty minutes later, while the VINCENNES hit a sea mine and sank while being towed towards Halifax Harbor.

21:19 (Paris Time)

Saturday, November 22, 1941

Submarine bunker complex of Keroman I, port of Lorient

Coast of Brittany, France

Admiral Karl Dönitz had made a point of being present for the arrival of the U-800, first because of the huge success of Kretschmer's patrol, second because he was anxious to get something more elaborate than the terse radio report sent by the U-800 twelve days ago, as it was starting its transatlantic trip back to Europe. In that, Kretschmer had truly lived up to his nickname of 'Silent Otto'. Dönitz however had made certain that the access to the submarine pen reserved for the U-800 would be severely restricted and would especially exclude any non-German worker. It was now clear to Dönitz, from intercepted radio messages sent in clear by panicked crews of torpedoed ships and from various intelligence reports, that the British and the Americans still believed that a whole pack of U-bootes had attacked and decimated both a British convoy leaving Halifax on October 16 and the not so secret anymore American troop convoy full of British soldiers out of Halifax on November 10. If they could be made to continue to believe that, it would be most convenient to Dönitz, for many reasons. First was the psychological effect on the British and Americans of believing that whole groups of U-bootes could operate with impunity close to Halifax, something that was bound to make them reinforce greatly the defenses of that area at the detriment of other areas, thus making it easier for other German submarines to conduct their operations elsewhere. Second, as long as they didn't get an inkling of the true capabilities of the U-800, particularly its top submerged speed, endurance on battery and the size of its armament, they were not going to be able to find proper countermeasures to it.

Kapitän zur See Eberhard Godt, Dönitz' chief of staff, suddenly spoke up, taking his superior out of his reveries.

"There it is, Herr Admiral! The U-800 is about to enter the pen."

The other officers, sailors and technicians present in the heavily protected pen of the giant submarine bunker all stared with unmitigated curiosity at the completely unfamiliar shape of the submarine now entering the reinforced concrete structure. Dönitz smiled on seeing the improvised flag rope attached to the extended attack periscope of the U-800: attached to it were 52 small triangular pennants, one for each of the ships sunk by Kretschmer during his epic war patrol. The other Germans present were also obviously impressed by the multitude of victory pennants.

"I think that the 'Tonnage King' is now going to be impossible to dethrone, my good Godt."

"Indeed, Herr Admiral! There is bound to be much talk in our submariners' messes tonight."

"I hope not!" Said Dönitz, his tone hardening. "The U-800 is to be kept as secret as possible. Please remind our U-boote crews of this."

"The crew of U-800 as well, Herr Admiral?"

"Especially the crew of the U-800! With the success they had on their patrol, they are bound to want to go brag about it in every Paris nightclub, bar and bordello they will visit."

"Quite true!"

The two senior officers then looked on in silence as sailors threw thick ropes to the submariners on the deck of the submarine, in order to tie it to the concrete quay of the pen. A gangway was soon put in place, permitting Dönitz and Godt to go down to the forward deck casing of the U-800, where they were greeted by Otto Kretschmer and by a sailor who blew the whistle traditionally used to mark the arrival of a high ranking visitor. Kretschmer and Dönitz exchanged military style salutes before shaking hands.

"Welcome aboard the U-800, Herr Admiral."

"Thank you, Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer. You certainly put your new boat to good use during your patrol."

"I must say that the U-800 is a pure dream, Herr Admiral. We definitely need more boats like it."

To Otto's surprise, his last remark made Dönitz' smile fade away.

"I am afraid that it will take some time before that could happen, my dear Kretschmer."

"But, why? The U-800's design is way superior to any of our other U-boote types."

"I know and I am not disputing that. However, we were hit by a piece of incredible bad luck while you were at sea. To make a long story short, British bombers hit the Krupp Germaniawerft shipyards in Kiel one evening two weeks ago. The damage was generally light but two bombs hit the offices of the design section. Doctor Gustav Premingen, who often worked late at night, was killed, while the blueprints for the U-800 were burned away."

"But, but, that's a true disaster for us, Herr Admiral!" Could only say the shocked and stunned Otto. "We need more submarines like the U-800: they would be our key to victory at sea."

"I do not doubt that, my dear Kretschmer, especially after considering the results of your patrol. However, not all is lost. While the complete blueprints for the U-800 were destroyed, copies of the blueprints for its sub-components were kept at the offices of the various sub-contractors involved with the building of the U-800. We are presently hard at work assembling those copies, so that we could reconstitute at least partly the design of your Type XX U-800. It will take some time and the final product may not look exactly like the U-800, but we will eventually produce a new class of U-boats, to be named the Type XXI."

"So, my U-800 will stay unique, Herr Admiral?"

"Like you, Kretschmer." Replied Dönitz, smiling, before wiggling an index at him. "By the way, you will really have to learn to report more frequently by radio: your long silences made me quite nervous."

"Herr Admiral, I strongly believe that we ignore too much the danger of being located via radio triangulation by the enemy. We use ourselves radio direction-finding, so why think that we are immune to it? If this may satisfy you, Herr Admiral, my patrol report is already written up and ready for your review. May I invite you and Kapitän Godt to the officers' mess of my boat, where you will be able to read my report and interview me and my officers in utter privacy?"

"An excellent idea, actually! Show me the way!"

Godt, who had never seen the U-800 before, quickly grew impressed as Otto led him and Dönitz inside the submarine via the forward hatch of the conning tower.

"Mein Gott! This submarine is really spacious."

Those words made Otto smile with malice.

"Wait until you see the crewmen's mess, Herr Kapitän. The officers' mess isn't too shabby either."

Godt had to agree with Otto when he entered the six meter by four meter officers' mess.

"Himmel! You could nearly call this 'luxurious' when compared to what we have on our Type VIIs and Type IXs."

"Actually, I would say that this should have been the norm, both for the officers and for the crewmen, Kapitän Godt. Our submariners have been fighting in cramped and squalid conditions for way too long, in my opinion. That they accomplished so much in such conditions is a testament to their valor and spirit."

"You may well be right, my good Kretschmer." Said Dönitz before sighing with content as he sat in one of the three well padded sofas of the mess, beside its dining table and ten padded chairs. Otto then handed him his mission report, which had been lying on the table.

"My patrol report, Herr Admiral."

"Thank you!"

As Dönitz started reading his report, Otto suddenly had an idea and went to Ulrich Von Wittgenstein's cabin, finding his second-in-command busy packing a suitcase ahead of their expected shore leave period.

"Ulrich, could I ask you to give a guided tour of the boat to Kapitän Godt, while Admiral Dönitz is reading my mission report?"

"No problem, Herr Kapitän! Where is he right now?"

"In the officers' mess."

"I will be there in a second."

"Thanks!"

With Godt soon gone on his guided tour, Otto was left alone with Dönitz and sat in the padded sofa opposite to him, waiting patiently for him to finish his reading. Dönitz, a highly intelligent man and an experienced, competent naval officer, proved to be a quick reader and raised his nose from the report a couple of minutes later.

"So, if I read your report correctly, the ASDIC sets of the British and of the Americans were not able to detect you at all during your attacks, correct?"

"Correct, Herr Admiral. Their sets are not sensitive enough to hear the U-800 when it is going at six knots or less on batteries. As for their active pinging mode, its range is limited and it works only in directional mode. My submarine was able to easily

evade their sonar searches thanks to its high submerged speed, high agility under water and low acoustic signature.”

“Good! I may have something that could improve further on that: it is a revolutionary sort of hull coating that is designed to greatly reduce the sound waves from ASDIC pings bouncing on a hull. While it seems to work very well, my problem with it is that it uses materials and special glues that are in short supply and that are considered vital strategic materials. I was thus unable to apply it on a wide scale on our U-boats. However, I now have on hand a one-of-a-kind revolutionary submarine which just proved itself to be an exceptional weapon of war. Kretschmer, my mind is now made up to make your U-800 benefit from Program Alberich. Your boat was due anyway to spend a minimum of a couple of weeks here in minor refit before you are due to go back to sea. You and your crew are also due for some well deserved shore leave, so there will be plenty of time to apply that special anechoic coating to your submarine in the meantime.”

“That would be truly nice, Herr Admiral. How effective exactly is that new coating?”

“According to initial tests, the Alberich coating absorbs 85% of the power from sonar pings in the frequency range of ten to eighteen kilohertz, which means that the detection range on active mode of the enemy ASDIC sets will be down to a few hundred meters at the most, instead of a couple of kilometers. With that new coating, your boat will become a true ghost ship for the enemy sonar sets.”

“That sounds fantastic, Herr Admiral. Thank you for your confidence in me and my boat.”

“Oh, I certainly wanted to thank you in a much bigger way, my dear Kretschmer, but the Führer overruled me on that.”

“Uh, I don’t understand, Herr Admiral. What did I do to infuriate the Führer?”

“Nothing!” Replied Dönitz, a big grin appearing on his face as he delivered his punch line. “He simply told me that he would take my place to pin medals on you. He wants you in Berlin on Monday, along with your whole crew, so that he can give you the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds.”

CHAPTER 7 – HAPPY TIMES IN AMERICA

08:26 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, December 9, 1941

Pen Number Three, Keroman I submarine bunker complex

Port of Lorient, coast of Brittany, France

The few sailors present on the deck casing of the U-800 and busy loading various supplies aboard the submarine came to attention and saluted when Admiral Karl Dönitz came down via the gangway. Dönitz returned their salutes, then looked at the most senior submariner present.

“Where could I find Kapitän Kretschmer, Bootsmann?”

“I believe that he is down in the stern torpedo tubes compartment, Herr Admiral.”

“Good! Please show me the way.”

“Right away, Herr Admiral!”

Following the submariner through the forward hatch of the conning tower, Dönitz went down to the crew mess before heading aft. Crossing the deck gratings running around the three big diesels of the U-800, Dönitz next went through the engine control room, with its big divers airlock chamber to one side, before stepping inside the aft torpedo room proper. He then saw Kretschmer, his back to him while he watched a pair of technicians welding what looked like a torpedo storage rack to the curved starboard side of the compartment. The sailor who had guided him then shouted to warn his captain.

“ROOM!”

Turning around at once, Kretschmer promptly saluted his commander, while the technicians stood at rigid attention.

“Admiral?!”

“At ease! Continue your work, men. Could I speak with you in private, Herr Kapitän?”

“Of course, Herr Admiral! Will my cabin do?”

“It will be perfect. By the way, what are these men doing, if I may ask?”

“They are welding in place retaining racks for additional torpedoes, Herr Admiral. There was some unused space left here, so I thought that I could install some extra

racks in order to be able to carry more torpedoes or mines. With those new racks, my maximum torpedo carrying capacity will go up from 68 to 72 torpedoes.”

Dönitz nodded his head, pleased.

“Impressive! You will be able to hurt even more the enemy with those extra torpedoes. As a matter of fact, I came to give you your next mission orders. Let’s go to your cabin to talk.”

The two men were soon alone in Kretschmer’s work office, with its door firmly closed. Inviting Otto to sit near him at the small work desk of the cabin and sitting himself in the padded sofa facing it, Dönitz took out of a vest pocket a fairly thick envelope, giving it to Otto.

“Here are your new mission orders: your general objective area has both changed and expanded. I suppose that you heard about the Japanese attack against the American naval base in Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii?”

“Who hasn’t, Herr Admiral?”

“True! Know that Berlin has advised me via a directive that is for the moment still confidential that Germany will be declaring war to the United States in the next couple of days and that my command is to be ready to hit American shipping along their East Coast as soon as we have submarines in that area. You will be my vanguard off the United States and in the Caribbean, my dear Kretschmer.”

“There are a lot of countries within the Caribbean and along the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico that are still officially neutral, Herr Admiral. What will I be allowed to attack over there that does not fly an American or British flag?”

“Quite a lot, actually. Our embassies are already picking up signs that many of the countries in the Caribbean and in Central and South America are about to side with the United States and against us in this war. Within a few days, I will have a precise list of who you can strike and in what circumstances. However, irrespective of in which waters or port you will find them, American, British and Canadian ships, both merchantmen and warships, will be fair game for you. In view of the percentage of war supplies and of fuel that the Allies are getting from the Caribbean Basin and Gulf of Mexico areas, you should find there plenty of juicy, legitimate targets for your torpedoes. Your only true worry, apart from enemy warships and patrol planes of course, will be your foodstuff, torpedo and fuel status. Unfortunately, the supply ships we had in the Atlantic have been either found and sunk by the Allies, or are now in the Indian Ocean,

so I won't have any ship available to resupply you on the spot there. You will thus have to husband your fuel and torpedoes and make them count."

Otto thought about that for a few seconds before asking a question in a cautious tone.

"What about if I play by the old rules of past privateers, Herr Admiral?"

"What do you mean, Kretschmer?"

"That, instead of sinking immediately every enemy merchantmen I will be encountering, that I stop and board isolated cargo ships and use their fuel and food supplies to replenish my boat. That will leave only my reserve of torpedoes as a limiting factor for the duration of my war patrol. I will of course exercise due caution in choosing my preys to be boarded and will jam their radios in advance of boarding, then will destroy their radios."

"Hum, that could be quite risky but it could effectively stretch the duration of your patrol by a significant factor. You will however need to carry with you some extra equipment, like portable pumps and fuel hoses and a few inflatable boats, plus extra small arms. I can get those things for you within a day."

"Thank you, Herr Admiral. Uh, do we have any kind of combat troops in the Kriegsmarine that are similar to the British Royal Marines? Having professional infantrymen with a good sailor footing would be a definite plus for such boarding operations. I presently have ten spare bunks available that were originally meant to accommodate shipwreck survivors, or spies being transported on overseas missions." It was the turn of Dönitz to think over his answer.

"We don't have any such troops in the Kriegsmarine, unfortunately. We would thus have to get the use of either Army soldiers or of Luftwaffe paratroopers. I however agree with you that such soldiers could come handy for your patrol, especially if you intend to sabotage Allied ships in neutral harbors. I will try to arrange something quickly within two days. After that, you will have to sail for America, with or without soldiers. In the meantime, I will pass the word that you are to be supplied with anything you will ask for, and this without delays or questions. I will want you to come visit my intelligence section tomorrow. There, you will get maps, charts and intelligence data on your new patrol area."

"I will be there, Herr Admiral. Thank you for your support."

"You can thank me by sinking many enemy ships, my good Kretschmer."

Replied Dönitz, a smile appearing on his face.

22:09 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, December 10, 1941

U-800, Keroman I submarine bunker complex

Lorient, coast of Brittany, France

Otto was in his office, reviewing for the second time the lists of supplies, equipment, spare parts and ammunition that had been loaded aboard his submarine in advance of his incoming war patrol, when someone knocked on the door, making Otto shout out.

“COME IN!”

He looked up towards the door of his office in time to see his second-in-command, Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, open it. Wittgenstein then stepped inside the cabin, closely followed by a young Heer³ lieutenant in camouflage pattern combat uniform. Both of them saluted Otto as the latter got up from his chair.

“Kapitän, seven men of the Heer have arrived to serve on our submarine. I brought their leader with me.”

The Heer lieutenant clicked his heels and spoke up in a strong, firm voice.

“Leutnant Hugo Margraff, of the Brandenburg Regiment, reporting with six men for duty on the U-800, at the request of Admiral Dönitz.”

Otto got up and walked to him at once to shake hand with Margraff.

“And I am Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, Captain of the U-800. I am happy to see you and your men, Leutnant Margraff: you will make ship boarding operations a lot easier for me down in the Caribbean. Did you bring with you special equipment or weapons that will need to be stored aboard?”

“We did bring extra equipment and ammunition, including explosives, Herr Kapitän. We also had a pair of pneumatic boats with us but we were just told that you have already two such boats aboard.”

“Hum, true, but I would still be more comfortable with four boats rather than two. Ulrich, go see if those two extra boats can be accommodated inside our two conning tower storage areas, then lead the six men of Leutnant Margraff to the bunks in the aft torpedo room and engine control room. As for the good Leutnant, I will install him in our spare junior officer’s cabin. Leutnant Margraff, if you will follow me.”

³ Heer : German Army

With Margraff following closely behind him, Otto walked out of his office and crossed the narrow passageway, pulling open the curtain door of the last officer's cabin along that passageway. Margraff opened his eyes wide on seeing the small but comfortable room.

"Mein Gott! This is much nicer than what I saw in the one submarine I visited once."

Otto couldn't help grin at that remark and briefly stopped and turned to look at the Heer junior officer.

"Wait until you see the officers' wardroom, Leutnant Margraff. The U-800 is the sole existing example of the Type XX submarine and is effectively much more spacious and comfortable to live and work in than the previous types of submarines in the Kriegsmarine. You and your men can count yourselves lucky to end on this boat rather than in a Type IX boat. However, know that the U-800 is as deadly for the enemy than it is comfortable for us."

"You definitely will need to tell me more about your boat later on, Herr Kapitän."

"And you will have to tell me more about you and your men, Leutnant Margraff." Replied Otto, becoming serious again. "We will count heavily on you for any future boarding of enemy merchant ships around the American East Coast and in the Caribbean Sea. Drop your kit and weapons in a corner of this cabin for the moment, then we will go back to my office to talk."

"It won't be long, Herr Kapitän." Promised Margraff before entering the cabin and piling in one corner his military backpack, kit bag, steel helmet, web gear and weapons. He couldn't help nod in approval while eyeing the double locker, small work desk with chair and captain's bed filling the small cabin. He however kept his comments in and followed Otto back to his office, where he was told to sit on the comfortable sofa in the room, while Otto sat back at his desk.

"So, Leutnant Margraff, tell me about you, your men and your unit. I have to say that I never heard of the Brandenburg Regiment before."

"That is most understandable, Herr Kapitän: few people actually know about it. It is a light infantry unit subordinate to the Abwehr⁴ and it specializes in covert military operations and raids behind enemy lines. We are rightly considered an elite unit and we

⁴ Abwehr : German Army Intelligence service during World War 2.

were active right from the start of the war, first in Poland, then in Belgium and Holland. Men from the Brandenburg Regiment, then a battalion, went ahead of our Heer troops in 1940 and seized important bridges and other valuable installations behind enemy lines before the enemy could blow them up. We often work while disguised as enemy soldiers and all of our men know at least one foreign language. As for me and my men, we can all speak English fluently with little or no accent, while a few of us know also either French, Dutch or Spanish. Personally, I speak fluently English and Dutch, plus can understand French. My sub-unit, the coastal raider platoon of the Brandenburg Regiment, is specially trained in coastal infiltrations, amphibious operations and small boat handling.”

Otto nodded his head, thoroughly impressed. He could also see the ribbon of the Iron Cross First Class on the uniform jacket of Margraff: the man was no blowhard.

“I see that Admiral Dönitz got us the very best, Leutnant. Now, about the U-800 and me. One of my nicknames in the Kriegsmarine is ‘The Tonnage King’, because I sank more enemy ship tonnage than any other U-boot captain in this war. My title was further reinforced by my last war patrol in October and November of last year, which was the first war patrol of the U-800. During that war patrol, we sank forty enemy merchant ships and twelve warships, including the battleship KING GEORGE V, the aircraft carrier VICTORIOUS and the American light carrier USS RANGER, sunk off Halifax. To be fair, our expertise and experience were only parts of the reasons for our tremendous successes on that patrol. The U-800 itself made a huge difference, with its much higher submerged speed and endurance and its huge torpedo capacity. Right now, we are about ready to leave for our next war patrol in American waters with a total of 72 torpedoes and 44 sea mines aboard, plus plenty of ammunition for our 10.5 centimeter deck gun and two quadruple 20mm flak mounts. While we will eventually run short of torpedoes during our patrol far from Europe, I intend to use them sparingly, thus expect to run short of fuel and fresh food first. That’s where you and your men will become important, Leutnant Margraff. While we will avoid bombarding coastal installations of nations that are still technically neutral in this war, I intend to attack enemy merchant ships anchored in or off neutral ports. One way to do that while avoiding angering those neutral governments will be to board them discreetly, take control of them and resupply ourselves in food and fuel directly from those seized enemy merchantmen. We will then scuttle them after letting their crews off safely. One thing we will keep an eye for while doing such boarding operations will be for any cargo of strategic metals or rare

materials, like chromium, nickel, tungsten, rubber and the likes. While space is still tight on the U-800, we do have some spare space that we can make for cargo considered valuable enough. Your job will however be mostly limited to the initial boarding and seizure of the ships, plus guarding of the enemy crews while my men do the plundering and fuel transfer. One important note: I personally believe in fighting a clean war as much as possible, so I will expect you and your men to respect the laws of war, except for the bit about tricking the enemy by wearing their uniforms to infiltrate them and take them by surprise. You have my blessing to deal with anyone trying to resist by force, but no unnecessary violence against unarmed civilians, please. Do you understand me on that, Leutnant Margraff?"

"Perfectly, Herr Kapitän! We in the Brandenburg Regiment can be ruthless when needed, but we are no murderers or butchers. Admiral Canaris, who commands the Abwehr, would not condone the massacre of prisoners anyway."

"Excellent! Now, can you tell me what kind of equipment you brought with you, apart from your individual weapons and ammunition?"

"Well, first, we have the two inflatable assault boats that I mentioned earlier. We came with complete frogmen's suits and close-circuit breathing apparatus. We also brought plenty of explosives and detonators, in order to do demolition work or to scuttle a ship. Next, me and each of my men brought in our kit bags a variety of disguises, including British, American and even Dutch uniforms, in order to better take enemy merchant ships by surprise. Finally, we brought plenty of ammunition and grenades, plus two backpack VHF radios and two signal lamps."

"That should do just fine, Leutnant. Now that this is covered, we will go see how your men are fitting in their new accommodations in the aft torpedo room."

Again leading Margraff, Otto left his office, turning left and nearly immediately went down a hatch, stepping on an elevated gratings platform inside the diesel engine room before going aft to the engine control room. Margraff, once in the aft torpedo room, nodded in approval as he eyed the now deployed six folding bunks located next to the forward bulkhead of the compartment, near the big moveable rack supporting twelve torpedoes. His six men had already stored away their kit and weapons in the storage lockers located in the adjacent engine control room compartment and were now eyeing with interest the big torpedoes and their launch tubes. On seeing the two officers enter,

Unteroffizier⁵ Franz Stein, Margraff's senior NCO, called the group to attention at once and saluted him and Otto.

"Sirs!"

"At ease!" Replied Otto, returning the man's salute. "I am Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, Captain of the U-800. What do you think of your accommodations up to now, men?"

"They actually came as an agreeable surprise, Herr Kapitän. Your submarine is also apparently very well equipped to accommodate embarked commandos or combat divers, if I judge from the combat divers' airlock chamber connected to this compartment."

"A combat divers' airlock chamber?" Said Margraff, taken by surprise by that information. Otto's answer was to smile and signaled him to follow him in the adjacent engine control room compartment. Going to a sort of large cylinder with a heavy hatch, he opened it and showed to Margraff the inside of a chamber with an internal diameter of over 150 centimeters, big enough for three or four divers at a time to stand inside it.

"Your unteroffizier is correct, Leutnant. This compartment, apart from housing our engine control stations and an auxiliary generator, was also designed to function as our combat divers' compartment. On top of this airlock chamber, which has a large access hatch on the upper deck casing, you have here a pressurized tank and pump system to refill your breathing tanks, plus large equipment lockers for divers' suits and other gear. There are as well three extra bunks with storage lockers if more than six passengers are to be accommodate aboard. If you will now excuse me, I have to go finish supervising the loading up of my submarine. Mechaniker Obergefreiter Helmut Hain, here, will give you a complete tour of the boat once your men will have finished making themselves at home. I will see you again tomorrow morning at four, when we will depart on our war patrol. That may be the last time you will see the open sky for quite a few days. We will discuss our offensive strategy after that, while transiting at schnorchel depth. On this, have a good night, Leutnant Margraff."

"You too, Herr Kapitän." Replied the Heer officer, saluting Otto, who saluted back before leaving the compartment.

⁵ Unteroffizier : German Army rank equivalent to sergeant.

04:04 (Paris Time)

Thursday, December 11, 1941

Conning tower of the U-800

Port of Lorient

Otto, standing in the open bridge atop the conning tower of his U-800, gave a last salute to Admiral Dönitz, who was present in the first rank of onlookers on the concrete quay, as the submarine slipped slowly out of its protective pen and started to emerge in the open. Then, he found himself staring at a dark, cloud-covered night sky as two gunboats escorted the U-800 out of Lorient Harbor. Leutnant Hugo Margraff, standing next to him, spoke softly after a minute of silence.

"I now understand at least partly the feeling you must have when leaving for a long sea patrol, Herr Kapitän: it is a bit akin to what me and my men felt when going deep behind enemy lines for days and even weeks. You can count only on yourself to survive, do the job and then come home intact."

"That is very true, my dear Margraff. You and your men better enjoy this last hour on the surface: once we dive, you will not breathe fresh open air again for at least two weeks, if not more. And please remind them that they can't smoke inside the submarine or on the deck, within sight of possible distant observers. They will have to use the smoking lounges for that."

Margraff gave Otto an amused smirk at those words: the 'smoking lounges' were actually two small, free-flooding covered platform half-way up at the back and front of the conning tower. It had opaque windows that could be opened during daylight hours and served as a smoking corner during the rare occasions that the U-800 navigated on the surface. It was quite open to the wind and to strong waves, but it was better than standing on the open deck or conning tower, where the red dot from a lit cigarette could be spotted for kilometers away at night.

"I will pass the word, Herr Kapitän."

Margraff then went inside the submarine, using the armored hatch on the side of the forward underwater observation dome tower. Forty minutes later, the topside of the submarine was evacuated and all hatches firmly closed, then the U-800 slipped under the waves to hide from enemy patrol planes before the Sun could come up.

10:07 (Mid-Atlantic Time)**Control room of U-800, navigating at periscope depth****Atlantic Ocean, southwest of the Azores**

Oberfunkmaat Eberhard Stamp, the chief radio operator of the U-800, came to Otto's side as the latter was examining the chart on the plotting table of the control room and presented him with a two-page document.

"A general distribution message from Lorient headquarters, Herr Kapitän."

"Thanks, Pusher⁶!" Replied Otto while taking the message. He read it once before switching on his ship intercom box.

"Leutnant Margraff is requested in the control room. I say again: Leutnant Margraff is requested in the control room."

It took only two minutes before Hugo Margraff showed up, presenting himself at attention and saluting.

"You asked for me, Herr Kapitän?"

"Yes, I did, Leutnant. We just got a message listing the countries around the Caribbean and South America that declared themselves neutral or declared war with Germany. I believe that it will greatly clarify what kind of liberty of action we will have towards those countries when we get there. Here is the message."

The young Heer officer took the message and read it quickly, nodding his head at the end of his lecture.

"So, apart from the British West Indies, Dutch West Indies, Puerto Rico and the United States, the countries that are now officially at war with us are Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. I suppose that this means that their ships, ports and territorial waters are now fair game for us, right?"

"Correct! However, a number of the countries that declared themselves neutral did break all diplomatic relations with us or openly support the British and the Americans, thus making them less than friendly for us. For those countries, meaning Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela, our orders are to avoid directly attacking their ports and coastal installations. We are however permitted to attack enemy ships that are within their territorial waters or at anchor in their ports and anchorages. You and your men will

⁶ Pusher : Nickname given to the radio operator aboard German submarines of WW2.

become especially useful around those four countries. As for friendly or sympathetic nations, we can count only on Chile and Paraguay.”

“Humph! It is nice to see that we have so many friends around there.”

“Isn’t it?” Replied Otto in a sarcastic tone. “Well, we will reward those who deserve it the way they deserve, with either a handshake or a torpedo, my dear Margraff.”

16:14 (New York Time)

Wednesday, December 24, 1941

Stern torpedo room, U-800

Near the entrance of Chesapeake Bay

Coast of Virginia, United States

Gefreiter⁷ Heinrich Bayerlein, of the Brandenburg Regiment, couldn’t help snap his fingers as he followed the beat of the American Jazz music piped across the submarine. They had been able to receive American radio shows and music for a good two days now, something that had helped spice up the monotonous routine aboard the submarine. Right now, Bayerlein was watching a mean game of Skat, a very popular card game in Germany, between two of his comrades and two sailors, with a flat board put on top of the reserve torpedoes supporting the cards thrown into play. To his disappointment and that of his companions, the music abruptly ended, to be replaced by an announcement by Kapitän Kretschmer.

“Attention all hands, this is the Captain. We are about to approach our first objective of this patrol. Everybody is to go to battle stations and to switch to silent running.”

The sailors in the torpedo compartment immediately got up and retrieved the deck of cards and the board, putting them away in a locker before going to their posts near the torpedo tubes loading hatches. As for the six men of the Brandenburg Regiment, they did as they had been told a number of times to do if a call to battle stations was heard: they sat in corners away from the torpedoes and kept out of the way of the sailors while staying quiet. The whole crew had been told a few hours ago that they were now approaching the American East Coast, so no one was surprised now to be called to

⁷ Gefreiter : German Army rank equivalent to corporal.

battle stations. In fact, it restored a sense of purpose in the men after those two weeks spent underwater at sea. One of the sailors then started gesticulating while looking at the Heer soldiers, who understood after a couple of seconds that he was enjoining them to put over their boots the special felt slippers used by submariners to move more quietly. Crawling on their fours to their kit bags, the Brandenburg men took out of them the said slippers and put them on, then returned to their corner. The ventilation system had by now stopped and the only noise they could hear was the weak humming from the electric propulsion motors of the submarine and a sort of barely audible noise of flowing water that came from the propeller, which the sailors kept calling a 'pump jet'. The men in the compartment then settled into a tense, nervous wait.

About 35 minutes later, the noise of approaching ship propellers started to be heard, apparently coming towards them. The men tensed up more as the swishing noise got progressively louder, to finally be heard right overhead.

"Himmel!" Said in a near whisper Gefreiter Karl Haussmann. "Are they going to drop depth charges on us?"

"We'll know soon enough, Karl." Replied Franz Stein. "Now, keep quiet!" To their relief, there were no resounding underwater explosions around them, while the propeller noise gradually weakened. They thought themselves safe then, until a second set of propeller noise grew, reviving their nervousness. That second set passed overhead, then faded as well, only to be replaced by a third set of screw noise. Seeing the nervousness of the Heer men, one of the senior sailors took on him to go see them, walking quietly to them and crouching near their group with a reassuring smile on his face.

"Don't worry, guys: those ships passing overhead did not hear or detect us. If they would have, we would have gotten a few depth charges on our heads already."

"Where are we exactly?" Asked Obergefreiter⁸ Michel Drücker. "There seems to be a lot of ship traffic around here."

Somehow, his nervous question seemed to amuse the sailor.

"Of course there will be lots of ship traffic around here! We are near the entrance to Chesapeake Bay, on the coast of Virginia."

"So?"

⁸ Obergefreiter : German Army rank equivalent to master corporal.

“So, on the other side of that entrance is the biggest American naval base on the Atlantic coast.”

“What?!” Nearly exploded Drücker, barely keeping his voice low. “And what are we doing here, near such a big naval base?”

“Hey, did you forget that we are on Christmas Eve? We have gifts to give to the United States Navy.”

The sailor then returned to his post, giggling to himself and leaving the soldiers mystified and uncomprehending.

Maybe ten minutes later, the submarine performed a noticeable ninety degree turn to the left, or port in marine jargon. Not long after that, the Heer soldiers nearly jumped when a strong sudden noise of compressed air being released for a second was heard, coming from their submarine. More similar noises followed at intervals of about 45 seconds. Drücker counted ten such blasts of compressed air before the submarine performed a wide half turn to go back on a parallel course. Again, ten blasts of compressed air followed at regular intervals, then the submarine did yet another half turn, followed by ten more blasts of air, before doing a final turn and picking up a bit of speed while staying mostly silent. Unable to resist his curiosity, the soldier walked quietly to the sailor who had come to speak with his group earlier on.

“Can you tell me what the hell is going on, man?”

“But, I told you already: we came to drop Christmas gifts for the American Navy.” Said the sailor before becoming more serious. “Look, there is no need to be nervous. We just sowed thirty sea mines across the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, in the entrance channel used by American warships. The idea is to set a trap for them when they will run out of their harbor at top speed to respond to our future actions. Now, we are going to head towards the entrance of New York Harbor, to start picking up juicy targets there for our torpedoes. That is if the Captain’s plan has not been changed in the last few hours.”

“What if the Americans sweep the entrance channel with minesweepers before coming out?”

The sailor gave a dubious look at Drücker then.

“If you are a policeman sitting in his police station, would you watch where you step when you run out after receiving a call about a burglary in progress?”

“Uh, I suppose not.”

“Neither will the Americans and they will end up stepping in our dog poop big time, mark my words.”

Less than seven hours later, as he was heading towards New York at twelve knots while at schnorchel depth and going on diesels, Otto raised his search periscope above the waves in response to a hydrophone report about a large ship about to cut across his path a few kilometers ahead. Expecting to have a hard time finding that ship in the dark night, he was both surprised and shocked to spot it at once: it was sailing with all its lights on! Otto frowned at that, having expected the Americans to enforce a general night curfew now that they were at war. A brief look at the American coast nearby told him that it was not so. His confused look attracted an alarmed question from Ulrich Von Wittgenstein, who had been plotting their position.

“Is something wrong, Herr Kapitän?”

“With us, no! With the enemy, definitely! Come and have a look around.”

Intrigued, his second-in-command came to the periscope and took his place before doing a sweep of the horizon. When he looked at Otto again, it was with incredulity on his face.

“The Americans are not enforcing a night curfew of their coastal towns and ships? Are they mad or just stupid?”

“More like amateurs at the business of war.” Replied Otto in a somber tone. “I believe that we will have to awaken them to reality. Prepare Tube One for firing!”

An old couple sitting on the porch of their house facing the sea near Ocean City, Maryland, suddenly saw a flash of light far at sea. A distant fireball then rose in the night sky as the two old Americans fixed it with their tired eyes. The noise of an explosion came only after long seconds, prompting a question from the old woman to her husband.

“What could that be, Mark?”

“Uh, I frankly don’t know, dear.”

“Could it be something serious?”

“On Christmas Eve? What could happen now that would be serious?”

After sinking his first ship off the American coast, a large tanker that burned fiercely before going under, Otto continued on his way to New York but kept encountering ships of all types and sizes along his route, all of them illuminated as if

they had not a single care in the World, while all the towns and fishing ports along the coast were lit up. He even saw a display of fireworks fired above a town at midnight, probably to celebrate the coming of Christmas. Shaking his head at such lack of concern and common sense, he picked the juiciest-looking target within his sight and fired a carefully aimed torpedo at a big cargo ship heading the same way he was, ripping away its propellers and rudders and making it stop dead in the water while sinking by the stern. Otto had ample time to record the name and port of call of the ship in his log before it sank under the waves in plain sight of a brightly lit American coastal community less than eight kilometers away. His third victim, a Panama-registered tanker ship, came less than half an hour later, broken in two and sunk by a single torpedo.

03:27 (New York Time)

Thursday, December 25, 1941

United States Atlantic Fleet Headquarters

Norfolk, Virginia

“Sir, we have another message from the Coast Guard about a ship sinking, presumably from a torpedo attack.”

Commander Emmett Waddington the Third, the duty operations officer present in the Fleet Command Center at this early hour on Christmas Day, took the message handed to him by a young ensign from the Transmissions Department and read it quickly before giving it back with a dismissive gesture.

“Probably someone who celebrated too much and hit a rock. The Coast Guard got the initial call, thus let them handle it.”

“But, sir, this is the second such message in less than two hours, from the same general area. It can’t be a mere coincidence, sir.”

Waddington, who was still pissed at having been put on duty on Christmas Day while all the other senior officers of the headquarters had gone on leave, threw an annoyed look at his subaltern.

“And your vast experience is telling you that, Ensign Farrell? Tell the Coast Guard that it’s their problem, not ours.”

The young ensign, still believing that this was serious but unable to convince his superior, returned to his radio room, hiding his frustration.

04:19 (New York Time)
U. S. Coast Guard Cutter ICARUS (WPC-110)
Off Atlantic City

"FLAMES VISIBLE ON THE HORIZON AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK, SIR!"

Lieutenant (Navy) Maurice D. Jester ran to the port side open bridge wing on hearing the lookout's warning and raised his binoculars to his eyes. Jester knew well the local waters and knew that there were no submerged rocks in this area. This was also the third time that a distress signal had been received by the Coast Guard in this area tonight. Something a lot more sinister than a simple reef was causing those distress signals.

"ALL CREW TO ACTION STATIONS! PREPARE FOR ANTI-SUBMARINE ACTION! HELM, STEER PORT BY TEN DEGREES! ENGINES TO FORWARD FULL!"

As the crew of his small, fifty meter-long coastal patrol boat ran to their battle stations, Jester thought about his next actions. His ship had a small radar and a sonar set, plus one three inch gun, one depth charge projector and two depth charge tracks, but a German submarine was an opponent that you dismissed only at your own peril. That opponent had already hit three merchantmen in the area, maybe more, and it was both his job and his duty to stop it before it could do more damage.

Rushing in at its top speed of sixteen knots, the American patrol boat was soon approaching the scene of the sinking, with burning fuel floating on the ocean and with debris scattered on the surface. As it was less than 300 meters from the debris and flames, the crew of the ICARUS suddenly saw the flash of an explosion in the direction of New York Harbor, maybe five kilometers away. That flash was then followed by a brilliant fireball, then by the noise of a powerful detonation fifteen seconds later.

"Damn! A tanker must have been hit over there." Muttered Jester to himself before shouting an order to his helmsman.

"NEW HEADING: 348! FULL SPEED AHEAD!"

As his helmsman obeyed him and turned his ship around, Jester had a glimpse of a body floating face down in the water, maybe a hundred meters away, as one of his projectors was sweeping the surface of the sea for survivors. The projector beam quickly came back to the corpse, then searched around it for men that still could be

saved. Unfortunately, there were none to be found, something that didn't surprise Jester: the frigid December waters would kill by hypothermia any swimmer that would not be rescued within minutes. The sight of that corpse however reminded Jester that this was about a lot more than just some ship being lost. The wives and children of the crewmembers of the ships sunk tonight by that presumed German submarine would soon enough learn that they had lost their loved ones at sea, and this on Christmas Day!

"Chief Pettigrew, send the following message to our base in New York: have found site of recent sinking, with no survivors in sight. Am now prosecuting a probable enemy submarine who has just attacked another ship in proximity. Request support. Add our position and send as quickly as possible."

"Right away, sir!" Replied the veteran Coast Guard man before disappearing inside the radio room situated aft of the bridge. He reappeared six minutes later, as the ICARUS was still a few minutes away from what looked like a burning tanker ship cut in two and sinking.

"Message sent, sir!"

"Good! Tell our gunners to load our three inch gun with armor-piercing shells and tell our depth charge men to set their hydrostatic detonators to a depth of sixty feet. In these shallow waters, a submarine won't be able to dive much deeper than that."

"I'm on it, sir!"

Jester's next order was to his sonar operator, telling him to start searching on active pinging mode for a submarine, then telling his radar operator to look for any small echo that could be coming from an emerged periscope. If, as it had happened often in the past months with British Atlantic convoys, that submarine chose to attack while surfaced, in order to gain speed and to be able to use its deck gun to finish off its preys, then his radar would be able to find it, hopefully before that submarine could see his cutter.

04:28 (New York Time)

Control room of U-800

"Active pinging now coming from Bearing 087, Herr Kapitän."

"Thank you! I have that ship in my sight right now: it is being silhouetted by the burning fuel floating around that sinking tanker. Hmm...looks like a small coastal patrol ship, about forty to fifty meters in length. Two low funnels amidships, raised forecastle with one open gun mount and bridge superstructure just at the forecastle break."

Maschinen Obergefreiter Wolfgang Leeb, who was standing on the opposite side of the attack periscope, flipped quickly the pages of the ships' recognition book he held in his hands, looking carefully at one page before passing to the next one and then speaking while turning around the book so that Otto could look at the ship silhouette on that page.

"Got it, Kapitän!"

Otto needed only a quick glance before he nodded his head.

"That's the one! THETIS-Class American Coast Guard cutter. It has radar, sonar and depth charge tracks, plus one 75mm gun. Hmm...it also has quite a shallow draught. BOW TORPEDO ROOM: SET TWO EELS ON MAGNETIC FIRING AND DEPTH OF SIX METERS!"

Otto then looked at Leeb with a sober expression.

"Time to see if the recent modifications to our torpedoes have truly corrected their problems with their magnetic detonators."

Leeb nodded, understanding too well what Otto was alluding to: the first months of the war had been very frustrating to German submariners, thanks to defective contact and magnetic detonators that had resulted in up to forty percent of torpedoes fired either failing to explode on contact or detonating prematurely due to overly sensitive magnetic sensors in their warheads. Otto then returned his eyes to his periscope's aperture.

"Target bearing, relative: 016! Set!"

Hermann Spielberger, the watch officer sitting at the torpedo fire control station, entered at once that data.

"Set!"

Otto then waited ten seconds, with the top of his attack periscope lowered below the waves, before raising it again.

"New relative bearing for target: 013! Set!"

"Fire control solution calculated, Herr Kapitän."

"Then, match bearing and fire Tube Two!"

"Firing Tube Two!"

On the ICARUS, Jester was scanning the night with his binoculars, trying to find survivors from the burning and sinking tanker ship, when his radar operator called to him.

"Sir, I just got a weak, intermittent radar contact from Heading 260, distance of approximately half a mile."

Jester immediately walked to the radar console, set in a corner of the bridge.

“Could it be a submarine periscope?”

“Uh, I don’t know, sir: it was very small and faint, even for a submarine periscope.”

Neither the operator nor Jester could know then that the periscopes and schnorchel masts of the U-800 were covered with special anti-radar coating that greatly diminished their radar signatures. However, Jester didn’t take any chance then, activating his intercom.

“Sonar, do an active ping to Heading 260, distance of half a mile!”

His sonar operator took a few seconds before replying to him via intercom.

“Nothing there, sir. My sonar should easily detect any submarine submerged at that distance, but my pings are only bouncing on the bottom and I can’t hear anything special on passive mode.”

“Very well! Keep watching that sector closely, just in case.”

“Aye, sir!”

Jester then looked outside through the windows of his ship’s bridge.

“Come on! Where are you hiding, you son of a bitch?”

Maybe twenty seconds later, his sonar operator came back on the intercom, near-panic in his voice.

“I JUST HEARD WHAT APPEARS TO BE A TORPEDO TUBE BEING DISCHARGED, CAPTAIN!... I CONFIRM: TORPEDO IN THE WATER, HEADING FOR US!”

“Shit! HELM, HARD TURN TO PORT! INCREASE SPEED TO MAXIMUM!”

Jester then grabbed hold of the radar console as his patrol boat started to turn hard. Looking at the direction of the last radar contact, he felt his heart sink on seeing a rapidly approaching trail of bubbles: his ship was never going to be able to avoid it at the speed the torpedo was going.

“Dear God, have pity on us!”

Fired from much nearer than he feared, the torpedo, a steam-propelled G7a set at its maximum speed of 44 knots, passed under the keel of the ICARUS at the level of the machinery room. The sudden passage under such a mass of steel set off the magnetic detonator of the torpedo and detonated the 280 kilos of Hexagonite explosive in its warhead. The powerful underwater explosion bodily raised the small patrol boat out of the water, breaking it in two before it fell back down. Out of the 75 officers and men

aboard the cutter, only 41 survived the immediate aftermath of that torpedo strike, to then having to survive the frigid coastal waters, either swimming or clinging desperately to some pieces of debris. However, their fate was sealed a mere two minutes later, when the depth charges aboard the hulk exploded as the stern part of the boat sank past the depth of eighteen meters at which they had been set. The underwater shockwaves from the twelve exploding depth charges turned the internal organs of the surviving American sailors into jelly, killing them nearly instantly, along with the few crewmen of the tanker ship that had still been alive.

07:46 (New York Time)

Operations center of U.S. Atlantic Fleet

Norfolk, Virginia

Captain (Navy) William G. Greenman couldn't help raising his voice to a near shout as he stared angrily at Commander Emmett Waddington the Third, whom he had come to relieve as Fleet Duty Officer of the day.

"Seven merchant ships either sent maydays or are reported missing, plus we have a Coast Guard cutter that is not responding after signaling that probable German submarines were operating in our area, yet you didn't deem necessary to advise either the Fleet Commander or the Chief of Staff? WHY?"

"But, sir, nothing of that was confirmed." Replied rather lamely Waddington, making Greenman even more angry.

"Not confirmed? NOT CONFIRMED? WHAT THE HELL WOULD IT TAKE YOU AS A CONFIRMATION BEFORE YOU GOT OFF YOUR ASS, YOU IMBECILE? HAVE YOU ALREADY FORGOTTEN THAT WE LOST SIX TROOPSHIPS, ONE CARRIER, TWO HEAVY CRUISERS AND THREE DESTROYERS TO GERMAN SUBMARINES OFF HALIFAX BARELY SIX WEEKS AGO? DID YOU EXPECT THE ENEMY TO TELEGRAPH US IN ADVANCE BEFORE ATTACKING?"

Regaining his control with difficulty, the Chief of Staff of the Atlantic Destroyer Force lowered his voice but kept staring into Waddington's eyes as he spoke further, his tone dangerous.

"You will stay here until I say otherwise, so that Captain Hustvedt can interrogate you afterwards about the events of last night. In the meantime, I will go do what you should have done at once: call the Chief of Staff."

Leaving the sweating Waddington to stand near the big plot table of the operations center, Greenman walked inside the private office of the officer of the day and sat down behind its desk before picking up the telephone and composing a number. A male voice answered him after two rings.

"Captain Hustvedt's residence. May I help you?"

"This is Captain Greenman, calling from the Fleet's operations center. I need to speak urgently with Captain Hustvedt."

"One moment, sir." Replied the steward before putting down his receiver and walking away. Maybe forty seconds later, the voice of Captain Olaf Hustvedt, the Chief of Staff of the Atlantic Fleet, came on the line.

"Captain Hustvedt here! What is happening, Bill?"

"Some potentially very bad news, Olaf: we very well may have a pack of German submarines operating off our coast. Seven merchant ships and one Coast Guard cutter are missing and not responding to calls."

Greenman then told Hustvedt in detail about the news and events of the night. The Chief of Staff was left speechless for many seconds.

"And Waddington never deemed this to be serious enough to contact me or anyone else?"

"Apparently not, Olaf. Look, if the pack of submarines that we now have on our front lawn is the same as the one that struck Convoy WS-12 last November off Halifax, then we are in potential deep shit. I advise that we take out all of our available destroyers and patrol ships, plus have all our patrol planes take off at once to hunt those submarines down. I know that many of our men are presently on Christmas leave, but I believe that I can muster enough men to fully man at least four of my destroyers."

"Do it! I will be at the operations center in half an hour."

"Uh, what do I do with Commander Waddington in the meantime, Olaf?"

"Make him wait at attention beside my office's door: I will deal with him myself."

"Understood!"

Greenman had just put down his telephone receiver when a young duty ensign came to him with a dismayed expression on his face.

"Yes, what is it, Ensign Smitters? Another merchant ship has been reported missing?"

"No sir! One of our fleet oilers just blew up on a sea mine right in our own entrance channel."

That painful piece of news reminded Greenman at once of one detail about the attacks on Convoy WS-12.

“Damn! It is the same pack after all!”

09:32 (New York Time)

Operations center, Atlantic Fleet headquarters

Vice Admiral Royal Eason Ingersoll, Commander Designate of the United States Atlantic Fleet was understandably in a sour mood by the time he arrived at his fleet headquarters. The whole nation was still sore and in shock from the disaster at Pearl Harbor, while Ingersoll himself had to skip an invitation to attend Christmas supper with his extended family after getting an urgent call from his chief of staff. Worse, he was still not officially Fleet Commander, as he was due to officially take the post only on New Year’s Day, while the titular commander, Admiral Ernest King, was in Washington, preparing to officially become the new Chief of Naval Operations. Ingersoll’s first move after dropping his coat and hat in his office was to go to the fleet’s operations center, where he found Olaf Hustvedt standing beside the big chart table of the center. The ethnic Norwegian called the center to attention on seeing Ingersoll enter, then waited for his commander to be by the chart table before starting to speak to him.

“I am sorry that I had to disturb you like this on Christmas Day, Admiral, but the situation along our Atlantic seaboard is grim and getting grimmer by the hour.”

“Don’t feel bad about that, Olaf: you did the correct thing by calling me. So, what has happened up to now?”

“Well, it seems that the ball started rolling sometimes around midnight last night, Admiral. That was when the first merchant ship, a tanker, was apparently torpedoed and sunk off the coast of Maryland, near Ocean City. It had time to send a mayday by radio to the Coast Guard before its crew had to abandon ship.”

Hustvedt then moved the tip of the pointer he was holding to a second red marker on the chart.

“Next was a cargo ship that disappeared in that area about one hour later, followed by a Panama-registered tanker ship that burned and sank half an hour later. After a fourth ship signaled that it was sinking, the Coast Guard base in New York radioed our headquarters for help at 03: 20. Unfortunately, the fleet duty officer at that time, Commander Waddington, dropped the ball and refused to act on the Coast

Guard's message. Then, at around 04:26, the Coast Guard cutter ICARUS signaled seeing a tanker ship being hit and burn, presumably attacked by a submarine. The last report from the ICARUS said that it was prosecuting a possible submarine contact off Atlantic City. Then, it disappeared and is presently classified as missing in action. Two more merchant ships sank in the two hours that followed, before our fleet oiler CIMARRON hit a sea mine planted in the entrance channel to Chesapeake Bay and was heavily damaged at about 07:55. Our fleet minesweepers went to work to clear the channel but it proved to be very dangerous work, as well over twenty dual acoustic/magnetic influence sea mines were found to have been sown, forming a dense minefield completely blocking the entrance channel. One of our minesweeper, the RAVEN, in fact hit a mine itself and sank while clearing the minefield. Our minesweepers are still at work to make sure that all the mines around the Chesapeake Bay have been found. Until they are done with that job, our fleet is essentially bottled up in harbor, Admiral."

Ingersoll frowned, obviously not liking that latest piece of news. He however contained his temper and asked a question in a calm voice.

"Did anything happen since then? Was any other merchant ship attacked?"

"Unfortunately yes, Admiral. A cargo ship off Cape Henlopen sent a mayday radio message half an hour ago, saying that it had been torpedoed and was sinking. The Coast Guard has diverted one of its cutters towards that cargo ship, while four of our patrol planes were sent to scour that zone and find the submarine that attacked that cargo ship. Unfortunately, they have found nothing so far. Captain Greenman told me that he believes that the same group of submarines that ambushed Convoy WS-12 off Halifax in November is at play here. In view of the present events, I would tend to agree with him, Admiral."

Ingersoll nodded his head slowly, his expression grim. The attack on Convoy WS-12 had been a double disaster: a military one and a political one. Apart from losing many important ships and thousands of men, the United States had been plunged as well into political chaos, with President Roosevelt having been ferociously attacked by members of the Congress and by parts of the medias for having blatantly violated the America Neutrality Act. Only the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which had diverted the public's attention, had saved President Roosevelt from a possible impeachment procedure by the Congress.

"I think that he is right, Olaf. This is a well planned anti-shipping campaign by a well led group of submarines. If we don't want to see a scene of carnage at sea extending from here to New York, then we will have to do everything possible to find and sink those German submarines."

"Then, could we at least start by enforcing a general blackout of all the ships off our Atlantic coast, Admiral? I know that this is normally a political decision, but the way ships are sailing around at night with all their navigation lights on is pure suicide. Coastal towns should also be made to respect a night blackout, to avoid giving a lit background that helps German submarines to silhouette their targets."

"These are simple common sense measures, Olaf, but we already tried to convince the politicians about this, with no success. It would hurt the population's morale too much, we were told. I will however contact Admiral King in Washington and ask him to try again to gain permission to impose a coastal and sea night blackout. In the meantime, fly out as many air reconnaissance patrols as you can along the coast and send out our destroyers to make anti-submarine sweeps as soon as the entrance channel is declared safe for navigation. I want those German submarines found and sunk before they could paralyze our whole shipping traffic."

"Understood, Admiral! We will do our best."

Ingersoll was tempted to say then that the enemy was certainly doing his own best already, but left it at that.

11:53 (New York Time)

Grumman J2F DUCK patrol amphibian aircraft

78 kilometers east of Atlantic City

Second Lieutenant John Barber had been buzzing around off the coast for a good three hours now in his amphibian biplane, with nothing seen but merchant ships and fishing boats. His plane was running low on fuel and he would soon have to return to his airfield in Lakehurst, New Jersey. He would not mind that, however: being scrambled on patrol on Christmas Day kind of ruined the holiday spirit. An excited shout from his observer, Technical Sergeant Frederic Stanfield, made him snap his head around to look down at the sea.

"SUBMARINE ON THE SURFACE AT TWO O'CLOCK!"

Barber spotted nearly at once the submarine in question, which was sailing northward at about ten knots. He grinned ferociously as he started diving on the apparently unsuspecting vessel.

"You can run, but you can't hide, Kraut! You will soon pay for all the merchantmen you killed."

Flipping a switch to arm the two small bombs carried under his lower wing, Barber then concentrated on his aim as he dove down. He could now see men on the aft deck of the submarine running towards the central kiosk, probably to scramble inside before it dove under the surface. The submarine was however too slow to react and Barber was able to release his two bombs while it was still on the surface. To his savage joy, both of his bombs straddled the submarine, exploding less than ten meters from its hull and most probably causing serious damage to it.

"YES! ONE KRAUT SUB THAT WON'T BE ABLE TO EVADE OUR SHIPS NOW. LET'S RETURN TO BASE TO CELEBRATE THIS, FRED!"

"I SECOND THAT!"

Standing atop the kiosk of his now slowly sinking submarine, Lieutenant Commander Thomas Klakring, Commander of the U.S. Navy submarine S-17, angrily shook his fist at the receding aircraft as his men hurried to evacuate their doomed boat.

"YOU FUCKING JACKASS! I WILL HAVE YOUR WINGS FOR THIS!"

17:33 (New York Time)

U-800, seventy kilometers southeast of Atlantic City

"SURFACE! SURFACE!"

With his men blowing air inside their ballast tanks, Otto waited patiently while his boat rose to the surface and broke through the waves, something that took less than a minute. Once he was satisfied that his boat was fully surfaced, he climbed up from the control room to the open air bridge of the conning tower, wearing a thick sweater under a rubberized waterproof long coat and wide-brimmed fisherman's hat. When he emerged in the open, he found the air to be quite cold, with strong winds and moderately strong waves. That weather, combined with the darkness of the night, should make him fairly safe from the American patrol aircraft that had forced him to stay at periscope depth and slow speed nearly all day. Now he would have a chance to recharge his batteries,

augment his speed and recycle the air inside his submarine, all the while hunting on the surface for new targets.

“Surface watch team, take your posts!”

As soon as four sailors had climbed up and had started to scan the night with their binoculars, Otto gave more orders by intercom.

“Start the diesels! Recharge the batteries! Refill the compressed air tanks and purge the sewage tanks! Those who want to use the smoking lounges can now do so in rotation of eight men at a time.”

His last directive was promptly seized by many of his crewmen and particularly by the soldiers of the Brandenburg Regiment, who had a hard time getting accustomed to the ‘no smoking’ policy in force aboard the submarine. Any time submariners could have a chance at breathing fresh air was a good time, unless of course the boat found itself in the middle of a Winter storm. Otto himself started scanning the night with his own binoculars, looking for ships within visual range. He and his lookouts were able to detect nearly at once no less than three ships, all of which were travelling with all their lights on. Otto shook his head at that, dismayed but also satisfied: the indolent attitude of the Americans nearly scandalized him, but it did provide him with many easy targets.

“Helm, steer port to Bearing 337 magnetic! Increase speed to twelve knots! Torpedo fire control team, be advised that we have multiple targets in sight.”

Otto then resumed his observation of what was going to be his fifteenth victim along the American coast.

05:08 (New York Time)

U-800, 52 kilometers south-east of New York

“Wow! That one was quite spectacular, Herr Kapitän.”

“Indeed!” Replied Otto, himself staring at the huge mushroom cloud that had replaced the latest cargo ship torpedoed by his submarine. “Torpedoes and ships loaded with ammunition and explosives truly don’t mix, Koenig. Well, I think that this will make a nice finale for the first phase of our campaign plan. With a total of 23 ships sunk to date, we spread enough mayhem and terror in this area for now.”

On those words, Otto left the conning tower and climbed down to the control room, where he consulted his navigation chart for a moment before giving orders to the helmsman.

"Helm, steer to starboard on Heading 190 magnetic! Increase speed to thirteen knots!"

"Heading 190 magnetic, speed thirteen knots, aye, Herr Kapitän."

His Second Watch Officer, Leutnant zur See Hermann Spielberger, came to see him then to discreetly ask him a question.

"We are heading for our Phase 2 area, Herr Kapitän?"

"Yes! The New York area is about to become way too hot for our comfort, with ships and patrol planes attracted by our latest series of sinkings. On the other hand, our Phase 2 area should offer us plenty of juicy targets, with the added benefit of a warmer climate. While heading that way, we may still engage targets of opportunity as they present themselves."

CHAPTER 8 – TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY

20:26 (New York Time)

Saturday, December 27, 1941

Head Keeper's residence, Cape Lookout Lighthouse

Cape Lookout Outer Banks, near Beaufort, North Carolina

“The winds are fairly strong tonight, James. I hope that no ship will get in trouble because of this weather.”

“Oh, this place has seen much worse in the past, Sadie.” Replied James Archie Newton to his wife. He was well placed to say that, since he had been the head keeper of the Cape Lookout Lighthouse since 1939. It was a tough, low paying job and there was a lot of solitude involved for him and his family, with the lighthouse and the residences attached to it situated on a mostly deserted sandy outer bank island of North Carolina. However, he knew a lot of people who had it much worse than him. Besides, he couldn't really complain about solitude, not with twelve children of his own. Since the start of the war in 1939, the old Bureau of Lighthouses had been incorporated into the Coast Guard, which gave to its married men a few family support amenities that had been most welcome by James. Having joined the Coast Guard had also motivated most of his nine sons, now grown men, in joining either the Navy or the Coast Guard. Of his three daughters, only his youngest one still lived with him and his wife at the lighthouse. However, James had invited his grand-children and their mothers to spend Christmas with him, since their fathers had seen their holiday leave cut because of the disaster at Pearl Harbor and its aftermaths and could not be home.

A couple of knocks on the front door of the two-storey wooden house made the heads of the family twist towards the entrance. James signaled to his wife to stay in her sofa with their two youngest grand-children and got up from his wooden rocking chair.

“I'll get that! Maybe some fishermen decided to take shelter here because of the bad weather.”

That kind of event actually happened fairly regularly around Cape Lookout, so James painted a welcoming smile before unlocking his front door and opening it. His smile

however disappeared at once at the sight of the tall soldier holding a submachine gun and wearing a steel helmet who was facing him: that soldier was not an American one. While inserting one booted foot to block the door open and pointing his submachine gun at James, the newcomer spoke with a polite tone in a surprisingly good English.

“Good evening, sir. Would you mind if me and my friends come in?”

James knew at once that this was not the time for heroics, not with his grand-children and daughters-in-law present and vulnerable to lost bullets. He thus opened his door wide and got out of the way, letting the newcomer enter. To his shock, three more soldiers entered the house behind the first one and walked in the lounge, making James’ wife and in-laws suck air in. The first newcomer however simply smiled to them and even playfully waved his hand at one of the younger girls, a toddler, before speaking, again in a polite tone.

“Good evening, good people! Let me present myself: Leutnant Hugo Margraff of the German Army. I am sorry to disturb you like this at such a time of the year but there is unfortunately a war on. However, be assured that we wish you no harm personally and that we will be here for only an hour or two, time to do a little job. Then we will leave, quietly. I will ask you to all stay in this room for the time being. If you need to go to the bathroom, just say so and one of my men will escort you. By the way, all of my men can speak English. I will now have to speak in private with the lighthouse keeper.” Turning around, Margraff gestured to James to go in the nearby kitchen, following him there and pointing his submachine gun while becoming quite serious.

“First, do you have any firearm in this house, mister? Please don’t lie to me: you would gain nothing by risking a firefight in a house full of children. On the other hand, I assure you that I have no reasons to harm anyone here, unless somebody acts stupid.” James could only nod his head, knowing too well that the German was right about the consequences of a firefight.

“I keep a revolver in my bedroom: it is my regulation weapon from the Coast Guard. I have no other firearm.”

“Thank you for being reasonable, mister. Now, are there other adult males around here, assistant keepers and the like?”

“I have one assistant keeper, named Smith. He lives in the house next door with his young wife and baby girl.”

“Then, he will be joining us shortly, mister: three of my men went separately to check the other house.”

"So, why did you come here, if I may ask?"

"Simple: to sabotage your lighthouse." Replied Margraff, a smirk on his face. "First, let's go get that revolver of yours."

James, who could only think about the safety of his family, didn't put up any resistance and led Margraff to his upstairs bedroom, where he pointed at a bedside table.

"My revolver is in that table's drawer, along with my spare bullets."

While keeping an eye on James, Margraff went to the bedside table and opened its drawer, effectively finding a .45 caliber revolver and a box of ammunition in it. Hugo then stuffed the handgun and its ammunition in an equipment pouch he was wearing slung from one shoulder.

"You are reasonable, mister. I like that. Now, you will show me where your radio transmitter is."

"I don't have one. The only radio equipment I have is a radio beacon transmitter, and it is in the ground level room of the lighthouse tower."

Hugo Margraff stared for a moment at the keeper, finally deciding that he was telling the truth.

"Very well! We will take care of your radio beacon at the same time we will take care of your lighthouse. Now, let's go back down to the lounge. You lead!"

Mortified, James went down the stairs, arriving in the lounge just as his assistant keeper, Boyd Monroe Smith, was being marched in with his wife and baby by two German soldiers. Smith, who was half of James age, looked quite pissed and probably would have done something regrettable if not for the fact that his wife and daughter were here, at risk of being shot.

"Did they get rough with you, Boyd?"

"No! They did take away my rifle, though."

"It can be replaced. The important thing is for you and your family to be safe."

"That is the right thinking, mister." Cut in Hugo Margraff, following behind the keeper. "If you will now go sit down in the lounge with the others, me and my men will go take care of our business. Two of my men will however stay to watch over you in the meantime. Oh, two little things: don't bother trying to give the alert by telephone once we are gone, as we have cut the lines; second, the deck gun of our submarine is trained presently on this house. If anyone shoots at us from the house as we leave, then this

house will be pulverized. We don't want to hurt anyone here but we have a mission to do and we will do what is necessary to do it. Do you understand me, mister?"

"Yes, I do, Lieutenant Margraff. While I hate to say this, I must thank you for showing restraint towards us."

Hugo smiled at those words.

"Thank you! Don't believe all that propaganda about German soldiers being blood-thirsty butchers. Now, please go sit down."

The disgruntled James obeyed and sat down beside his wife and two youngest grand-daughters, while Boyd let his wife sit in the rocking chair, their baby girl in her arms. All but two of the Germans then left the house, with the two remaining soldiers taking positions in opposite corners of the lounge, facing the Americans. Detailing them at length, James had to say that the Germans appeared to be well trained, well equipped and disciplined soldiers. They certainly did look dangerous.

"So, are we going to let them sabotage the lighthouse without doing anything?" Asked Boyd in a near whisper while standing behind James' sofa. Seeing that the Germans didn't seem to care about them staying silent or not, James looked up at him.

"Are you ready to risk the lives of our families? I believe that we should take those Germans very seriously."

"But, where do they come from? We didn't get any word about submarine activity around here."

"That doesn't mean that they were not around, Boyd, just that they hid well from our ships and planes. However, I'm afraid that a lot of mayhem could follow along our coasts after this."

His wife Sarah, who had been watching nervously the German soldiers, then cut in on the conversation.

"When I think that we have German soldiers on American soil. What an outrage! I hope that someone in Washington will wake up after this."

"I am not sure that the news about this won't be censored, Sadie." Replied James. "It would embarrass too many people in the Navy and in Washington."

His wife nodded her head at that, seeing the logic in his opinion. The group then fell into uneasy silence, at least as far as the adults were concerned. The younger children present however quickly resumed playing between themselves or with their toys, probably not understanding fully what was happening, especially since the two German

soldiers present stayed silent and near motionless. At one moment, James tensed up after one of his grand-daughters kicked a ball that rolled up to the feet of one of the Germans. Thankfully, the young soldier simply smiled at that and softly kicked back the ball towards the four year-old girl. That started a back and forth ball kicking exchange between the soldier and the little girl, with the child actually giggling while kicking the ball. The exchange ended when a loud explosion from the outside of the house shook it, followed by the noise of debris falling around. James couldn't help lower his head then.

"There goes my poor lighthouse...and my job."

Maybe two minutes later, Hugo Margraff and his four soldiers returned into the house. Giving first a few orders in German to his soldiers and making them walk out, Hugo then bowed slightly at James.

"Thank you for being reasonable, mister. We will now leave you and your family in peace. Goodbye!"

Sarah waited until Margraff was gone before speaking.

"He was really polite...for a German."

"Well, I bet that they are not all as polite as this Lieutenant Margraff, Sadie. Boyd, we will wait another two minutes before going to inspect the damage they have done. In the meantime, let's close the lights in the house: I want to see if we can catch a glimpse of the submarine they came in."

Getting his binoculars from the closet of the vestibule, James went to one of the windows facing the sea and started scanning the beach and waters, helped in this by a half moon.

"I see those Germans: they are carrying a pneumatic boat to the water's edge."

A flashing light signal out at sea then attracted his attention.

"I see a dark mass at sea, maybe a mile away. It is quite difficult however to make out its silhouette in detail. It is exchanging light signals with those German soldiers... The soldiers have now gotten aboard their boat and are starting an outboard engine... They are now on their way to their submarine."

James then looked at his assistant while lowering his binoculars.

"I think that it is safe now to go inspect the damage caused to the lighthouse."

"Agreed!"

Putting first their coats on, the two men then went out of the house and walked towards the 163 foot-high brick tower. From the outside it looked intact but numerous

glass debris lying around the sand told James that he should not be too optimistic about what he would find. Effectively, evidence of the passage of the German soldiers became evident as soon as the two keepers entered the tower: the radio beacon transmitter housed on the ground floor had been smashed to bits. Climbing the spiral staircase leading up to the lighthouse lens system, James felt his heart sink when he emerged from the staircase: all the glass surfaces of the panoramic window had been blown out by an explosion, while the central lens assembly was reduced to a mass of distorted metal and broken prisms.

“Jesus! The whole lens assembly will have to be replaced.” Said Boyd while looking in discouragement at the damage. “It will take weeks to restore our lighthouse.”

“Weeks during which many ships could founder because of the lack of a coastal beacon.” Added James, bitter. “I hope that the Navy will wake up to reality after this.”

“You are talking about the same people who refused to provide us with a radio transceiver under the pretext that there was no money available for getting one? Dream on, James!”

23:35 (New York Time)

Monday, December 29, 1941

U-800, on the surface off the port of Miami

Florida

As per his habit, Otto was the first to step on the deck of the open bridge once his submarine had surfaced. With four sailors scrambling to take their lookout positions, Otto scanned with his binoculars the port of Miami and its anchorage area. As with the other American ports he had seen to date, it was fully illuminated and the ships at anchor or at quayside all showed at the minimum a few lights.

“Himmel! How long will it take those Americans to learn their lessons?” Reminding himself that this same indolence was making his job both easier and safer, Otto started classifying the possible targets of interest for him in and around the port as his U-800 continued its quiet approach on the surface at five knots, using strictly its electric motors on battery power. He already knew from the reports of his electronic warfare section that there were no radars operating presently in the area of the port, while radio traffic had been characterized by one of his operators as ‘a bunch of busybodies exchanging gossip on the air’. It took Otto less than a minute to spot and

locate what had to be an American Coast Guard station, just beside the main entrance channel of the port, between Miami Beach and Fisher Island. He also spotted a fuel tank farm on the nearby Virginia Key Island. The dark silhouette of a large cargo ship anchored off the port and near Virginia Key Island then caught his eyes: it was the only ship in and near the port that showed no lights at all. Intrigued and made curious by that, Otto studied in detail the dark ship, soon recognizing a British flag flying from its stern. Further examination also showed him that the cargo ship was armed, with at least two medium caliber deck guns visible on its bow and stern. However, the caution showed by the British merchantman had been cancelled by the fact that, on top of standing out as the lone blacked out ship, the lit port installations and other ships silhouetted it, making its blackout measures ineffective. Taking a quick decision, Otto activated the intercom box of the open bridge.

“Leutnant Margraff, report to the open bridge at once!”

Otto then resumed his observation of the port while waiting for the commando officer to show up. The young lieutenant showed up less than two minutes later, dressed in combat uniform.

“You wanted to see me, Herr Kapitän?”

“I certainly did, my dear Margraff. You see that cargo ship to our ten o’clock, the one that is kept dark? It is an armed British merchant ship, which means that there will be at least a few trained military men aboard. Do you think that you and your men could discreetly board it and take control of it quietly?”

Otto then passed his binoculars to Margraff, so that the commando officer could examine in detail the ship in question. After about one minute of visual examination, Hugo nodded his head and gave back the binoculars to Otto.

“I believe so, Herr Kapitän. We could do part of the way on outboard power, then row the rest of the distance and climb quietly aboard. We do have a few silenced weapons that will facilitate the job. However, to take effective control of this big a ship, half measures won’t do: I will have to systematically kill at least the Royal Navy sailors found aboard to avoid having them spread the alarm.”

“I understand. British bombers don’t mind targeting our civilian population, so do what needs to be done, Leutnant.”

“Thank you, Herr Kapitän. For what purposes exactly do you want me to grab control of that particular ship?”

“For a number of reasons, actually. First, we will be able to then siphon off the diesel in its tanks and thus replenish our own fuel tanks. Second, we will probably be able to find some fresh food on it, either in its pantry or as part of its cargo. After nearly three weeks at sea, our reserves of fresh food are about empty and we could use some fresh supplies to supplement our canned foodstuff, even though our Smutje is doing miracles with what he has. Third, I am in mind of using the deck guns of that cargo ship and turn them on the port installations, particularly against a Coast Guard station that I spotted a few minutes ago.”

Hugo grinned on hearing that.

“Herr Kapitän, you would have been at home with the Brandenburg Regiment.”

“Me, a landlubber?” Exclaimed Otto with a false expression of horror on his face. “Get the hell off my bridge and prepare your men for action, Leutnant Margraff!” Hugo obeyed him at once, laughing to himself as he slid down the access hatch of the bridge.

00:21 (New York Time)

Tuesday, December 30, 1941

M.S. CALYPSO, anchored off Virginia Key Island

Port of Miami open anchorage area, Florida

It was taking young Seaman Arthur Bonham all of his will not to close his eyes and fall asleep as he stood guard at the top of the metallic access ladder extending down from the side of the merchant ship facing Miami Harbor. Armed with a Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifle and exposed to the fresh wind from the sea, the 21 year-old Royal Navy sailor dearly wished that someone would bring him a cup of hot tea soon. The growing noise of an approaching motor boat then chased away some of his fatigue and he looked in the direction of the noise, trying to see through the darkness. In that he was imitated by the other Royal Navy sailor on duty at this late hour, Able Seaman Fred Jones, standing as lookout watchman atop the aft deck gun platform. Jones soon shouted at him, having spotted something first.

“SMALL BOAT APPROACHING FROM THE STERN! GET READY TO CHALLENGE THEM!”

“GOT IT, ABLE SEAMAN!” Replied Bonham, who then looked for the boat in question. It came out of the dark a few seconds later, coming from the direction of the

main entrance of the port and heading towards the bottom of the access steel ladder of the M.S. CALYPSO. The young sailor was soon able to detail the three occupants of what was actually an inflatable boat with outboard engine. One of them wore a Navy rubberized trench coat and an officer's cap, while the two others looked like simple sailors wearing baggy rain suits. Bonham didn't bother taking his rifle off his shoulder when the boat stopped against the foot of the ladder, with the navy officer deftly jumping on the platform situated just above the water and starting to climb the steel stairs. Instead, he came to attention and saluted when the visitor, wearing a U.S. Coast Guard service cap, got up to the level of the deck and stood a mere two meters from him.

"Welcome aboard the M.S. CALYPSO, sir. What is the purpose of your visit?"

"I have an important classified advisory message to show to your captain, young man." Answered the man in excellent English. "Where could I find him?"

"I believe that he is presently sleeping in his cabin, sir, but I can lead you to the duty officer on the bridge instead, sir."

"That will do just fine! Lead on, Sailor!"

Not bothering to get first a replacement sentry for his post, the inexperienced Bonham started walking on the main cargo deck towards the bridge superstructure amidships, leading the visitor. As soon as they were out of direct line of sight of the lookout on the aft gun platform and of any lookout that may stand on the ship's bridge, Hugo Margraff took his silenced-LUGER pistol from under his coat and shot the young British sailor once in the back of the head, then hurriedly grabbed him and his rifle before they could make noises by falling on the deck. Dragging the corpse to a dark spot under a staircase, Hugo also hid the rifle before climbing the stairs towards the ship's bridge. A dark silhouette wearing a hooded coat and a white service cap greeted him as he was about to step on the port side open bridge wing, speaking English with a strong British accent.

"Good evening, mister. What can we do for you at this hour?"

Hugo made a quick salute as he replied to the man.

"Lieutenant Huntzinger, U.S. Coast Guard. I came to bring you an important classified advisory message. Could we go inside, where there would be some light?"

"Of course! This way, please."

The man opened a hatch and walked inside the ship, leading Hugo into what turned out to be the bridge, which was lit only by red light lamps. There was no one on the bridge at the time and the British continued to a door at the back of the bridge. That door led

into the ship's chart room, with an open side door showing the radio room, where a sleepy radio operator sat in front of his radio sets, evidently bored to death. The British, a merchant navy lieutenant, turned to face Hugo and extended his right hand.

"You may show me that advisory now, mister. What is it about exactly?"

"It is about German saboteurs roaming the Miami port area." Answered calmly Hugo at the same time that he took out his silenced pistol and shot the British twice in the chest. As the merchant navy officer crumbled to the deck with a grunt of pain, Hugo pivoted on his heels and shot the radio operator between the eyes from a distance of six meters. Walking quickly inside the radio room to make sure that nobody else was inside, Hugo found that the operator had been alone. He was about to walk out of the radio room when his eyes caught on a small book with a brown leather cover that bore a 'MOST SECRET' stamp in red letters. Holding his breath, Hugo went to the book and leafed through it, feeling triumph as he recognized what it was: he was now holding a current copy of the British Royal Navy codebook! Quickly pocketing the precious book, Hugo next went back to the open bridge wing, where he went aft to see what the British sentry on the stern gun platform was doing. The man turned out to be smoking a cigarette while leaning against the big deck gun, using its bulk to cut part of the fresh wind sweeping the deck. He also happened to be turning his back to Hugo. However, the distance was too great to risk a pistol shot that could miss and put the sentry on alert. Hugo thus went to the nearest set of stairs and climbed down as silently as he could, stepping on the stern gun platform and approaching the sentry with very cautious steps. He was still about nine meters away from the British when the latter somehow sensed his presence and started turning his head. He barely had time to see Hugo's dark silhouette before he was shot three times in the chest and fell back against the deck gun, dead. Quickly looking around him and seeing nobody else on deck, Hugo took out a flashlight and, pointing it aft, sent a prearranged signal that would tell the second part of his commando team that it was now safe to board the ship. Returning to the access ladder lowered against the hull of the cargo ship, he motioned to his two men that had waited near the top of the ladder after tying up their boat to it.

"Let's go! We have work to do. Haussmann, you stay here to greet our other men and then lead them inside the superstructures to find and neutralize the crew quietly."

Followed by Obergefreiter Michel Drücker, Hugo ran quietly to the superstructures block and entered it by a deck level hatch. He and Drücker were now inside a lit passageway with doors spaced along it on both sides. Reading the plaques on each door, Hugo nodded his head in satisfaction.

"We are in the section containing the officers' cabins, as I had expected. You watch my back while I deal with the occupants one at a time."

"Understood, Herr Leutnant."

Opening first the door of the Captain's cabin and entering it silently, Hugo went to the bunk bed where a man was snoring quite loudly. That snore was abruptly cut by a 9mm bullet to the head. Then repeating the procedure and entering each cabin in succession, Hugo killed without remorse the men sleeping inside. By the time that he was finished with the British officers, his four other soldiers had joined up with him. Keeping his voice low, he gave them a few quick orders.

"The officers are now dead and the bridge has been cleaned up. This leaves the crew and the Royal Navy gunners assigned to this ship. We will go eliminate them as quietly as possible. If any of those British manage to survive and give the alarm somehow, then our whole plan will be kaput, so kill silently without hesitation and be thorough. Stein, you lead Weiss, Lang and Hausmann down to the next deck. I will take the rest with me and finish cleaning up this level. Let's go!"

Less than forty minutes later, with the whole crew now dead, Hugo returned to the aft gun platform and, using his flashlight again, sent the signal that would tell the U-800 that it could now approach the cargo ship. With this done, he then returned on the bridge, searching it and the chart room for a copy of the ship's manifest, finally finding it posted on a clipboard suspended inside the chart room. Grabbing it and reading quickly the list of the various merchandises and cargo loaded on the ship, Hugo smiled to himself.

"A refrigerated stores ship...perfect! Kapitän Kretschmer will be most pleased."

Taking the cargo manifest off the clipboard and pocketing it, Hugo went out on the open bridge wing on the side facing the open sea. Using a pair of binoculars taken from the bridge, he was happy to quickly see the U-800 as it was silently approaching the M.S. CALYPSO, its dark blue-green hull paint making it all but invisible in the night. Another few minutes and it would be mooring itself by the side of the cargo ship. Running down the stairs leading to the main open deck, Hugo went to collect his six men. Their first

task was to lower the access ladder on the open ocean side amidships, so that the sailors of the U-800 could climb easily aboard. They then inspected together the various guns arming the ship. The main armament of the CALYPSO turned out to be quite powerful, probably thanks to its displacement of over 10,000 tons. The stern gun was a QF 4.7inch Mark V dating back from World War 1. Hugo grinned on examining one of the 20.41 kg shells used by the old gun, of which a good forty rounds were stored nearby in a ready-shell locker.

“This should give us quite a punch against this port tonight, men. We will let the gunners from the U-800 handle it, but we will help them in handling and carrying ammunition for it when the time comes to fight. Now, let’s go see the other guns on this ship.”

Hugo was leading his small group towards the bow gun when they met with Otto Kretschmer, who was leading his own party of sailors. Otto was the first to speak, shaking the hand of Hugo.

“Excellent job, Leutnant Margraff! Your men are true professionals. Were you able to find what this ship is carrying?”

“Yes, Herr Kapitän! First, this ship, the M.S. CALYPSO, is indeed powered by diesel engines, so you will be able to replenish your own fuel tanks from its tanks. Second, it happens to be a refrigerated stores ship carrying lots of foodstuff. Here is the cargo manifest I found in the chart room aft of the bridge. I also found this in the radio room.”

Taking first the cargo manifest, then the code book from Hugo, Otto’s face quickly lit up with a smile when he saw what the book was.

“Himmel! Just getting this amply justified this boarding operation. This could make our life much safer around the British Caribbean islands.”

Pocketing the precious code book, Otto then quickly read the cargo manifest, using the light of a flashlight, nodding his head with satisfaction at the end.

“This ship has everything that we needed in terms of fresh foodstuff...and more. What about its armament?”

“We just inspected the stern deck gun: it’s a big 4.7inch gun. I was on my way to inspect the bow deck gun when we met.”

“Good! I will let you continue the inspection of the armament. Make sure to locate where the reserves of shells are at the same time: we may just start quite a

bombardment program once we will be finished transferring stuff between this ship and our submarine. My first priority will be to start pumping diesel fuel out to the U-800, then I will get men to transfer selected types and quantities of fresh foodstuff. I will be on the bridge of this ship in the meantime, using its height to survey our potential targets inside the port. Report to me there once you will know what we have as deck armament.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän!”

The two groups then split, one continuing towards the bow, the other heading for the superstructures.

Otto had been up on the bridge for fifteen minutes when Hugo Margraff joined him on the open wing, where Otto had been inspecting the port area with his binoculars.

“Herr Kapitän, I have finished my inspection tour. Apart from the 4.7inch gun on the stern deck, we have a QF 4inch Mk V gun on a high-elevation mount on the bow, plus a total of four Oerlikon 20mm automatic cannons on anti-aircraft mounts along the sides, with two 20mm facing the port. Each medium gun has over a hundred rounds of ammunition, while there is a shitload of 20mm ammunition. My men are now busy bringing all that ammunition near the guns, so that we could sustain quite a high rate of fire.”

“Excellent! My men have on their part started to pump out fuel to the U-800, an operation that will go on for about another half hour but that presently needs only two men. The rest has started to select and transfer foodstuff from the refrigerated holds of the CALYPSO. I must say that it is a bit disheartening to think that we will have to sink and destroy most of that foodstuff, when rationing is in force across Germany. There is enough aboard this ship to feed a big city for a few days. At least, we will be eating well during the next few weeks.”

“I won’t complain about that, Herr Kapitän: up to now, me and my men have been much better fed than when serving on land.”

“I am happy to hear that, my dear Margraff. In a few hours, we will be ready to feed another sort of diet to the Americans, one that they will have much trouble digesting.”

The two men laughed briefly at that joke before Margraff left the bridge to return to his men: he wanted to collect a few weapons and pieces of uniforms from the dead British sailors, to improve his collection of disguises to be used on future boarding operations.

One of the sailors from the U-800 that climbed aboard the M.S. CALYPSO was the chief cook, Dieter Hannig. Given by Otto Kretschmer the list of the cargo carried by the British merchantman and told to choose what was most needed for the needs of the crew of the submarine, Dieter made his way to the first refrigerated hold with anticipated glee: while the standard foodstuff allotment of a U-boote going on a war patrol was much superior to that of a Heer unit going in the field, it still could not compete with the riches listed on the cargo manifest. At least, his past experience as a cook in a Black Forest gasthaus⁹, where part of his job had been to administer the buying and reception of food staples to his restaurant, was going to be useful in this case. Leading a work party of ten men, he opened the insulated door of the first freezer compartment and walked inside, then stopped to admire the impressive quantity of beef and pig quarters hanging from the ceiling.

“Now, that is what I call a nice reserve of prime meat. Okay, guys, we will need to transfer to our own freezer room twenty of those beef carcasses, plus thirty pig carcasses. In the meantime, I will go inspect the next freezer compartment. Let’s get to work!”

Going out to the next walk-in freezer, Dieter found it positively crammed with frozen chicken wrapped in plastic and with cardboard boxes of cut meat. Quickly checking the boxes of meat, his mouth watered on seeing that they contained a nice variety of steaks, cutlets, roasts and sausages.

“Mein Gott! With this I will be able to throw a true banquet for the next supper.” Using sheets of papers ripped from a pad he had brought with him, along with a felt marker pen and pins, he stuck notes to the piles chosen by him for transfer to the U-800, so that the men helping him would know what to take. He did the same in the two other freezer compartments he visited, which contained a variety of frozen seafood and fish, plus tons of dairy products, including butter and ice cream. He was starting to wonder if he would have enough space in the U-800’s freezer room for all the riches he wanted to take by the time he moved to the refrigerated holds, where vegetables and fruits were kept according to the cargo manifest. There, he found crates after crates of fresh fruits that would be considered like treasures in Germany, where they were highly rationed and would probably have ended up on the black market...or on the tables of big Nazi Party wigs. There were as well piles of boxes containing canned fruit juices, along with

⁹ Gasthaus : German countryside restaurant.

jugs of fresh milk. The real treasure was however in one of the non-refrigerated holds. He nearly bowed on his knees at the sight of piles of jute bags and boxes bearing markings in Spanish.

“Colombian coffee! Real coffee, by the ton! And chocolate as well! Thank you God!”

He then knew that he would have to take as much of this as possible, even if he would have to stuff some of it in places like the engine room of the U-800. Other submarine crews were going to owe him a lot of favors once back in Lorient, in exchange for some of that coffee and chocolate, two items which were the dreams of black marketers across Europe.

05:06 (New York Time)

Bridge of the M.S. CALYPSO

Miami Harbor anchorage

“Stern gun, ranging round, fire!”

On the command from Otto Kretschmer via ship telephone, who was ready to observe the fall of shot, the big QF 4.7inch Gun Mark V on the stern deck erupted, sending an explosive shell towards the United States Coast Guard station situated on a tiny artificial island inside the port's entrance channel. Otto waited for a few seconds while observing with his binoculars, time for the shell to get to its destination, then spoke again in his telephone.

“Correction: add 200 meters and fire second ranging shot. Oerlikon cannons, fire at will against Virginia Key Island. Target the coastal defense battery first, then the marine fuel tank farm.”

As the German gunners manning the 4.7inch stern gun quickly finished loading a fresh shell with its separate powder charge in their piece, the two 20mm automatic cannons manned by the soldiers of the Brandenburg Regiment opened fire, aiming first at the battery of three old model 3inch guns constituting the total coastal defense force of Miami. Specifically, they aimed first at the corrugated iron barracks near the battery that served as quarters for the American gunners, raking them with explosive 20mm shells. Caught sleeping in their bunks, with only a lone sentry up by the guns to guard them, the American reservists were ripped to pieces by the rain of exploding shells. Only five gunners managed to run out of the barracks, only to be killed when they tried to man one

of their old guns. By that time, the servants of the 4.7inch gun, assisted by Otto's observations, had found the range to its target, at which time the 4inch gun on the bow joined in, using the corrected range data from the 4.7inch gun. Pumping rounds out much more quickly than the 4.7inch, thanks to its one-piece, cased ammunition, the 4inch gun more than doubled the weight of explosives now raining on the unfortunate Coast Guard station and its docked patrol boats. The 50-meter patrol boat USCGC NIKE started receiving hits from the 4.7inch gun within the first minute of firing, while the offices, workshops and barracks of the Coast Guard station got peppered with a mix of 4.7inch and 4inch shells arriving at a combined rate of fifteen rounds per minute. The rudely awakened Coast Guard men who survived the first shells ran to their moored patrol boats and craft, only to see with confusion and incredulity that the firing was coming from a British merchant ship anchored off the harbor. While a junior officer tried desperately to send the alert by telephone while being under fire, five brave men ran to man the 3inch deck gun of one of the ACTIVE-Class patrol craft docked at the station, despite the fact that the patrol craft had already been hit twice and was slowly sinking. They had time to fire off three rounds before a 4.7inch shell hit the pier beside their craft and exploded, its splinters shredding the American gunners to pieces. Less than a minute later, the ammunition magazine of the NIKE blew up after being hit by a shell. The explosion tore the unfortunate craft in two and sent 3inch shells flying around in the air, to explode on impact when hitting the ground or the water around Miami Harbor, thus creating even more confusion and panic. After eight minutes of firing and with the Coast Guard station and its boats utterly destroyed by over a hundred 4.7inch and 4inch shells, Otto Kretschmer had his two medium guns switch fire to the merchant ships either docked at quayside or anchored around the harbor, but not before having a couple of shells fired at the marine fuel tank farm on Virginia Key Island. The huge fuel tanks, already turned into sieves by 20mm shells and with bunker oil and diesel fuel gushing out of them and flooding the whole tank farm area, then burst into flames in a mighty roar, sending up a giant fireball that was seen by the whole population of Miami and of its surrounding area. Another spectacular fireball went up when a tanker ship half full of gasoline and docked alongside Dodge Island was hit by a 4inch shell and burst into flames. That quick and easy destruction of a tanker in turn allowed the German gunners to switch their attention to other nearby worthy targets. By now, panicky residents of Miami were flooding the telephone exchanges with calls for help and with wild stories of an enemy amphibious assault against Miami. Some of those calls were in turn switched

to various nearby military bases and installations. With no regional inter-service coordination center to make sense of the calls coming in, the American military reaction proved to be haphazard, uncoordinated and also agonizingly slow. The Governor of Florida, who could see by himself the flames and explosions in the port area from his own window, actually reacted faster than most of the regional military commanders, calling no less than Secretary of War Henry Stimson at his home in Washington to indignantly demand that something be done to stop the invaders attacking Miami.

Thanks to the confused and slow response from the American forces and to the night's darkness, which prevented most planes from taking off right away to chase him, Otto had ample time to fire off all of the 280 4.7inch and 4inch rounds stored aboard the M.V. CALYPSO. With his fuel tanks full and his submarine crammed with fresh foodstuff, he was able to embark his men back on the U-800 without a single loss to them and to sail away into the night, still unseen and unsuspected and not having expended a single torpedo in the affair. He was down to a depth of sixty meters and sailing away from Miami at fifteen knots before the Sun finally rose on a shell-shocked Miami. That evening, his crew was able to celebrate their action with plates of juicy steaks cooked by Dieter Hannig, with chocolate cakes baked by Hannig's assistant as dessert. The belated American military response finally came in the form of an air attack targeting the unfortunate M.S. CALYPSO, which was already slowly sinking, its sea cocks opened by Germans before they had evacuated the ship. A full air group of American light bombers attacked the now abandoned British merchant ship after sunrise, raining bombs on it and strafing it with machine gun fire. Most of the bombs actually missed, testament to the mediocre standard of bomb-aiming of most of the American bombardiers. The two 500 pound bombs that actually hit the ship were however enough to accelerate its sinking, something that only managed to hide from the Americans vital clues about what had really happened.

15:19 (New York Time)

United States Coast Guard Station

Miami Port, Florida

The three graying men slowly walking among the ruins that had been the Coast Guard station offered quite a physical contrast: one was tall and thin, nearly ascetic;

another was small but wide-shouldered, while the third one, in naval military uniform, was tall and solidly built, with an unmistakable command presence to him. There was however no doubt to any observer that they were men of power and authority, the way everyone around them acted deferential and saluted them. Their anger and frustration were also quite evident. The trio stopped near the quays of the station, either saluting or bowing their heads as two Coast Guard men passed by them, carrying a dead man covered with a blanket on a stretcher. Secretary of War Henry Stimson then eyed severely Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations of the U.S. Navy.

"How could all this happen, here? And why would a British ship fire on an American port?"

"We don't know yet, Mister Secretary." Replied the usually irascible fleet commander, apparently as mystified as Stimson. "However, all the witnesses we have say that the firing came strictly from that British armed merchant ship, the M.S. CALYPSO, and from nowhere else. Divers are due soon to dive on its wreck, to see if they could find some clues about what happened."

The shorter man in the trio, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, shook his head as he surveyed the devastation around him.

"There is no way that our censors will be able to hide such a brazen attack from the public."

That got him an angry look from Stimson.

"Hide? You should be more concerned about what the Navy will do to prevent a repetition of this, Frank!"

"And do what, precisely, Henry?" Shot back Knox, becoming defensive.

"Oh, I don't know: you are the Secretary of the Navy, after all."

As Knox chocked on his answer, Stimson looked next at King.

"Admiral, I believe that this is connected with the recent reports about German submarine activity along our East Coast and particularly with the incident where German soldiers were seen while sabotaging one of our lighthouses."

"You might well be right, Mister Secretary. German commandos could well have been landed by submarine, to then take control of the CALYPSO during the night, while its crew was sleeping. That is the only logical explanation I can think of to explain all this."

"So, we may have a group of German soldiers, fully armed and equipped, on American soil right now?"

"On it or just off it, Mister Secretary." Agreed King somberly. "From the intelligence interviews made with the Coast Guard lighthouse keepers who saw them, those German soldiers are probably elite ones, trained for raiding operations and sabotage. They could potentially cause a lot of damage if not stopped soon."

Those last words seemed to revive the anger in Stimson, who rose the volume of his voice.

"And this is not already enough damage, Admiral? One Coast Guard station and three patrol boats destroyed, plus four merchant ships sunk and the totality of the fuel reserves of the port of Miami gone? What concrete measures are you going to take? You do realize how furious the President is about this, do you?"

"I do, Mister Secretary." Said King, containing with difficulty his urge to bark back at Stimson. "As for concrete measures, the whole of the Navy along the Atlantic board is already on full alert."

"That's it? What about enforcing a night light curfew on our coastal towns and on our merchant ships? What about forming coastal convoys, like the British do?"

King, who had already been hounded to death by British navy officers about his lack of coastal convoys and about light curfews, made a dismissive gesture out of frustration.

"Forming convoys without escort ships would only make it easier for German submarines to find targets. As for light curfews, I don't have the authority to impose them on coastal communities: your military regions commanders are the ones who can impose them."

"What about merchant ships then? They must fall under your authority as commander of the Navy. You can order them to respect a light curfew at night, no?"

"And greatly augment the risks of collisions at sea? No thank you!"

Stimson gave up then on trying to convince King, seeing that his mind was made and set in concrete. He would probably have more chances of having things changed by going the indirect route, through the President. As for Frank Knox, he had displayed a rather shocking lack of resolve up to now, basically letting his military subalterns do as they wished without straightening them out when they failed or showed incompetence. If this was as much as he could hope from the Navy Department, then those German raiders were going to have a rather easy time of it.

CHAPTER 9 – CARIBBEAN CRUISE

11:28 (New York Time)

Thursday, January 1, 1942

Control room of the U-800

Off the northern coast of Haiti

Otto smiled with satisfaction as he did a second tour of the horizon with his watch periscope, seeing nothing threatening and without a single ship within sight.

“That storm seems to have moved on and out of the way and I can see the Sun piercing out of the clouds. Time to get some fresh air and do a sextant reading. SURFACE! SURFACE! SURFACE!”

With Rudolph Dollman blowing air in their ballast tanks and Werner Nielinger at the helm pulling on his aircraft-type control stick, the U-800 started emerging from under the waves in less than twenty seconds. As soon as his submarine was stabilized on the surface, Otto gave a few orders on the intercom.

“Secure from diving stations! Engine room, throttle up our diesels to the maximum: I want our batteries recharged completely as quickly as possible. Leutnant streib, arrange a rotation of the men on deck so that they could take in some sunrays. I will allow a third of the crew at a time on deck, in rotations of one hour each. Have our sewage tanks purged, our garbage bags thrown overboard and our compressed air bottles refilled immediately: we don’t know how long we will be able to stay on the surface.”

“Yes, Herr Kapitän!”

Getting his binoculars, his sextant and his marine chronometer from a drawer under the navigation plot table, Otto then climbed up to the open bridge atop the conning tower of his submarine. There, a lukewarm wind and bright sunshine greeted him, making him take with delight a deep breath of fresh air: he may be a submarine ace, but he still liked to enjoy the Sun and fresh air as much as he could. His men were quick to use this too rare occasion to be able to freely walk around shirtless and smoke a cigarette in the open. The hard working Dieter Hannig also came on deck, but to throw weighed bags of garbage into the sea. The sight of a few sharks diving for the garbage bags then

attracted a few amused comments from the German sailors. As the Sun reached its zenith, Otto carefully noted the time shown on his marine chronometer, set on Berlin Time, and the height of the Sun, data that he was going to use to calculate his exact location. Briefly going back down to the control room to plot his new position and refine the course given to his helmsman, he then returned up on the bridge, wanting to profit from the Sun like his men. A thermos bottle of American-made hot chocolate was soon brought up by the assistant cook, Gustav Bouhler, and circulated between Otto and the four men on lookout duty on the bridge.

The second rotation of men to come out for sunrays and a smoke had been on deck for maybe twenty minutes when one of the lookouts shouted a warning.

“SOLITARY RAFT AT OUR TWO O’CLOCK, APPROXIMATE DISTANCE OF 900 METERS!”

Pointing his own binoculars, Otto had to mentally congratulate his lookout: the raft in question was barely visible as a large dot and appeared only at intervals as it bobbed up and down on the waves.

“HELM, STEER TO STARBOARD TO HEADING 150 DEGREES! ACCELERATE TO TWELVE KNOTS! RESCUE TEAM ON THE DECK! DOCTOR LIST REQUESTED ON THE DECK AT ONCE WITH HIS MEDICAL BAG! THOSE ON RELAXATION WALK ARE TO RETURN INSIDE.”

As his men on the open deck ran back inside, they were quickly replaced by six men equipped with life vests, ropes and boat hooks. The submarine’s doctor, Oberleutnant zur See Konrad List, a graying naval reservist who had served in World War One as a young ship’s doctor, showed up on the heels of the rescue team. With the distance to the raft quickly diminishing, Otto was able to see that there were people inside the raft. Soon, one of them started waving his arms frantically, having obviously spotted the approaching submarine. Two more occupants then started waving their arms as well, while two small shapes kept laying down. Otto’s heart sank when he finally was able to see better those two shapes: they were children, very young children! Grabbing his megaphone, Otto shouted a warning to his waiting rescue team and to Doctor List.

“THERE ARE THREE ADULTS AND TWO YOUNG CHILDREN ABOARD THE RAFT. THE CHILDREN ARE NOT MOVING AND ARE TO BE TREATED AS TOP PRIORITIES!”

Right now, Otto didn't care what nationality those survivors were and he suspected that his men didn't care either. While they were presently at war, the old laws of the sea still had precedence in his mind. Otto personally had never heard of any German submarine captain having its crew shoot at survivors floating in the water or sitting in rafts and lifeboats, even though he knew that British propaganda had accused more than once U-boote men of doing just that. The fact that young children were in distress only spurred him further to run to the rescue of those unfortunate souls.

With the helmsman occupying the upper helm position in the forward underwater observation dome and thus able to more easily steer the U-800 towards the raft, the submarine soon bumped gently against the raft, with two sailors immediately catching with their boat hooks the rope handles fixed to the raft, thus allowing the other sailors to grab the survivors, who were clad in night clothes, and pull them on the deck. Doctor List immediately examined them, starting with the two children, who were mere toddlers. He briefly looked up and aft towards the conning tower's open bridge to shout his diagnosis for Otto's benefit.

"THEY ARE ALL ALIVE, HERR KAPITÄN, BUT THEY ARE DEHYDRATED AND WEAK."

"GET THEM TO THE INFIRMARY, QUICKLY!" Shouted back Otto before activating his ship's intercom. "Leutnant Margraff, please contact me on the open bridge via telephone!"

As he waited for Margraff to call back, Otto eyed the five survivors as they were gently led inside the submarine via the forward access hatch of the conning tower. Two of them were mere toddlers, one boy and one girl. There was also a young couple, probably American or British by their looks, plus one Hispanic-looking man in his thirties. The latter one was the only one of the group to wear a full set of clothes and definitely looked like a civilian sailor, possibly a deck hand. The ringing of the telephone held inside a waterproof steel box welded to the bulwark of the open bridge then took Otto's attention away from the survivors. Grabbing the telephone handset and bringing it up to his face, he spoke briefly in it.

"Kapitän speaking!"

"This is Leutnant Margraff, Herr Kapitän. You wanted to speak with me?"

"Yes! We just rescued five persons found in a raft: three adults and two small children. They are presently being led to our infirmary. I want you and two armed men

to go to the infirmary and to interview them gently once Doctor List will have finished treating them. Get their names, particulars, on what ship they were and how they ended up in a raft. You will then report back to me with that information. Again, be gentle about it, unless of course one of the men starts acting stupid.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän! I’m on it!”

Hooking back the handset and closing the intercom box, Otto then shouted at the two sailors who had finished pulling the now empty raft aboard.

“IS THERE ANY SHIP MARKING ON THAT RAFT, MEN?”

“YES, HERR KAPITÄN!” Answered one of the sailors. “IT BELONGED TO A M.V. ESPERANZA.”

“GOOD! BRING IT INSIDE: WE COULD ALWAYS HAVE A USE FOR IT IN THE FUTURE.”

Watching first his two men drag the small raft inside the conning tower’s forward airlock, Otto was then about to make an intercom announcement in order to let his crewmen return to the open deck for their Sun exposure when one of his lookouts shouted, alarm in his voice.

“AIRCRAFT APPROACHING FROM TEN O’CLOCK! DISTANCE: SIX KILOMETERS!”

Otto’s reaction was immediate: this was no time to waste time by wondering if that aircraft could be a threat or not.

“DIVE! DIVE! DIVE! EVACUATE THE BRIDGE!”

His four lookouts took only seconds to disappear down the access hatch of the bridge, with Otto closely following and firmly closing the hatch behind him before sliding down the ladder, landing with a thump three paces from the control room’s entrance hatch. The watch officer, Franz Streib, passed him a number of informations as soon as he ran inside the control room.

“All hatches are closed and the diesels and schnorchel are shut down, Herr Kapitän. We are ready to go down.”

“Then, push down hard on the diving planes and push electric engines full ahead! Flood the ballast tanks and make our depth 300 meters in a hurry! Turn ninety degrees to port as soon as we are fully submerged.”

“Aye, Herr Kapitän!”

Two decks lower, the young couple in the group of survivors looked at each other when they heard the repeated 'honk' of some kind of alarm. Jennifer Kaiser-Coolidge was still under the shock of realizing that they had been retrieved by a German submarine, on top of being worried sick for her children, and gave a fearful look at her husband John.

"What is happening now, John?"

"I'm not sure, but I think that this submarine is about to dive, judging from the reaction of the crewmen around us."

John then lowered his voice to a near whisper and made as if he was kissing his wife's temple.

"If they ask about me, tell them that I am simply a junior shipping company administrator in Miami and that we were coming back from vacation in Puerto Rico."

Jennifer, who was no empty-headed blonde, nodded briefly her head at those words. To be frank, her biggest worries right now were about little Helen and Robert, who were being carried in the arms of two sailors. John, who was looking around with intense curiosity at the interior of the submarine, couldn't help wonder about how spacious the compartment they just stepped down into was. It looked like some sort of cafeteria, with rows of long tables and service counters. The submarine suddenly went nose down at a steep angle while the noise from its propellers increased dramatically. John and Jennifer, like the Puerto Rican sailor saved along with them, had to cling to a nearby table in order not to lose their balance. A few seconds more and the submarine, still diving steeply, turned sharply to the left, rolling like a plane in a stunning display of agility for such a big boat. John even had to help Jennifer, who was about to lose her grip on the table because of the centrifugal force of the turn. Yet, the submarine kept diving deeper and deeper, something that started to worry John. One of the Germans saw his expression and smiled to him in an effort to reassure him and Jennifer, speaking in a broken English.

"No worry! This is emergency dive. We will be okay."

"How deep can this submarine go?" Asked John spontaneously. The German was about to answer him but thought better of it and grinned.

"Sorry: classified information."

The submarine then shook slightly as the survivors could hear distant underwater explosions, which made the same German sailor smile again.

"Depth charges, too shallow: no worry! Please follow!"

Going aft, the group of five survivors and four Germans soon entered a small compartment that appeared to John as being the boat's infirmary. Just the fact that there was such a thing on a submarine was most unusual but, while small, it seemed well equipped and had two double bunk beds for patients, plus a treatment table surrounded by counters and storage closets for medical equipment and supplies. The graying German doctor who had examined them quickly on the upper deck had the sailor carrying little Robert lay him on the examination table and hold him in place. He then removed the wet, salt-incrusted night gown of the toddler boy, leaving him naked on the table, so that he could examine and treat him better. Sponging him down to remove the salt on his skin, he then applied an ointment on his face and arms, which had been burned by the Sun, and finished by making him drink slowly some water. Giving the boy to his mother, List then treated the small girl in a similar way, to give her to her father at the end of it. For Jennifer, List smiled to John while pulling closed a privacy curtain separating the treatment section from the bunk beds and waiting area, speaking in good English.

"So that your wife can be treated with appropriate privacy, mister."

"I understand, Doctor. Thank you for helping us."

"I am simply fulfilling my oath as a doctor, mister."

John then had to wait on one of the two chairs of the cramped waiting area, along with the Puerto Rican sailor and two German sailors. John used that time to nod and smile at the Puerto Rican, shaking his hand as he spoke.

"I have to thank you again for helping save my wife and children, Ricardo."

"It was a pleasure, Mister Kaiser. My only regret is for not having been able to help the other people on the ship. I am afraid that we are probably the only survivors from the ESPERANZA."

"I am afraid of that as well, Ricardo. That storm came in so suddenly and without warning."

"What will happen now with us, Mister Kaiser? Will these Germans keep us as war prisoners?"

"I hope not! I have no wish to see my family being brought as prisoners to Germany."

As if their words had conjured some bad blood, the hatch of the infirmary was then opened and a German soldier in full combat field uniform stepped inside, with two more soldiers visible on the other side of the hatch. All three were armed and wore steel

helmets, making them quite intimidating. The one who had entered then surprised John by his polite tone and excellent, nearly accent-free English as he addressed John and Ricardo.

"Welcome aboard the U-800, gentlemen. I am Lieutenant Hugo Margraff and me and my men will be in charge of your surveillance while you are aboard this submarine. Do not worry about your well-being: you will be well treated, as long as you behave sensibly. While we cannot drop you right away in some friendly port, you will be released at the first occasion we will meet with an unarmed civilian ship or get to a neutral port. That could however take a week or two. I understand that were five of you, by the way."

"My wife is being examined by your doctor on the other side of that curtain and she has our small daughter with her."

"I see! If you don't mind, I would have a few questions for you. First, may I have your names?"

"Of course, Lieutenant! I am John Kaiser and my wife's name is Jennifer. My son, who is two and a half years old, is named Robert, while my four year-old daughter is named Helen. We are American citizens."

"And you, mister?" Asked Margraff, looking at the Puerto Rican sailor.

"My name is Ricardo Montes and I was a deck hand on the ESPERANZA. I am Puerto Rican."

Margraff, who was noting down that information in a small notepad, looked again at John.

"Next, on what ship were you and where were you heading? How did you end up in a life raft?"

"We had booked passage on the M.V. ESPERANZA, a mixed cargo and passenger transport, in San Juan and were heading for Miami when a sudden storm swamped our ship in the middle of last night. I am afraid that we are the only survivors from the ESPERANZA."

"I am sorry to hear that, Mister Kaiser. May I ask what was the reason of your trip to Miami?"

John then did his best to keep a straight face and even voice as he lied to Margraff.

"Me and my family were returning from a Christmas period vacation in Puerto Rico. I work as a junior administrator in a Miami shipping company."

If Margraff doubted the veracity of his words then, he didn't let it show up and closed and pocketed his notepad and pen before looking down and smiling at little Robert, who was sitting naked on John's lap.

"I will go see what I can find as new clothes for you, your family and Mister Montes. If it may reassure you, we do have spare beds available for all of you."

"Your submarine certainly seems to be unusually comfortable and spacious, Lieutenant. Are all German submarines this comfortable?"

John's question made Margraff burst into genuine laughter and it took him a couple of seconds before he could answer him.

"Hardly! The U-800 is in a class of its own in about everything, as the British have learned the hard way lately."

To John's disappointment, Margraff didn't elaborate about that and left, to be soon replaced by a sailor wearing a cook's apron and carrying five steaming tin cups in his hands. He handed two of the cups, which turned out to contain hot coffee, to John and Ricardo, plus a cup of hot chocolate for little Robert. He then made signs about his two remaining cups, obviously not knowing English. John understood him easily enough and spoke to his wife through the privacy curtain.

"Jennifer, the cook brought a cup of coffee for you and a cup of hot chocolate for Helen."

"What a fine man!" Jennifer said before slipping two hands through the curtain separation, taking the cups offered by the cook, who then departed. Helping first his toddler son to drink a bit of his hot chocolate, John then took a sip of his coffee and felt like coming alive again.

"God, I really needed that coffee! I wouldn't mind a good meal as well."

"We will take care of that as soon as you have all been examined and then given clothes and a bed, mister." Replied the German doctor through the curtain.

"Thank you, Doctor, for everything. The crew of this submarine certainly proved to be most decent up to now."

"Well, you shouldn't believe all that Allied propaganda about Germans being blood-thirsty automatons, Mister Kaiser."

"What about the Japanese, then?"

"Can't say that I know much about them, mister, so I won't venture an opinion on that. You should however be more worried in the long term with Stalin."

On that, John couldn't argue with List.

John and Ricardo had time to be inspected and treated by Doctor List before Lieutenant Margraff returned with some clothes for the survivors. The adults ended with baggy mechanics' coveralls and rubber boots, while the two toddlers got simple T-shirts with their bottoms cut to the appropriate length, just above their ankles. They were then led out of the infirmary and shown two double bunk beds situated in the compartment forward of the cafeteria. One of the double bunk bed had two sides hidden by blankets hooked from the ceiling and forming a sort of privacy curtain. Margraff pointed at the curtained-off bunk bed while facing John and Jennifer.

"That double bunk bed is for the use of Madam Kaiser and of her two children. Mister Kaiser, Mister Montes, you will use that bunk bed nearby. If you will now follow me, we will be able to provide you with a decent meal."

The group then stepped aft into the crew cafeteria, where Margraff showed them one of the tables.

"If you will please sit down at that table, the cook will have something for you soon. Uh, does any of you have any sort of food allergy?"

"Just to British food." Quipped John, making Margraff laugh again.

"I have to say that I must agree with you on that. I had to eat captured British field rations a few times and they were nothing to shout about."

Margraff then disappeared behind a partition separating the cafeteria from what had to be the kitchen. He came back after a minute.

"Your food will be ready in ten minutes. In the meantime, you will find fresh bread, butter and jam at the service counter behind that partition to your left. If you will now excuse me, I will have to take care of other things for a while. Two of my men will however stay with you. Both speak good English, by the way."

"Uh, wait, Lieutenant!" Said Jennifer, making Margraff stop. "Can you explain to me why you and your men, who are Army soldiers, are on a submarine?"

Her question made Margraff grin with malice.

"Why? So that American soil could bear the marks of German boots, Madam Kaiser."

On that, Margraff walked out of the compartment, leaving the Americans to ponder his words. They however forgot about them when the cook brought a big serving pot that he suspended just above the table, using hooks apparently devised to that effect. Jennifer

was about to ask why the pot was suspended but understood by herself when she saw the pot gently sway as the submarine rolled and pitched slightly.

“Hey, this is a good idea! It sure prevents spillage of food in heavy seas.”

The cook then distributed large bowls and utensils around the table before ladling out a thick stew of meat and vegetables, serving the two children first, followed by Jennifer and then the men. He next brought fresh bread, still warm from the oven, and tin mugs filled with water. The smell of the stew was enough to convince the adults to forget that they were prisoners aboard a German submarine, with everybody soon eating the stew with gusto. To the children’s delight, freshly baked chocolate biscuits followed for dessert.

Forty minutes later, with everybody well stuffed, John looked at one of the two soldiers that had been watching them from another table.

“What happens now?”

His question seemed to amuse the German, who shrugged.

“Now, we wait!”

“Wait for what?”

“Wait for the Captain to make his next move. That could however take a few days, or even a week or two. It will depend on what we encounter on our path.”

“Days? And what are we going to do to spend the time in this submarine, especially with two small children?”

“You can sleep, read, play cards or chess, listen to music, watch the sea...”

“Woah! How are you supposed to watch the sea while inside a submerged submarine?”

The two German soldiers exchanged a look, then the older one got up from his bench seat.

“I will go see if I can get permission for you to go observe the sea. I won’t be long.”

John, Jennifer and Ricardo looked at each other, utterly confused, as the soldier went upstairs to the next deck, but didn’t dare comment out loud about it in the presence of the other soldier. The soldier finally returned twelve minutes later, a smile on his face.

“The Captain has authorized the use of our underwater viewing domes by you, but no more than two at a time, and that includes the children. Madam Kaiser, if you will

follow me with one of your children. Your husband will be able to follow with your other child in fifteen minutes.”

Seeing that Jennifer was unsure about following the German, John encouraged her with a nod.

“Go ahead, Jennifer: go with Helen. I don’t believe that anything bad will happen.”

“Okay! Come, Helen: we are going to watch something.”

“What are we going to watch, Mommy?” Asked the small girl in her tiny voice.

“I don’t know yet, sweetie.”

Still a bit apprehensive, Jennifer Kaiser took Helen’s right hand and led her while following the German soldier, who led her up two levels inside a small lift cabin, then made her and Helen climb two sets of ladders. When she emerged from the last steel deck hatch, she found herself in some kind of steel cylinder topped by a thick transparent dome. Outside of the dome was a sort of glass and steel canopy and beyond that...the sea. The submarine was actually fairly close to the surface, with the sunlight above the sea illuminating the waters to an appreciable depth. Jennifer then found herself able to clearly see all the fish and objects between the surface and her position, and this for nearly 200 meters all around.

“My God, this is incredible! Look at all those fish to our right, Helen!”

“I see them, Mommy.” Replied her daughter, getting excited. As her daughter marveled at the fish swimming around, Jennifer gave a warm smile to the German soldier who had guided her up to the dome.

“Thank you so much for letting us profit from such a fantastic experience, mister.”

The German nodded his head soberly, acknowledging her thank you.

“We are human beings like everyone else, madam, and seeing your kids being happy and healthy makes us happy. We may be conducting war operations right now, but the Captain will never let any act of abuse or violence be committed against you or your children.”

That left Jennifer to ponder those words for a long moment afterward.

19:50 (New York Time)

Otto Kretschmer’s cabin

Otto was reading a book in bed while still fully clothed when someone knocked on the door of his cabin.

"YES, COME IN!"

One of the electronic warfare section's operators, Josef Knocke, then entered and came to attention.

"Herr Kapitän, we just intercepted and decoded a Royal Navy secret message that may be of high interest for us. Here is the decoded text."

Getting up from his bed and grabbing the message offered by his sailor, Otto read it quickly, then grinned from ear to ear.

"Indeed, my good Knocke! With this, we will be able to serve a nice surprise to those Englishers. Good work, Knocke!"

"Danke, Herr Kapitän!" Replied proudly the sailor before leaving the cabin. Otto, the message still in his hands, hurried to the control room, where he checked quickly his navigational chart. He grinned again when he saw that he would be effectively in time to surprise the British and possibly inflict them a painful blow.

07:43 (New York Time)

Sunday, January 4, 1942

U-800, off the entrance to Willemstad Harbor

Southern coast of Curacao, Dutch West Indies, Caribbean Sea

Otto, standing at the search periscope and watching his intended prey approaching on time over the eastern horizon, was not a little surprised, not to say frustrated, when his sonar operator shouted a warning from his station a few paces away.

"Three ships approaching from the west-northwest, Herr Kapitän! From their speed and group formation, I would say that they are warships."

"Gott und Himmel! Can't a man greet properly a British gentleman without being disturbed?" Quipped Otto while doing a half turn to look towards his stern. Focusing his periscope lens, he effectively saw three smoke trails and three far-off silhouettes in the distance, apparently traveling in a single column. With both the approaching British heavy cruiser HMS DEVONSHIRE and the three newcomers still a good seven kilometers away at a minimum, too far yet for their radars to have a realistic chance of

detecting his periscope, Otto retracted the head of his periscope under the surface. He then went to the sonar section, standing behind one of the two operators and looking at their cathode displays.

“Can you give me at least a possible identification, Herr Grote?”

“The most I could say right now is that one of the three units sounds distinctly bigger and more powerful than the two other newcomers, Herr Kapitän.”

“Hmm, sounds like a cruiser or battleship escorted by two destroyers. Hell, that could complicate our job a bit this morning.”

“Bah! You will eat them all for breakfast without even breaking a sweat, Herr Kapitän.” Replied the chief sonar operator, making Otto smile and attracting a playful slap on the back of the head from his Captain.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Grote. Keep good track of both these ships and the British cruiser. I will be at the tactical plot table.”

Walking to the nearby tactical plot, where Ulrich Von Wittgenstein was plotting their original target, Otto examined the picture forming on the plot while thinking about how to proceed. The U-800 was at periscope depth at a distance of maybe two kilometers south of the entrance channel of Willemstad Harbor, the capital of the Dutch possession of Curacao, itself close to the coast of Venezuela. His original plan had been to first ambush and sink the incoming British heavy cruiser, then to dive and move around the island before surfacing again and bombard with his deck gun the huge refinery and oil tank farm complex bordering the Willemstad Harbor. Now, he was going to be forced to juggle more balls at the same time. His first watch officer gave him a questioning look as Otto was thinking.

“Should we still engage today or wait for a better occasion, Herr Kapitän?”

“Those who wait for better occasions never get to achieve much, Ulrich. We will attack this morning...and in grand style. Have all our tubes loaded with G7e eels set on contact detonation and running depth of three meters and be ready to compute fire control solutions for multiple targets, using time-on-target shooting. We will use surprise to the maximum. Our torpedo men are to reload their tubes immediately after firing, without waiting for my orders to do so.”

“Which target will we engage with our bow tubes?”

Ulrich's question, a very pertinent one actually, made Otto pause for a moment.

"As much as I want to get that British cruiser first, we will point our bow at that group of three incoming warships and reserve our four stern tubes for the HMS DEVONSHIRE. That way, we will be able to engage all four targets with our first salvo."

"Got it! We will be ready, Herr Kapitän."

"I know that you will, Ulrich."

On those words of encouragement, Otto grabbed the nearest intercom microphone and activated it.

"Attention all hands, this the Captain. Take your battle stations but do it quietly. The enemy is getting near."

He then switched temporarily to English for his other announcement.

"To our temporary guests, this is the Captain. We are about to go into combat. You are to move at once to the crew cafeteria and stay there quietly until further notice. Any attempt to interfere with the combat operations of this submarine will be dealt with severely. Thank you for your time."

As he hooked back the microphone, Otto couldn't help wince at the thought that he was about to go into combat with two young children aboard his submarine. He however had had no opportunity to offload the Americans and the Puerto Rican before arriving off Curacao.

The two German soldiers in charge of watching the Americans at the time quickly but fairly politely made them move from their bunk beds, where they had been passing the time as best they could, to the adjacent crew cafeteria, where they were told to sit at a table in a corner and stay there. John Kaiser was actually more nervous than his wife was now, for the reason that he knew better than her how risky for the occupants of a submarine a sea battle could be. Normally, if a submarine was hit while under the surface, the chances of having any survivors was slim at best, contrary to the survivors from a surface ship. As much as the thought riled him, John had to hope that the Germans would win that fight if he wanted to see his family survive this day.

Maybe fifteen minutes after the Captain's announcement, the noise of a blast of compressed air and a slight shaking of the submarine made Jennifer Kaiser straighten nervously on her bench.

"What was that?"

“This submarine has just launched a torpedo, dear.” Explained quickly John while discreetly looking at his watch. Seven more bursts of compressed air, all heard from the direction of the bow, followed in quick succession, making John’s face harden: so, this U-800 had eight bow torpedo tubes. That made for a very heavy armament indeed. He had just thought about that when four more bursts were heard, this time from the rear. Lowering his voice to a near whisper, John reached for Jennifer’s hand and pressed it while talking, acting as if he was trying to comfort and reassure his wife.

“This submarine has a total of twelve torpedo tubes: eight in the bow and four in the stern. That is an amount of firepower unheard of in other submarines.” Jennifer didn’t say a thing then, not understanding why he was even bothering to count such torpedo launches. As for John, he noted the hour then, intent on seeing how fast those torpedo tubes could be reloaded. His heart sank when they all heard a series of distant but powerful detonations: all but one of the twelve torpedoes had hit their targets. He then felt the U-800 turn around in the water and accelerate for a moment, to then slow down and apparently nearly stop dead in the water. John bowed his head, thinking about the hundreds of men that may just be dying at this exact time.

08:11 (New York Time)

Bridge of the heavy cruiser H.M.S. DEVONSHIRE

One kilometer southeast of the entrance channel of Willemstad Harbor

“ENGINE ROOM, WHAT IS YOUR STATUS?”

The chief engineer of the heavy cruiser, speaking via intercom, was nearly drowned out by a variety of background noises as he tried to answer his captain.

“OUR PORT SIDE BOILER ROOMS HAVE BEEN HIT AND ARE FLOODING RAPIDLY, SIR! OUR TWO PORT SIDE PROPELLER SHAFTS WERE EITHER BROKEN OR DEFORMED BY ONE TORPEDO HIT AND ARE OUT OF COMMISSION. I CAN STILL GIVE YOU MAYBE FIVE KNOTS BUT OUR PUMPS ARE UNABLE TO COMPENSATE FOR THE FLOODING AND WE ARE RAPIDLY TAKING AN ALARMING LIST TO PORT.”

“THEN, USE COUNTERFLOODING TO DECREASE OUR LIST. WHAT ABOUT SHIP’S POWER?”

“WE ARE DOWN TO AUXILIARY DIESEL GENERATORS, SIR, SINCE OUR MAIN POWER AND STEAM LINES HAVE BEEN CUT. WE HOWEVER HAVE TO

RESERVE MOST OF THE JUICE FOR THE BILGE PUMPS, THUS HAVE INSUFFICIENT POWER LEFT TO WORK UP THE TURRETS.”

Captain (Navy) R. D. Oliver tightened his jaws on hearing those bad news: his ship was now close to defenseless, just as a German submarine was lurking in proximity. That same submarine had also hit hard the American light cruiser U.S.S. SAVANNAH and its two escort destroyers at nearly the same time as the DEVONSHIRE had been hit. There could in fact very well be more than one German submarine involved. Looking through the broken windows of his bridge, Oliver eyed with bitterness the smoke and flames hiding from his sight the rear half of his ship. If that list increased much further, he would then be forced to order his crew to abandon ship before it capsized. He then looked at the bridge officer.

“Lieutenant, have a message urgently sent to the Admiralty, stating that we have been torpedoed by a German submarine at the entrance of Willemstad Harbor. Add that the USS SAVANNAH and its two escort destroyers were also torpedoed.”

“Aye, sir!”

Oliver next went to his operations officer, Commander Keating, who was busy making a number of frantic calls via ship telephone, and tapped his left shoulder.

“Do we have any sighting of the bastards who hit us?”

“None, Captain! Those torpedoes came out of the blue, literally. With the number of near simultaneous torpedo hits against us and the American ships, my assessment is that a submarine pack ambushed us. Right now, those submarines could be reloading their torpedo tubes for a second salvo and there would be nothing that we could do to stop them.”

“What about the Americans? Are their destroyers still able to hunt those subs down?”

In response, Keating pointed at the American group of ships, about six kilometers away. All three ships had obviously been hit hard but one of the two destroyers, broken in two, was already sinking.

“The U.S.S. LANSDALE is sinking, while the U.S.S. CHARLES F. HUGUES is down to ten knots of speed and is listing severely. Those damn Germans have us by the balls, sir.”

“Alright! Contact Willemstad and ask for immediate help to retrieve survivors. We may have to abandon ship soon if this list gets much worst.”

Just as he had said that, Oliver saw the lights inside the bridge flicker, then die entirely. Swearing to himself, he contacted again his chief engineer, only to learn that the auxiliary generators had failed, leaving the cruiser powerless. With the bilge pumps out of action, the list to port then increased rapidly, ultimately forcing Oliver in shouting out the most bitter order he had ever given.

“TO ALL THE CREW, THIS IS THE CAPTAIN! ABANDON SHIP! I SAY AGAIN, ABANDON SHIP!”

The crewmen of the British heavy cruiser, or rather the ones still alive out of a complement of 784 men, ran up ladders as quickly as they could, trying to get to the open decks in order to avoid being trapped inside if the ship capsized. The ship's boats on the starboard side however proved to be unusable, the list to port being too pronounced, while most of the boats on the port side had been destroyed by the blasts of the four torpedoes that had sealed the fate of the cruiser. That left only a collection of lifejackets and Carley floats available to the frantic British sailors. Many of the men had no choice left but to jump into the water without even a lifejacket. Thankfully, the temperature of the Caribbean Ocean at this date was quite mild, something that prevented many deaths by hypothermia. In the North Atlantic, very few of the sailors now swimming away from the listing cruiser would have survived more than a few minutes.

Observing that drama from a distance of three kilometers via his attack periscope, Otto couldn't help feel bad for the American and British sailors now fighting for survival. The need for a second torpedo salvo was evaporating quickly now, with only one of the American destroyers out of his four targets likely to survive the day. One destroyer had broken in two, while the American light cruiser was close to capsizing. Using a sailor to change films in the camera hooked to the back prism of his periscope, Otto took pictures of his latest victims as each ship sank or capsized, then retracted his periscope and gave orders to his control room crew.

“Helm, steer to Heading 110, make depth eighty meters and speed twenty knots: we are taking some distance from this place before enemy planes could react. Secure from battle stations but keep silent routine.”

Only then did Otto allow himself to relax a bit. However, he was not finished yet with the island of Curacao, far from it.

20:10 (New York Time)
Beach near Santa Barbara Plantation
Curacao, Dutch West Indies

Helped by one of his men, Hugo Margraff pulled the inflatable rubber boat nearly out of the water, then offered his hand to help Jennifer Kaiser, carrying little Robert in her arms, to step out of the boat and on the sandy beach. She accepted his help with gratitude and stood on the wet sand as her husband John, carrying Helen, also stepped off the boat, soon followed by Ricardo Montes. All five still wore the coveralls or T-shirts given by the Germans, plus rubber boots in the case of the three adults. The decision by Captain Kretschmer to let them go so early after sinking a number of Allied ships had surprised them, but they were still quite happy to be finally back on firm land and John shook the hand of Margraff with genuine gratitude.

“Thank you for having treated us humanely and with respect, Lieutenant Margraff. We will not forget your kindness and that of Captain Kretschmer.”

“We could not have done less in all decency, Mister Kaiser. Oh, by the way, I have a last thing for you, from Captain Kretschmer.”

Hugo then took out of a uniform pocket an envelope that he then gave to the intrigued John, who opened it. Inside, he found a folded sheet of paper, plus a number of American dollar bills.

“Uh, what’s this, Lieutenant?”

“A declaration from Captain Kretschmer on official Kriegsmarine paper certifying how you were found on a raft off Haiti and rescued by him. You may need it to make the local Dutch authorities believe your story. The money comes from the reserves of foreign cash money kept on the U-800 for contingency purposes. There is a total of a hundred American dollars in this envelope, to help you, your family and Mister Montes to pay for food, lodging and eventual passage to the United States. You may need cash for the next couple of days, until your government can take charge of you.”

“I...I don’t know what to say, Lieutenant. This is mighty generous and considerate of your Captain.”

“Pah! It’s nothing, really. How could we not spoil a bit your cute kids?”

John smiled and shook hands again with Hugo.

"You are a good man, Lieutenant, even if you are fighting against the United States. I sincerely hope that your men and those of the U-800 will survive this war."

"Thank you, Mister Kaiser. Good luck, you and your family."

Hugo then looked at Ricardo Montes and shook his hand as well.

"Good luck, Mister Montes. Return safely to your family."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Margraff." Could only say the Puerto Rican sailor, still having a hard time to believe that he was now free and on firm ground. The five survivors then watched as Margraff and his two men pushed back their rubber boat in the water and climbed aboard, paddling at first for some distance before starting their outboard engine and disappearing in the night, in the direction of the black mass standing 600 meters offshore. John finally spoke up softly to the rest of his group.

"Okay, let's start walking towards those houses visible to our left. Hopefully, the people there will not shoot on sight at us."

They ended up walking for about a kilometer before arriving at what looked like a farmhouse with annexes. Hoping fervently that they would get a friendly reception, John knocked on the main door of the farmhouse, his family and Montes behind him and with little Helen still in his arms. He heard footsteps approach the door after a few seconds, with a bearded man opening the door and looking at him with curiosity, sniffing at the stench of diesel fumes impregnating their clothes. The man then said something in a foreign language that John didn't understand, making John shake his head and speak in English.

"I am sorry, but I don't understand you. Do you speak English?"

The man's reaction was to turn around and speak to someone inside the house. A teenage boy of about sixteen then came to the door and spoke to John after detailing him and his group for a couple of seconds.

"Can we help you, mister?"

"You certainly can, young man! We are Americans and were shipwrecked a few days ago. A boat fortunately retrieved us then and just dropped us off on a nearby beach."

The teenager did a double take at his explanation, then translated John's words to the bearded man before looking back at John, now clearly suspicious.

"If that boat saved you, why didn't it drop you off at a port, instead of landing you on a beach, mister?"

Knowing that he was liable to reveal that eventually, John sighed and hoped for the best.

“Because that boat was a German submarine, mister. Thankfully, me and my family, along with Mister Montes, were well treated after we were fished out of the water. We would need to contact the American consul in Curacao, if there is one, so that we could be repatriated.”

Now obviously agitated, the teenager again translated John’s words, making the bearded man fix the newcomers suspiciously as he replied to the teenager. The man then walked away from the door, going towards a telephone hooked to the wall of a lounge as the young man opened the door wide.

“My father will call the authorities in Willemstad. In the meantime, come in. Do you need water or food?”

“No! As I said, we were well treated aboard that German submarine. I also have some information about that submarine that could be of interest to your government.”

“Then, our officials will certainly want to speak with you, mister. One or more German submarines attacked and sank three Allied warships just off Willemstad this morning. They are still fishing out bodies from the water.”

“I know: we were aboard that submarine and heard its torpedo tubes as they were discharged a number of times.”

The teenager nodded his head at that and pointed at the sofas around the lounge.

“Please sit in the lounge, mister. I will get my mother to prepare some coffee for you and milk for your children.”

“Thank you! You are too kind. Oh, I nearly forgot: my name is John Kaiser and this is my wife Jennifer, my son Robert and my daughter Helen. Our companion of misfortune is Ricardo Montes.”

“And my name is Jan Demaersk. This plantation belongs to my father. Don’t worry anymore: someone will undoubtedly come quickly for you.”

23:09 (New York Time)

Fort William, Willemstad

Curacao

Captain (N) Robert Oliver felt like a broken man as he was returning to the room given to him at Fort William by the Dutch governor of Curacao: he had just finished a long tour of the local hospitals, where hundreds of his men were being treated. He had

also lost 369 men of his crew when his heavy cruiser had capsized and sank just outside of the entrance channel to Willemstad Harbor. The Americans had lost even more men in the morning attack, including the commanders of their light cruiser and of one of their destroyers that had broken in two. Oliver had already sent a message to the Admiralty in London following that tragedy and was intent on writing a full report before going to bed.

The British commander was about to open his room's door when a Dutch officer came to him at a run down the hallway while shouting at him.

"CAPTAIN OLIVER! CAPTAIN OLIVER! WE NEED YOU TO GO LISTEN TO SOME PEOPLE."

"What kind of people, Lieutenant?" Replied Oliver, a bit ticked off, as the Dutch officer came to a stop in front of him and saluted. "Is it something really important? I have a report to write."

"They are an American family of four, plus one Puerto Rican sailor, sir. They say that a storm shipwrecked them off Haiti and that a German submarine then saved them. That submarine dropped them off on a nearby beach three hours ago. The American man says that he has information about the German submarine in question." His idea of writing a report suddenly put on a back burner, Oliver nodded to the Dutchman.

"Alright, lead me to these shipwreck survivors."

"They are being questioned in our military police offices, sir. This way, please!" Hoping desperately that those survivors would tell him something that could help sink the bastards who had sunk his cruiser, Oliver followed the Dutch lieutenant to the basement level of the building, where the Dutch military police had its offices and cells. One thought suddenly came to his mind, making him ask a question as he kept walking.

"Uh, I hope that your MPs have not used brutality against those survivors, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir! Their questioning, at least of the two adult men of the group, have been intense but no violence was used."

"Who else is part of that group of survivors?"

"A young woman and two toddlers, sir."

That answer made Oliver look crossly at the Dutchman.

"And you really think that German spies could have been dropped off on your coast in the company of small children? Aren't your MPs a bit paranoid?"

The Dutch lieutenant shrugged his shoulders at that.

"Probably, but they prefer to play it safe, sir."

Oliver frowned but let it at that. They soon arrived at the MP section, where a Dutch MP led them to a guarded hallway with steel doors on each side. As they approached one of the doors, Oliver was able to hear the muffled voice of a man who sounded quite angry.

"WILL YOU STOP WITH YOUR FUCKING ACCUSATIONS? I AM A UNITED STATES NAVY RESERVE OFFICER AND I AM TRYING TO HELP YOU, DAMMIT!"

Not waiting for the Dutch lieutenant to open the door for him, Oliver pushed his way ahead and pulled the door open himself, stepping quickly inside and looking around briefly to gauge the situation. One fairly tall man wearing a gray coverall and a pair of rubber boots was facing a Dutch MP officer from across a small table, with both men being nearly nose to nose. They would have probably come to blows if not for the fact that the man in the coverall had his hands manacled in his back. Still, the two other Dutch MPs present were about to forcibly sit the man back on his chair when Oliver raised his voice.

"LEAVE THE MAN ALONE!"

The Dutch MP, a captain, looked with confusion at first at Oliver, who wore his uniform of Royal Navy captain, then became angry at him.

"Captain, this is an internal affair under the jurisdiction of my government."

"And this man could have precious information that could help the Royal Navy find and sink the German submarines who sank my cruiser and two other Allied warships at the entrance of your port, so buzz off and let me speak with him...one on one. If you don't, I will have to report your unhelpful attitude to the Governor. And remove his handcuffs before you go."

The Dutch captain stiffened at that threat but didn't reply to it, instead signaling to his two MPs to obey Oliver and leave before stomping out himself. Soon alone with the man in the coverall, except for the Dutch military intelligence lieutenant who stayed discreetly by the door, Oliver approached the ex-prisoner and presented his right hand.

"Captain Robert Oliver, Royal Navy. I was the commander of the heavy cruiser HMS DEVONSHIRE."

The man in the coverall shook his hand firmly.

“United States Navy Reserves Lieutenant Junior Grade John Kaiser. Thank you for intervening and putting a stop to this nonsense. Could I first ask to see if my family and Mister Montes were not mistreated by those goons while I was separated from them, Captain?”

“That’s a reasonable enough demand, in my opinion. In fact, I think that it would be better for all of you to be together while we speak: that way, your wife or this Mister Montes could remember some extra detail of importance to me.”

Oliver then looked at the Dutch lieutenant, who nodded in understanding and left the room. While waiting for his return, Oliver showed the two chairs opposite the small table.

“Why don’t we sit in the meantime, Lieutenant Kaiser?”

“Thank you, but I will reserve those chairs for my wife and kids, Captain Oliver.”

“Well, I think that we could do better than that, Lieutenant.”

Oliver then went to the door and passed his head and torso outside before shouting.

“BRING FOUR EXTRA CHAIRS IN HERE AND HURRY ABOUT IT!”

Satisfied with himself, Oliver returned to face John Kaiser, with both men taking a moment to take the measure of the other. The Dutch lieutenant was soon back with a Latino man and a young blond woman with two young toddlers. A soldier was following, carrying four folding chairs. Oliver had five of the chairs in the room lined up in a semi-circle in front of the small table. When Jennifer Kaiser kept the smallest toddler in her arms, Oliver had the Dutch lieutenant take the unused chair and place it beside his own chair. With everybody now seated and with the Dutch lieutenant providing him with a pen and a notepad, Oliver had a round of presentations made, then went to the serious business, looking at John Kaiser.

“First off, Lieutenant Kaiser, could you resume quickly how you came to end up aboard a German submarine?”

“It was actually quite straightforward, Captain Oliver. Me and my family booked passage on the MV ESPERANZA, a mixed cargo and passenger ship, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on December 30, to go to Miami. I just had been recalled as a reservist Navy officer and was going to join my assigned post in the United States. Then, our ship hit a sudden, nasty storm at night and foundered. We were all sleeping when our ship started capsizing and we had to evacuate in our night clothes. Mister Ricardo Montes, who was a deck hand on the ESPERANZA, managed to loosen a Carley Float and helped pull my family in it before our poor ship went down. The next few hours were hell

and we were nearly washed away by waves a number of times, but thankfully were able to all stay in the raft. The storm eventually blew away but we then found ourselves alone, with no other survivors in sight. We spent a whole day and a whole night in that raft, exposed to the Sun and without water or food, before a German submarine appeared and picked us up, early on the morning of New Year's Day."

Oliver nodded and got ready to take some serious notes from then on.

"Go on, Lieutenant Kaiser."

"Before we do, Captain Oliver, could I get back an envelope that the Germans gave us before leaving us on a nearby beach? It contains a letter signed by the German submarine captain, along with some American cash money he gave us to help us pay for passage back to the United States."

"I will take care of that, Captain." Announced at once the Dutch military intelligence lieutenant, getting up from his chair and then leaving the room. Oliver patiently waited until he had returned with the said envelope and handed it to John Kaiser.

"Could you please check if anything is missing from the envelope, Lieutenant?"

John did so and opened the envelope, only to become angry at once.

"The bastards! They took the money that was meant for our use."

Now getting really pissed, Oliver stared at the Dutch lieutenant and wiggled an index at him.

"Lieutenant, could you please get that money back and tell at the same time that MP captain that I will be lodging a strong complaint against him with the Governor? We are wasting a lot of valuable time here because of him."

The Dutch lieutenant, himself getting irritated by this, left the room again. While waiting for his return, John took out Kretschmer's declaration and showed it to Oliver, who examined it with great interest.

"The captain of the U-800 gave us this, to help convince the Dutch authorities about our story. I have to say that Captain Otto Kretschmer proved himself to be a perfect gentleman during the four days we were aboard his submarine. We were always well treated and were never roughed up. He even invited us once for supper at his officers' wardroom. He speaks an excellent English, with nearly no accent."

"Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds, Commander of U-800..." Said softly Oliver while reading the signature block on the sheet of paper. "You were dealing with one of the

best, if not the best German submarine commander presently in service, Lieutenant Kaiser. No wonder we got clobbered here this morning.”

“Oh, there is a lot more to say about him and his submarine, Captain.”

“I’m sure there is, but let’s wait for the return of the good Lieutenant Voorman. I am sure that the Dutch military intelligence could be interested as well in all this.”

“Of course!”

The said Voorman was back after six minutes, looking quite pissed. He put ten American bills of ten dollars each on the table as he explained himself.

“Please excuse the delay, but I had to call the Governor and notify him: that MP asshole had pocketed that American money for himself and it took the denunciation of one of his own men for him to give back the money to me. I then had him put under arrest for theft, using the Governor’s authority.”

“Incredible!” Muttered Oliver, shaking his head. “Well, you more than made up for that man’s conduct with your own actions, Lieutenant. Be assured that I will place a good word on your behalf with the Governor. Now, to return to the affair at hand, Lieutenant Kaiser showed me this letter, made by one of the top German submarine commanders presently in service.”

Oliver then passed the letter to Voorman, who quickly read it. With that done, Oliver concentrated his attention back on John Kaiser.

“So, Lieutenant Kaiser, what else could you tell me about this Captain Kretschmer and his U-800?”

“A lot that is both incredible and disturbing, Captain Oliver. First, when we were picked up by the U-800, we were brought inside and below to a small but well equipped infirmary with one treatment table and two patients’ recovery double bunk beds. There was a qualified doctor aboard, an Oberleutnant Konrad List. He was a graying man and told us he’s a reserve officer who served on a ship in the Great War. That Doctor List proved to be both competent and kind.”

Both Oliver and Voorman looked at John with disbelief.

“A German submarine with enough space for a dedicated infirmary?” Asked Oliver, making John nod.

“Oh, there was plenty of space inside for lots more, Captain Oliver. While not that much larger on the outside compared to other German submarines, the U-800 is surprisingly spacious inside. When I commented on that to a German sailor, he told me

that it was because the U-800 is what he called 'a single hull submarine', contrary to the other German submarines, which are double-hulled. In essence, the main part of the U-800 is a large pressure hull, with the ballast tanks at both ends and with a few things under a free-flooding upper casing that forms the deck when on the surface. I was able to look at a basic schematic plan of the U-800 that was displayed near one of its access airlocks and that plan showed me a lot of important details. One of them was the fact that, while we didn't see a deck gun on the U-800 when we were pulled aboard, the plan I saw showed that three deck guns were stowed under the upper casing, covered by streamlined plating. One of the guns appeared to be a medium caliber gun, hidden under the forward deck, while the other two guns were anti-aircraft mounts. There were also 44 large but short tubes placed perpendicular to the centerline, under the upper casing, but I couldn't figure then what they were for."

Oliver paled on hearing those words, making John worry.

"What? What is that telling you, Captain Oliver?"

"Launch tubes for sea mines! That bloody U-800 can carry sea mines! That explains a lot of things."

"What does it explain?"

"Well, you probably don't know about this, since the censorship was severe about those incidents, but we suffered a series of devastating submarine attacks near the port of Halifax during the months of October and November of last year. During one of those attacks, sea mines planted at the entrance of Halifax Harbor sank or damaged a number of ships as we responded to torpedo attacks. That convinced us then that we were dealing with a whole pack of German submarines, with one of them specialized in the carrying and sowing of sea mines. Your U-800 could very well have been that specific submarine. What about its torpedo armament? Were you able to visit its torpedo room?"

"No! We were not allowed inside either of the torpedo rooms, nor inside the engine room. However, I was able to count the number of torpedo discharges during this morning's attack of your ship and your escort ships by the U-800. It has eight bow torpedo tubes, plus four stern torpedo tubes."

Both Oliver and Voorman again gave him incredulous stares.

"Twelve torpedo tubes? But, no known German submarine has this many tubes. This is unprecedented, especially if you add to that the sea mines launch tubes."

"Believe me when I say this, Captain Oliver: the U-800 is not your run of the mill German submarine. I personally believe that it is in fact the prototype for a highly advanced new class of German attack submarine. A lot of care seems to have gone in designing a submarine with extensive crew accommodations and facilities, probably because it is meant to be a very long range boat. Every sailor aboard had his own dedicated bunk and there were even some extra bunks available. A few of those were in fact used by a group of seven German Army soldiers, who were fully equipped and armed. The cash money we were given in fact came from a reserve of foreign cash money kept aboard for the use of saboteurs or commandos. The leader of the army soldiers, a Lieutenant Hugo Margraff, told me that when he dropped us off on a nearby beach."

"Were you able to learn to what unit those soldiers belonged, Lieutenant Kaiser?" Asked Lieutenant Voorman, jumping in the exchange. To his satisfaction, John nodded his head.

"My wife Jennifer actually noticed that detail, Lieutenant: their uniform sleeves wore embroidered bands wearing the words 'Regiment Brandenburg'. What? You're paling on me!"

Voorman, both shaken and excited, looked somberly at Oliver while speaking in a grave tone.

"The Brandenburg Regiment is an elite unit of the German Heer under the direct command of the German Army Intelligence, the Abwehr. It specializes in special operations, commando raids, deep penetration raids and the like. It was the first German unit to enter Belgium and the Netherlands at the start of the war, infiltrating our lines and either blowing up or capturing intact vital installations like bridges in advance of the main German attacking units. These men are to be considered very dangerous and could well launch night raids on our installations here in Curacao. This is a very important piece of information indeed for us, Lieutenant Kaiser."

Those words then made Oliver connect with a recent, most infamous event.

"Bloody hell! Miami! The M.S. CALYPSO incident!"

"Uh? Don't tell me that the U-800 was in Miami recently, Captain." Said John, surprised. Oliver gave him a near haggard look.

"It may very well have been, Lieutenant Kaiser. Know that the port of Miami was attacked in the early morning of December 30th. For some incomprehensible reason, one of our armed merchant ships anchored off Miami Harbor started firing its deck guns

at the port installations, destroying both the local Coast Guard station and the marine fuel tank farm, on top of sinking or damaging severely a number of ships at quay in Miami. The American reaction was slow at first but the CALYPSO was finally sunk by airplane bombs once the Sun rose. The glitch here is that no one saw any submarine then.”

To Oliver’s surprise, Jennifer Kaiser’s face then reflected a sudden flash of understanding.

“That stew we were served! I knew that I recognized it!”

“Stew? What stew? What are you talking about, Misses Kaiser?” Asked Oliver, thoroughly confused now. Jennifer, with little Robert still in her arms, gave him an embarrassed smile.

“Sorry for having jumped in like this, Captain Oliver. The day we were picked up by that German submarine, we were served a really good meat and vegetable stew in the crew’s dining room and...”

“Excuse me, but did you just say the crew’s dining room?” Asked Oliver, not believing his ears. “Even on our large warships, the sailors eat in the same messes in which they sleep, while things are even more basic on submarines.”

“Well, there was nothing basic about the eating facilities aboard that submarine, Captain Oliver.” Replied Jennifer, a bit miffed at having been interrupted. “The German sailors had a dedicated cafeteria for eating their meals that was separate from their sleeping compartments. Over thirty men, more than half of the crew I was told by a sailor, could eat at the same time in there and there were self-serve counters for preparing toasts, sandwiches and cups of coffee or tea. As for the officers’ mess of the U-800, it had enough room for a large dining table and a couple of sofas, plus a service counter. I was able to see the inside of the kitchen when I offered to help prepare a cake: it measured a good twelve by fifteen feet, if not more. Returning to the business of that stew, I thought at the time that it tasted and looked exactly like a brand of canned stew produced in Florida and that I had eaten before. Now, I am sure that it originated from Florida.”

The truth then descended on Oliver like a bolt of lightning.

“The buggers! They boarded the CALYPSO and stole some of the foodstuff aboard, probably killing the crew first, then turned the CALYPSO’s deck guns on the port of Miami. Decidedly, this Captain Kretschmer and his army commando soldiers have kept busy lately.”

As John and Jennifer looked at him with incomprehension, Oliver smiled to them and explained himself.

“Know that our armed merchant ship in Miami, the CALYPSO, was a refrigerated stores ship, loaded with a mix of canned, fresh, refrigerated and frozen foodstuff. Those German Army soldiers you saw aboard the U-800 probably boarded the CALYPSO at night, killed the crew and then transferred part of the foodstuff in it aboard the U-800 before turning its deck guns against the port of Miami. Know as well that, on the night of December the 27th, German soldiers briefly took control of the Cape Lookout lighthouse, on the coast of North Carolina, and detained the keepers and their families while they sabotaged the lighthouse. Those soldiers then left by rubber boat, probably to be picked up by your U-800.”

Oliver then exchanged a knowing look with Lieutenant Voorman.

“Decidedly, this U-800 looks and sounds like a very serious threat to both our shipping and our port installations around the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, with both submarine attacks and coastal commando raids to be expected.”

“I agree with you on this, Captain. I will send an advisory message around after this.”

“And I will advise London as well.”

The little voice of four year-old Helen, speaking to her mother, then made them all look at her.

“Can we tell them about the fish we saw swimming, Mommy?”

Both Jennifer and John were apparently struck by those words, as if they reminded them of something important. Jennifer was the first to explain the words of her daughter to the British and the Dutch.

“What Helen said was about something completely unexpected we saw on the U-800, gentlemen: that German submarine has transparent observation domes that allows its crew to actually see around and above their submarine while they are under the surface of the sea. We could see fish swim around us and also spot ships on the surface as they got close to us.”

“And where were those domes located, Misses Kaiser?”

“On top of the tower, covered themselves by a protective transparent canopy.”

“I can add to that the fact that, in clear waters and in shallow depths, those domes helped a lot to navigate safely by avoiding reefs and underwater obstacles.” Added John Kaiser, making Oliver nod his head slowly.

"Well, this is something completely new altogether, I must say. We will have to examine that concept in more depth to find how much it could affect specific tactical situations. Anything else about the U-800, Mister and Misses Kaiser?"

"Uh, I believe that it is all, Captain Oliver. What about my family and Mister Montes? When will they be able to go home?"

"Do not worry, Lieutenant Kaiser." Answered Voorman, giving him a reassuring smile. "We will fly you out tomorrow, along with Mister Montes."

At a bit past midnight, with an urgent report sent to London via encoded radio message, Robert Oliver went out for some fresh air and climbed to the sentry walkway atop the old walls of Fort William that faced the sea. The fresh, saline air did help him dissipate some of the tension in him created by learning what kind of dangerous opponent was out there, at sea. He was still inhaling some fresh air when a brief flash of light far out at sea attracted his attention. Long seconds later, another flash of light, this one inland, made his head twist around. His eyes bulged and he swore to himself when he saw that something had exploded within the huge complex of storage tanks and gas separation towers of the Royal Dutch Shell refinery, situated on the shores of the Schottegat, the vast inland lagoon that sheltered the port of Willemstad. That explosion apparently touched something sensitive, as a long, intense flame started burning up inside the refinery complex. More gun shells, as they could only be that, followed in quick succession after that initial ranging strike.

"THOSE GERMAN BASTARDS!"

He knew very well that the typical 88mm and 105mm deck guns carried by German submarines easily had the range for such a bombardment. The giant Shell refinery also happened to be a huge, hard to miss target with lots of sensitive spots. That was quickly demonstrated in a matter of mere minutes, with shells transforming large parts of the refinery and oil tank farms into a raging inferno. The few old coastal guns the Dutch had protecting Willemstad then proved either too inaccurate or too short-ranged to reply effectively to the German gunfire. The U-800, as it probably was, thus kept firing calmly at a steady rate, sweeping its fire left to right and in depth to spray the whole area of the refinery. After ten minutes of firing and over seventy shells fired, the whole of the largest oil refinery complex in the Caribbean region, a refinery vital to the Allied war effort, was turned into a sea of raging flames, with Oliver being able to feel the heat from the fires

even from two kilometers away. The U-800, having just added another feat to its already long list, then quietly slipped under the sea.

CHAPTER 10 – A DESPERATE HUNT

15:38 (New York Time)

Monday, January 5, 1942

Headquarters, United States Navy Atlantic Fleet

Norfolk, Virginia, U.S.A.

“Show me again that report on this U-800.”

“Yes, Admiral!” Replied the assistant operations officer of the fleet before going quickly through his pile of messages. Finding the one asked for, he then passed it to a depressed-looking Vice Admiral Royal Ingersoll, Commander of the Atlantic Fleet, who was standing with other senior naval commanders around the big chart table of the operations center. However, re-reading the report sent from Curacao didn’t seem to help his mood, on the contrary. Ingersoll soon looked up from the message and eyed the men around the chart table before speaking.

“Some will probably be tempted to say that, since this damned U-800 is now in the Caribbean Sea, it is no longer our concern. However, that German submarine did pass through our East Coast operational zone recently and we failed to stop it. It is thus still partly our responsibility to find and destroy it before it causes yet more damage to our war effort and to ourselves. Furthermore, we have orders from our new CNO¹⁰ to help hunt down and sink that submarine, so any discussion about this is moot. We now know for certain that there are elite commando soldiers aboard the U-800, meaning that we can expect coastal sabotage raids along the eastern and southern seaboard anywhere and anytime, on top of having a German submarine on the prowl and hitting our shipping lanes. We will thus have to reinforce significantly the level of security of our port installations and aboard our ships at anchor.”

“But, Admiral, aren’t we grossly overestimating the threat represented by this lone German submarine?” Asked Rear Admiral Adolphus Andrews, the commander of the Eastern Sea Frontier area. Ingersoll gave him a distinctly less than friendly look as he answered his question. Andrews had basically done nothing during the enemy rampage of the last months and had ignored the suggestions from the British to form

¹⁰ CNO : Chief of Naval Operations. Title of the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Navy.

coastal convoys in order to lower the losses in merchant ships. In a way, Ingersoll himself was also guilty of negligence in that matter for not having pushed Andrews harder, but he now was about out of patience with him.

“We are grossly overestimating the threat from that submarine? Haven’t our recent losses, mostly incurred in your sector, been enough to convince you that it was time to get off your ass, Rear Admiral Andrews?”

Ingersoll then looked around the table at his assembled subordinates, his expression severe.

“The times of half measures and peacetime habits are over, gentlemen! Since what little we have in the Caribbean and in the Gulf of Mexico area is probably insufficient to find and destroy quickly that U-800, I have decided to temporarily transfer three full destroyer squadrons and four maritime patrol aircraft squadrons south, in order to reinforce our defenses there. I will also direct the Marine Corps to assign sub-units from Camp Lejeune to various ports and installations along our Southern Coast, in order to protect them from commando raids. I want a detailed plan for an extensive anti-submarine sweep of the Caribbean Basin and Gulf of Mexico prepared and ready for my review in three days. We will then meet again. You are dismissed, gentlemen!”

As his admirals left, Ingersoll went to a young lieutenant who had obviously been waiting for a while already with a message in his hands.

“You have something for me, Lieutenant?”

“Yes sir!” Replied the young officer, coming to rigid attention and presenting the message he was holding. “We received this report twenty minutes ago, sir.”

Taking the message and reading it quickly, Ingersoll had to stop himself from cursing out loud: five tanker ships had been torpedoed and sunk off the Venezuelan coast, while three more tanker ships had been shelled and destroyed while docked at the oil transfer terminal of the Cardon Refinery, in Punta Cardon, Venezuela. The terminal itself, while not directly targeted, had been significantly damaged by the burning of the docked tankers. The worst part was that all this had happened over ten hours ago, with this the first information he was getting about it. Keeping the message, he started walking briskly towards the office of his intelligence officer, intent on telling him what he thought of such delays in the passage of vital information. What he couldn’t possibly know then was that his troubles with German submarines were only starting: the first group of Type IX oceanic attack submarines sent by Admiral Karl Dönitz to attack merchant shipping along the American East Coast was going to arrive soon, just after the planned

departure of three American destroyer squadrons for the Caribbean Basin to hunt down the U-800.

13:06 (New York Time)

Tuesday, January 6, 1942

Officers' mess of the U-800

Off the coast of Colombia, Caribbean Sea

Hugo Margraff was the last one to arrive at the officers' mess of the submarine and found all seven other officers aboard assembled at the dining table, with a chart of the Caribbean Basin and of the Gulf of Mexico spread on the table. Otto Kretschmer, apparently in quite a good mood, smiled on seeing him enter the mess and motioned to him to join the group at the table.

"Ahh, Leutnant Margraff! Please sit down with us: we have strategy to discuss." Taking place beside Leutnant zur See Franz Streib on one of the pivoting seats, Margraff kept silent then, expecting the discussion to be mostly about naval matters. In that he was proven wrong rather quickly. Pointing at a spot on the chart spread on the table, Otto Kretschmer spoke in a sober tone to his assembled subordinates.

"Here is our last position, calculated an hour ago from a fresh sextant measurement. We are now about 265 nautical miles from our next objective, the Colombian port of Cartagena and its maritime traffic. Apart from being a very active port, Cartagena also happens to have a large refinery and oil tanker terminal, which I consider as primary targets for us. I know that most submarine commanders would say that the business of submarines is to sink ships, but if we could destroy the refineries that fill the tankers we normally concentrate on, then why not do it? Refineries, as we amply showed in Curacao, are large, easy to spot and very vulnerable to any sort of damage. Another reason for my interest in refineries is that we only have a finite number of torpedoes aboard. In fact, we already have expended 42 of our 72 torpedoes and I intend to save what's left for truly worthy targets at sea. On the other hand, we still have over 170 rounds for our 10.5 centimeter deck gun and I intend to use those in the most efficient manner to help save on torpedoes. Another way I have in mind to save torpedoes is to keep using you and your men, Leutnant Margraff, since you have proved to be quite good at boarding ships and blowing shit up."

Hugo smiled on hearing that: the actions at Cape Lookout and in Miami had given him the taste for more of the same.

“What do you have in mind for me and my men, Herr Kapitän?”

“Well, that’s one of the points of this discussion: I don’t know yet for sure. What I intend to do is to present you all a list of our potential targets around the Caribbean Basin and the Gulf of Mexico and to then discuss which ones we should strike in priority and with what kind of weapons, meaning either torpedoes, guns or saboteurs. Keep as well in mind the psychological factor while discussing: we want our enemies to be confused and to wonder where we will strike next. Even if you think that a particular target is way too risky to attack, don’t dismiss it offhand: the Americans have proven so far to be surprisingly amateurish and ill prepared in terms of defensive measures. If they think that a port or facility is unlikely to be attacked by us, then it may just give us a chance to strike at it by slipping around the American defenses, thanks to their negligence. So, gentlemen, the floor is now open to everyone and everything, including crazy ideas!”

17:29 (New York Time)

Coastal lookout post, Bocachica

Southern entrance to the Bay of Cartagena

Colombia

The Colombian Coast Guard officer focused as best he could his eyes while examining with his binoculars the large tanker ship entering the Bay of Cartagena an hour after Sunset. He then briefly looked at his NCO, who was sitting nearby in front of the radio set of their lookout post.

“I see an American flag flying from the stern of that tanker. The name on the bow is ‘TEXACO UNITED’. Is it on the ship’s manifest for today, Petty Officer Guzman?”

“One second, Teniente!... Yes, the TEXACO UNITED was expected today to arrive from Boston to fill up with gasoline at the oil terminal of the Empresa Colombiana de Petroleos Refinery. It was supposed to arrive in the afternoon, but it could have been delayed by a storm.”

“We have the right name and flag: that’s good enough for me. Record its entry in the bay at this hour.”

"Yes, Teniente!"

The Colombian officer then all but forgot about the American tanker, looking more for a rumored German submarine supposedly prowling the Caribbean Basin and making the Americans paranoid.

On the bridge of the TEXACO UNITED, Hugo Margraff smiled while scanning the bay around the tanker ship with his binoculars.

"No sign of a reaction by the Colombians. I think that our little stratagem worked."

Matrosen Obergefreiter Peter Schültz, at the wheel of the captured American tanker ship, grinned in response.

"To be fair to these Colombians, who would think that we could pull such a stunt as this? I just hope that these American merchant sailors will quickly enough be rescued from their lifeboat floating off the coast. I have the refinery and oil terminal in sight, four nautical miles ahead. There are two tankers presently docked at the oil terminal."

"Excellent! Do as a normal visiting tanker would do, but head directly for the biggest of those two tankers. Uh, what kind of impact can we expect in a collision at ten knots between tanker ships?"

Peter Schültz wiggled his left hand at that question.

"With a 12,000 ton tanker doing the ramming? We will probably cut that other tanker in half, on top of crushing part of the loading jetty. Believe me, Herr Leutnant: you don't want to be still aboard when that will happen."

"Oh, I certainly don't intend to stay longer than what is needed to ensure that we do hit that tanker and terminal, especially with that white phosphorus incendiary round rigged to explode on deck."

Hugo then resumed his watching, concentrating on the two tankers and the wide expanse of the refinery beyond the oil terminal.

"That refinery complex is certainly big by any standards: it easily covers over one square kilometer of surface. I can see plenty of juicy oil storage tanks all over the place. Once we lit a fire at the oil terminal, the illumination should make it easy for our gunners on the U-800 to target those storage tanks."

As he said that, Hugo couldn't resist throwing a glance towards the starboard side of the tanker, where the surfaced U-800 was navigating on a parallel course very close to the tanker, using the dark mass of the American ship's hull to hide itself from coastal

observers. Only the most observant lookout would be able to make out in the obscurity the low, dark silhouette of the submarine against the background made by the tanker's black hull. The whole scheme was actually an idea from himself and Hugo was quite proud of it, while Otto Kretschmer had certified his idea as crazy enough to just work. Normally, Otto would normally have avoided to directly attack the coastal installations of an officially neutral country, but the directives he had received on that subject from Admiral Dönitz had been clear: if a supposedly neutral country actually supported openly the war efforts of the United States and of Great Britain, then Germany was going to ignore, at least unofficially, that so-called neutrality. Beside, Colombia had already cut all diplomatic relations with Japan, Germany and Italy, so there was in truth little left to talk about in that matter.

At the oil terminal loading jetty, the lonely sailor on night bridge watch aboard the Canadian tanker ship JOHN IRVING got on his feet, becoming nervous as a big tanker ship was approaching the jetty and was showing no sign of slowing down. That tanker seemingly accelerated further when it got within 800 meters from the jetty, heading straight towards the JOHN IRVING. That convinced the sailor to pick up the telephone receiver on the bridge and call his captain's cabin. He got a sleepy answer after four rings.

"Captain Kinnock speaking! What is it?"

"Captain, a ship is heading for us at full speed. It is now less than half a mile away and is still not slowing down."

"WHAT? I'M COMING UP!"

Captain Kinnock never had time to get to the bridge before the TEXACO UNITED slammed at twelve knots, its maximum speed, right into the unlucky JOHN IRVING. The bow of the American tanker, which was much bigger than the Canadian tanker, sliced the JOHN IRVING in two, with enough residual energy left to continue on and hit directly the oil loading jetty behind it, badly warping it and breaking in multiple places the pipelines connecting the jetty with the oil tank farms. Refined gasoline and diesel fuel then gushed out in massive quantities from both the broken pipelines and from the ripped tanks of the JOHN IRVING, spreading on the surface of the water around the jetty. The panicked sailors of the JOHN IRVING who had survived the collision then scrambled to evacuate their doomed ship, while the few Colombian workers present around the jetty ran away as fast as they could. Two minutes after the collision, the

white phosphorus incendiary shell on the bow of the TEXACO UNITED burst, sending burning white phosphorus particles all around in a radius of fifty meters and igniting the puddles of gasoline. A huge fireball then rose in the evening sky, illuminating everything within two kilometers. A few seconds later, the servants of the 10.5 cm deck gun of the U-800 opened fire, aiming at the oil storage tanks of the refinery. The 15.1 kilo explosive shells easily pierced the thin steel walls of the giant storage tanks, exploding inside them and literally bursting them open like balloons filled with water, raining either gasoline, diesel fuel or raw oil around. Because they needed to mix first with some oxygen from the surrounding air, that fuel did not ignite immediately but flowed out of the ripped open tanks, flooding the grounds of the refinery. After a dozen 10.5 cm shells were fired, the deck quad 20mm anti-aircraft gun of the U-800 then opened fire, sending explosive incendiary rounds in thick streams around the refinery and igniting the spilled fuel. A titanic detonation resulted, thanks to fuel-air explosive mixture effect, creating a shockwave that nearly blew the gunners of the U-800 off the deck of their submarine, and this at a distance of over three kilometers. Hugo Margraff's team, which had evacuated the TEXACO UNITED after setting it on its final collision course, was also nearly thrown into the water as their commandeered motor boat from the American tanker nearly capsized due to the blast. The Germans then stared with awe at the gigantic fireball that rose above the now destroyed refinery.

"Mein Gott!" Uttered Hugo Margraff, transfixed by that vision. "What a sight!" Taking back hold of himself, he then pointed at the U-800, now less than fifty meters away.

"Come on! Let's hurry and get back to our submarine!" Peter Schültz, at the commands of the motor boat, didn't need more encouragement and pushed his outboard motor to the maximum. Soon, they were bumping against the hull of the U-800, with sailors on the deck of the submarine throwing ropes at them. Two minutes later, all the Germans were inside, with the access hatches firmly closed and locked and with the two deck mounts retracted under the upper deck plating. Staying on the surface for the moment because of the shallowness of the Bay of Cartagena, which wasn't deep enough to allow the U-800 to dive to periscope depth, the submarine turned around and made its way at top speed towards the bay's southern entrance. The Colombian Coast Guard men at the Bocachica lookout post, not having an artillery gun at their disposal, could only watch as the German submarine sped out of the bay and disappeared into the night.

10:42 (New York Time)

Thursday, January 8, 1942

Headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Atlantic Fleet

Norfolk, Virginia

Vice Admiral Ingersoll looked up from the report just brought in by his chief of staff, Captain Olaf Hustvedt, and threw a discouraged look at the ethnic Norwegian.

"If not for all the damage they caused in Cartagena, I would be tempted to clap my hands to congratulate those Germans: they have balls and imagination aplenty."

"They certainly showed some very unorthodox thinking last night, Admiral."

"Then, how about thinking ourselves in an unorthodox manner in order to guess where they will attack next, Olaf?"

"I already did a bit of that, Admiral. If we look at the trail of destruction left behind by this U-800, we can actually see some continuity in it. It probably started here in Norfolk, when it sowed a minefield to block our harbor entrance, then went up along the coast towards New York before turning around and sprinting to Miami, probably to throw us off. From Miami, it went down along the Cuban and Dominican coast, where those Germans picked up the Kaiser family, then went straight to Curacao, ignoring the dense ship traffic around Bermuda. From Curacao, the U-800 apparently followed the South American coast westward, hitting Punta Cardon on its way before finally hitting Cartagena. One pattern that I believe I see in this is the priority given by this Captain Kretschmer to targets connected to oil, be they tanker ships, oil terminals or refineries, which he probably consider key strategic targets. My bet is that the U-800 will continue westward and then northward towards the next biggest target of strategic importance: the Panama Canal Zone. Once in that area, Kretschmer would find himself in what I would call a 'target-rich environment', with dozens of ships waiting daily in line to pass through the Panama Canal locks and waterways. Apart from our main coastal ports, the Panama Canal is probably the most vital maritime installation we have and is the doorway between the Atlantic and the Pacific."

Ingersoll thought over those words for a moment before nodding his head slowly.

"What you just said certainly makes much sense, Olaf. Very well: tell two of the three destroyer squadrons we just dispatched south to head at best speed towards the Panama Canal Zone, with the mission to hunt the U-800 once there. Alert also the

Panama Zone Commander about this submarine and ask him to double up his anti-submarine air patrols. With luck, we will be able to catch that fox before he can again enter the hen house.”

“I’m on it, Admiral!”

16:25 (New York Time)

Monday, January 12, 1942

Headquarters, U.S. Atlantic Fleet

Norfolk, Virginia

“I have both a good news and a bad news, Admiral.”

Ingersoll passed a hand on his face before replying to his chief of staff: the last two weeks had been truly exhausting and stressful ones for him and for everybody at Fleet Headquarters.

“Alright, Olaf: give me the bad news first!”

“We now have a group of German submarines that is confirmed as operating along our East Coast, Admiral: four ships have been torpedoed and sunk in the last five hours between New York and Atlantic City, two of them nearly simultaneously and over a hundred miles apart. It is thus not the U-800 at play, especially in view of the distance to Cartagena: the U-800 simply could not get from Cartagena to New York this fast.”

“And the good news?”

“We have not heard from nor seen the U-800 since its attack against Cartagena, five days ago. Maybe it ran out of torpedoes and is now on its way back to Europe.”

“Thank God if that’s truly the case! That Kretschmer was becoming worst than the Black Plague! On the other hand, he still could be hiding somewhere, waiting for us to lower our guard before striking again. Keep those destroyers searching for the U-800 around the entrance of the Panama Canal waterway, just in case it reappears there, but tell them to stay in passive sonar mode and to wait in quiet, ambush positions. With luck, we could just attract Kretschmer into our nets.”

“And the other German submarines now operating along our East Coast, Admiral?”

Ingersoll’s shoulders sagged a bit at that question.

“Deploy the destroyers we have left the best you can, Olaf. Our heavy units will stay in port for the moment, so that they don’t eat up our limited destroyer availability

with escort duties. As for me, I will be contacting the governors of our coastal states to implore them again to enforce a night curfew along the coast. Hopefully, they will prove more reasonable and realistic this time.”

Unfortunately for Ingersoll and for hundreds of American and Allied merchant sailors, his pious hope proved unfounded. The pack of German Type IX submarines now sailing up and down the American East Coast had just started what would be called later on ‘The Happy Time’, thanks to the stubborn refusal by American politicians and many military leaders to look at reality in the face. It was going to take another three months before common sense prevailed over inertia and old habits.

09:06 (Texas Time)

Wednesday, January 14, 1942

Control Room, U-800

Coast of Texas

“I’m sorry, Herr Kapitän: this area of the Texas coast is too shallow for us to operate safely. The continental plateau along the whole coast this side of the Gulf of Mexico is unusually wide and shallow, with barely enough water depth to operate at periscope depth, and this with only a few meters to spare under our keel. Our high definition sonar readings are formal: with the tiny gradient of the sea bottom in this region, we would have to cover a good eighty to a hundred nautical miles from the coast just to get to waters deep enough to dive past thirty meters. We would be an easy prey for any maritime patrol aircraft flying overhead while we sailed over this shallow continental plateau.”

Otto made a bitter smirk on hearing the judgment of his navigator, Franz Streib. Since his charts of this region were old and incomplete, he had decided to conduct first a reconnaissance sweep before attacking his intended target. Now, it seemed that the port of Galveston was out of reach for him, short of taking suicidal risks to get there.

“Very well! We will thus forget about Galveston and the other Texan ports on our target list.”

“So, where will we go next, Herr Kapitän? Do we return to Lorient now?”

“I will be damned if I would return to port with thirty eels still aboard, Franz. I want to expend those torpedoes on worthy targets before we go back home.”

Grabbing the list of potential targets he had made with his officers eight days ago, Otto scratched off his intended targets along the Texas and Louisiana coasts, then looked at what was left for a long moment, with his navigator waiting silently for his decision. Otto finally put his finger on one entry in his target list and spoke in a firm tone.

“This one holds the most promises for us, even though it is supposed to be strongly defended. Turn the boat around and head south-southeast.”

“Yavoll, Herr Kapitän!”

14:52 (Central America Time)

Monday, January 19, 1942

Control room, U-800

On silent submerged cruise off the port of Colon

Caribbean coast of Panama

Otto was sharing the forward underwater observation dome with three of his sailors as the U-800 glided quietly in a parallel course to the ledge of the continental shelf off the coast of Panama. One of them was a watchman on duty but the two others were playing underwater tourists, like Otto. With the U-800 navigating at a depth of eighty meters and with the local waters being quite clear, some sunlight reached all the way down to the ledge and made it visible to the men of the U-800 as a dark gray slope that suddenly dived into blackness. It was a sight both fearsome and majestic: fearsome, for reminding mere men of the crushing depths of the ocean; majestic for showing how vast the ocean was. Even for a seasoned seaman like Otto, the spectacle of the continental shelf's slopes plunging into the darkness of the abyss was truly a sight to remember. For that reason, and in order to help maintain the morale of his crew during this long war patrol, he had been encouraging his sailors and officers to come periodically to the two underwater observation domes in order to enjoy viewing the sea from under its surface.

Otto was about to go down the hatch of the observation station to return to the control room when one of the sailors sharing the dome with him suddenly pushed a shout of alarm while pointing at something outside.

“OVER THERE!”

Snapping his head around and fearing that his sailor had just seen a sea mine close to his submarine, Otto suddenly felt his heart stop for an instant: four giant, nightmarish tentacles had appeared from under the submarine and had slapped themselves against the forward upper deck. His eyes bulging from the surprise and emotion, he soon saw to what the tentacles were attached to: a giant squid of the kind you saw only in some marine museum or horror movie. Going quickly over his surprise, Otto activated the intercom of the observation dome, shouting in it.

“SOMEONE GET UP IN THE FORWARD DOME WITH A CAMERA AND FLASH UNIT, QUICKLY!”

To his credit, Maschinen Obergefreiter Norbert Straube clambered up to the observation dome within a minute, a still camera with flash unit slung from his neck. Looking up at his captain as he set foot in the observation tower, he asked a question to Otto in an excited voice.

“What is it, Herr Kapitän? Are we passing by a wreck?”

“Better than that! A Kraken is attacking us! Take a few photos of it quickly before it disappears! It is glued around our forward hull.”

“MEIN GOTT!” Could only say Straube when he saw the giant squid, whose head and body was now visible less than twenty meters away. He however didn't lose time and took in quick succession three pictures with flash of the sea monster. In the meantime, Otto made the two other men that were off duty go down, so that more men could have a chance to see the squid. He himself went down as well, giving his place to the young Hermann Spielberger. Werner Nielinger, who had just come down from the dome with his captain, looked and grinned at Otto.

“This reminds me of the part in Jules Verne's book '20,000 Leagues Under the Sea', when a giant squid attacked Captain Nemo's submarine, the NAUTILUS, Herr Kapitän. Why would it attack us like this?”

“Well, we are the right shape for looking like a sperm whale, which giant squids are reputed to attack and eat, even though we are much bigger than a whale. We are also presently moving slowly and quietly, thus making that poor squid trying to eat steel plates right now.”

“Poor squid? It is scary enough for anyone, Herr Kapitän.”

“True! Well, that is one more sight you will be able to tell your family about once back home, Nielinger.”

"And...when could we expect to return home, Herr Kapitän? I have a baby girl that I am missing very much lately."

Otto smiled and patted the young sailor's shoulder.

"Don't worry: we should be able to expend a last batch of torpedoes soon. Then we will go home."

Less than an hour later, and with the squid having left in disgust after a few futile minutes, Otto was called to the sonar room adjacent to the control room. There, the senior operator on watch, Michel Hartmann, showed him three closely connected spikes on his passive hydrophone array's display.

"We have three warships coming on a path perpendicular to our own bearing, Herr Kapitän. They are traveling as a group and are going at a minimum speed of fifteen knots. One of the ships is continuously pinging on active but is actually going too fast to hear much on its sonar. My bet is that two destroyers are escorting a heavy unit, with one destroyer pinging actively in order to chase away pesky nuisances like us."

Otto smiled in amusement at the term used by his sonar operator.

"But he is only pinning a target on himself by doing so. Decidedly, those Americans still have a lot to learn. How far from us are they, in your opinion?"

"From the noise level, I would say about twenty nautical miles, Herr Kapitän. They are presently to our ten o'clock and will pass from left to right in front of us in about one hour."

"Then, we will make sure to be well positioned by then, in order to say 'hello' to them. Any other ship in the area?"

"I have a few other ships at a distance to our two o'clock, probably merchant ships either approaching Colon or coming out of the Panama waterway. Even if those three speedy warships would not have shown up, we would still have had plenty of targets to use our torpedoes on."

"Well, some of them might still get a gift or two from us afterwards. But first, let's prepare for our three next guests."

Grabbing the intercom microphone from its box fixed to the sonar room's partition, Otto activated it and spoke with his usual calm voice.

"Helm, steer five degrees to port, accelerate to eight knots. Torpedo rooms: load G7a eels in all tubes and set them to short arming distance and top speed. We will then reload with G7e eels for our second salvo. To all: go to battle stations, but quietly!"

The next fifty minutes or so were tense aboard the U-800, as its crewmembers expected the incoming fight and prepared for it while making as little noise as they could. Otto even had his forward torpedo tubes flooded and their external doors opened in advance, in order to prevent that noise from alerting the American destroyers at the crucial moment. Otto also kept his periscopes below the surface of the ocean to avoid offering a radar target to the enemy, instead relying on direct sight from his forward underwater observation dome to spot the underbellies of the American warships when they would pass by him. In that he mentally thanked again the late Gustav Premingen, for designing such a useful feature of his submarine. Those domes had up to now helped him many times in close fights, allowing him to target enemy ships from up close while avoiding both visual and radar detection. The observation domes were also equipped with AZO optical target tracking units which allowed the pointing and firing of torpedoes as well as it could be done from the control room's periscopes. For this attack, Otto had decided to go up into the forward observation dome to direct the action from there. When his sonar operators announced by intercom that the American warships were about to cross the bow of the U-800, Otto already had the three of them in visual contact.

"You were correct, Hartmann: I see one destroyer leading what must be a battleship, with a second destroyer in the tail. Herr Wittgenstein, be ready to enter my target bearings into your fire control director."

"Ready when you want, Herr Kapitän." Replied his second-in-command from the control room.

"Gutt! Range to targets is approximately 500 meters, will probably go down to 400 meters by the time the battleship crosses our bow. The first two pairs of torpedoes will go to the destroyers, then we will fire four eels at the battleship, using time-on-target technique. Giving now the first bearing on the lead destroyer."

Giving in succession the bearing to each of his three targets, Otto then waited fifteen seconds before announcing fresh target bearings. A few seconds later, Ulrich von Wittgenstein spoke up on the intercom, his excitement audible.

"We have fire solutions on all three targets, Herr Kapitän."

"Then, match bearings and shoot all forward torpedo tubes! Helm, turn around 180 degrees as soon as all eight forward tubes are discharged."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!"

The noise and vibration from the departure of the first torpedoes from their launch tubes followed only a second later. Fired from a distance of barely 400 meters, the G7a torpedoes rushed to their targets at a speed of 44 knots. In this case, the G7a's visible trail of bubbles in their wakes was not a factor, as the twenty seconds or so they took to get to the American ships was too short to allow the targets to start making evasive actions. As the U-800 was starting to swing around with its phenomenal agility, Otto was able to see that all of his eight torpedoes hit their marks squarely, with only the tail end destroyer having barely started to turn to starboard in an attempt to present less of a target to the incoming torpedoes. As his crew was screaming with triumph, he bent down and quickly slid inside the narrow steel tube linking the forward and aft observation dome towers. Crawling quickly to the stern observation tower, he emerged from the connecting tube as his helmsman was completing his half turn, with the U-800's stern now pointed at the American warships. All three were still under power, but it was evident that their speed was now drastically reduced. Otto, jumping on the target tracking unit, announced at once new target bearings to von Wittgenstein and fired all four of his stern torpedo tubes, two at the battleship and one each at the destroyers. Fired from about 500 meters at targets that were now doing a mere ten knots or less, all four torpedoes exploded against the hulls of the enemy warships, prompting more cheers aboard the submarine. That was when Otto decided to go back down to the control room, where he raised the head of the attack periscope above the surface for the first time in the fight. On his orders, a sailor also stood by, ready to change films in the camera hooked to the periscope's base as Otto consulted a ships recognition guide book and compared the silhouettes in it with the actual ships now burning and sinking nearby.

"Okay...we have here a NEW MEXICO class battleship. Both of the destroyers are of the BENSON class. I am going to try to read now their hull numbers. Hum...the hull number of the battleship is '41'. The destroyer numbers are '407' and '408'."

"They are the battleship MISSISSIPPI and the destroyers STERRETT and WILSON, Herr Kapitän." Added von Wittgenstein, who had also been consulting a ships guide.

"Gutt! Add that information to our ship's log. Herr Lüdemann, we are going to start taking pictures now."

As Otto was methodically taking pictures of his sinking targets, one of his electronic warfare operators shouted a warning from his adjacent section.

"HERR KAPITÄN, THE AMERICAN BATTLESHIP IS SENDING RADIO DISTRESS SIGNALS IN CLEAR. ONE AMERICAN DESTROYER, THE USS WAINWRIGHT, HAS RESPONDED AND SAID THAT IT IS RUSHING IN AND WILL BE HERE IN FORTY MINUTES, ALONG WITH ANOTHER DESTROYER."

"WERE YOU ABLE TO DETERMINE THE RADIO AZIMUTH OF THAT DESTROYER?"

"YES, HERR KAPITÄN: IT WAS FROM APPROXIMATE BEARING 260."

"EXCELLENT! HELM, TURN TO BEARING 260, GO TO MAXIMUM UNDERWATER SPEED!"

"AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!"

As his U-800 quickly accelerated to its maximum submerged speed of 31 knots, a speed underwater well above the usual seven to ten knots of other existing submarines around the World, Otto went to see his First Watch Officer at the tactical plot table.

"Ulrich, I intend to rush towards those incoming destroyers in order to take a surprise ambush position ahead of the point where they would normally slow down in order to operate their sonar sets. With luck, they will then blindly run into our torpedoes. However, in case they prove to be more competently led than I expect them to be, replace our G7e eels by G7a torpedoes in two of our forward tubes and two of our stern tubes. In fact, let's clear two stern tubes right now by firing two G7as at the MISSISSIPPI, to make sure that it sinks."

"A fine idea, Herr Kapitän."

Two more torpedoes soon hit the unlucky American battleship, giving it the coup de grâce, with Otto then taking pictures from a distance as the MISSISSIPPI sank at the vertical. He was now playing a risky game with the two incoming destroyers, as he was quickly depleting his reserves of energy in his batteries as a consequence of his high underwater speed. He was in fact going to start the next fight with only a quarter of his battery power left and would be in possible trouble if he missed his opening salvo, being then unable to escape underwater at high speed. He toyed for a moment with the idea of slowing soon and raise his schnorchel, in order to partly replenish his batteries, but he quickly ruled that out: the little benefit that this would bring him would be more than cancelled by the much higher level of noise his submarine would then produce, noise that could in turn give away his position to the American destroyers. It would also offer a radar target, however small and faint, to the American destroyers. He finally decided to

stop and take an ambush position at about twice the distance a typical Type IX or Type VII would be able to cover underwater in forty minutes. A competent destroyer commander would normally slow down within that distance from the sinking battleship in order to start his sonar search. If that happened to be the case, then the two incoming destroyers would be still rushing it at 35 knots or more, at which speed their sonar sets were totally deaf, when he would be firing his torpedoes.

17:49 (Central America Time)

Destroyer U.S.S. WAINWRIGHT (DD-419)

Approaching the area off the port of Colon

Captain (Navy) Don Pardee Moon, Commander of Destroyer Squadron Eight, was both furious and despondent at the news that two of his destroyers, along with the battleship MISSISSIPPI, had been torpedoed and were sinking. Five of the nine destroyers in his squadron had now fallen victim to German submarines in the last two months, and this without destroying a single enemy ship or plane yet in this war. If this continued on, he could very well expect to be relieved of command soon and find himself stuck in a desk job for the rest of the war, thus marking the end of his future in the Navy. The captain of the U.S.S. WAINWRIGHT, Lieutenant Commander Lewis approached him on the bridge as Moon was looking at the pillars of smoke marking the site of the latest battle.

“Sir, the MISSISSIPPI has stopped transmitting and is now presumed sunk. The STERRETT was declared sunk in the last transmission, while the WILSON was slowly going down by the stern. We are now twelve nautical miles from them, with the WILSON just visible at the edge of our radar display screen.”

“Any radar contact of possible submarines yet?”

“None, sir! As for our sonar, we would have to slow down drastically in order to be able to scan properly, but that would more than triple the time it would take us to arrive and be able to help the survivors from our ships.”

Moon thought over that for a moment: his instincts told him that rushing like this to the site of a torpedo attack only invited trouble. Yet, he also had to think about all the men now swimming in the ocean and depending on him to be rescued quickly from shark-infested waters.

"Slow your ship to ten knots, Mister Lewis, so that it could start to operate its sonar. Then signal the U.S.S. STACK to continue on at best speed to the site of the sinkings, in order to help our men in the water."

"Understood, sir!"

Lewis first passed the order to slow down to ten knots, then instructed his signals officer to tell the U.S.S. STACK to continue on. However, that officer never had the chance to transmit that order, as the STACK suddenly shuddered under the impact and explosion of two torpedoes against its starboard flank. At nearly the same time, a lookout on the WAINWRIGHT shouted out loud.

"TORPEDOES CROSSING OUR BOW FROM STARBOARD TO PORT! THEY NEARLY HIT US!"

Moon froze for a moment then as cold sweat suddenly formed on his forehead: his last order had just saved the WAINWRIGHT from suffering the same fate as the STACK.

"ZIGZAG COURSE NOW! INITIATE SONAR SEARCH!"

Moon next crossed over to the port-side open bridge wing, to see in what state the STACK really was.

On the BENSON-Class destroyer U.S.S. STACK, things were already beyond help. The two torpedoes that had hit it in a tight group had open wide its starboard side boiler room and engine room, killing outright most of the American seamen in those two compartments and either puncturing or rupturing the high pressure steam lines from both port and starboard boiler rooms. Those who were not killed by the torpedo blasts or drowned by the sudden flood found themselves trying to desperately flee the machinery spaces while scalding superheated steam filled those compartments. With the destroyer doing 36 knots at the time it was hit, the water rushed in with tremendous force, flooding section after section. All power went out only seconds after the torpedo hits, leaving the survivors in the dark as they frantically fought their way up to the open decks. With the emergency pumps out of power, the list to starboard grew alarmingly fast. The BENSON-Class destroyers were already known to be top-heavy and the U.S.S. STACK proved no exception. Less than two minutes after being hit, it capsized and rolled belly-up, pulling all but 23 of its 250 crewmembers to their death.

Watching with dismay and horror that tragedy unfold, Moon nearly forgot that he still had to deal with a very dangerous adversary. When he regained some control of

himself, Moon went to Lieutenant Commander Lewis, who was passing frantic orders via intercom, and tapped his left arm to get his attention.

“Do we have any sonar contact yet, Commander?”

“None, sir! Despite pinging our sonar on active mode, we haven’t yet gotten a single underwater contact within more than a mile. We also have no radar contact yet.”

“But, that’s impossible! A submarine has to be hiding nearby.”

“Maybe they fired their torpedoes from maximum distance, from outside the range of our sonar, sir.”

“That would make those shots incredibly accurate ones. We however have to find that submarine before he sinks us as well. Continue your sonar search while I radio a message to alert our land-based patrol aircraft. They should...”

A nearly shouted warning coming from the overhead intercom speaker then cut him off.

“CAPTAIN, THIS IS THE SONAR! TORPEDOES APPROACHING FAST FROM OUR STARBOARD SIDE!”

Lewis shouted at once to his helmsman, while Moon ran to the starboard side open bridge wing.

“HELM, HARD STARBOARD! REVERSE STARBOARD PROPELLER!”

Captain Moon was not able to spot the two incoming G7e electrically-propelled torpedoes before they exploded just as they were passing under the keel of the destroyer, set off by their magnetic influence pistols. Their combined blasts bodily raised the destroyer out of the water, breaking its back and splitting it in two. The two parts then sank quickly, with less than six men being able to swim away from the sinking wreck.

A mere 600 meters away, Otto watched that drama through his attack periscope, taking a couple of pictures as well of his latest victim as its parts sank separately. He finally gave a somber look at his second-in-command, still sitting at the nearby tactical plot table.

“The last enemy warship is now sinking and we have only two torpedoes left aboard. Steer to Heading 085, speed ten knots and depth of eighteen meters. Raise the schnorchel and switch to diesels. It is time to go home.”

All the men inside the control room then cheered loudly on hearing those last words.

CHAPTER 11 – REST AND REFIT

19:14 (Paris Time)

Saturday, February 7, 1942

Keroman I submarine bunker complex, Lorient

Coast of Brittany, France

Despite being happy to see the U-800 return intact from its second war patrol, Karl Dönitz couldn't help feeling some frustration as he saw Otto Kretschmer, standing in the open bridge of his submarine while his boat slowly entered the concrete shelter assigned to it in the Keroman I bunker complex. Kretschmer had again fully lived up to his nickname of 'Silent Otto' and had sent a grand total of two, TWO messages back to his base during his patrol. One had been sent as the U-800 was in the mid-Atlantic, saying that he was on his way back, while the other had been sent a mere twelve hours before, announcing the estimated time of arrival of the U-800 in Lorient. One of Dönitz' staff officers present on the internal quay of the submarine pen, Korvettenkapitän Schnee, audibly choked when he could count the multitude of victory pennants floating from lines attached to the extended attack periscope of the U-500.

"Forty-nine ships sunk?! Mein Gott! Either Kretschmer is the biggest braggart in the Kriegsmarine or he is a magician at the commands of a U-boote."

"Some of the magic is his, Herr Schnee," replied Dönitz, 'but much of it is in his U-800. I wish that our naval designers could hurry up to complete the plans of our future Type XXI class, so that we could truly squeeze the British sea commerce to death."

A detail then attracted the admiral's attention, making him swear lightly.

"Himmel, Kretschmer's kill count includes thirteen warships! He better brief me quickly about his war patrol once I am aboard."

Dönitz and Schnee were able to board the U-800 six minutes later, once mooring lines had been tied and a gangway had been put in position. Otto Kretschmer, with most of his crew lined up on deck and wearing clean going out uniforms, greeted the admiral and his staff officer at the foot of the gangway, saluting him the old fashion military way. Schnee noticed then that Otto and his men were all freshly shaved, contrasting with the

usual picture offered by other returning U-boat crews, who commonly wore thick beards and long hair on arrival in Lorient.

"Welcome on the U-800, Herr Admiral! I have both a complete mission report and a couple of gifts for you waiting inside."

"Gifts?" Said Dönitz, mystified. "What kind of gifts could you find in the middle of the ocean, my dear Kretschmer?"

"Oh, the sea holds many treasures, Herr Admiral. But could I invite you to review my men first before we go inside to talk?"

"Of course! I will always have time for our brave submariners."

Kretschmer then followed closely Dönitz as the latter started reviewing one by one the men of the U-800, talking briefly with each of them and even exchanging the occasional joke with them. Kretschmer knew that Dönitz truly cared for his submariners, especially since he was himself an experienced submariner and knew the kind of hardships and dangers they had to face while at sea. Once the review of the crew was completed, Otto invited his admiral and Schnee to go down to the officers' wardroom, where the three men sat around the long dining table. Otto then took out of his vest a folded document and a small book, putting both down on the table in front of Dönitz.

"Here is my patrol report, along with one of the gifts I alluded to, Herr Admiral."

Dönitz' blood surged to his brain when he recognized what the small book marked 'TOP SECRET' in English was. Grabbing it and leafing through it quickly, he then gave Otto a bemused look.

"A copy of the Royal Navy code? Where and how did you get it, Kretschmer?"

"We found it aboard a British armed merchant ship anchored off the port of Miami, Herr Admiral. Leutnant Margraff and his men from the Brandenburg Regiment covertly boarded it on the night of December 29 and took control of it. We then used the deck guns of that British ship to bombard the port of Miami before leaving unseen. That British ship was scuttled by us on departure, so it should be quite difficult for the British to assert if we got or not their code book. By the way, Herr Admiral, those Brandenburg men proved positively priceless during my war patrol and I request formally that they could go back at sea with the U-800 when I will depart on patrol again."

Dönitz, who was staring with glee at the British code book, nodded his head at once.

"If you say so, then I have no qualms with that, Kretschmer. I will arrange that with Admiral Canaris tomorrow. And what would be the other gifts you had for me on top of this code book?"

"A few tons of genuine Colombian coffee and chocolate, liberated from the holds of that British merchant ship after we took control of it. We were able to refill both our food reserves and our diesel fuel tanks at the same time. I would like to request your permission to distribute a portion of that confiscated coffee and chocolate, along with a few more staples we found, to my men, so that they could bring a few gifts to their families. The rest would be yours to distribute among our other submariners as you see fit."

Dönitz was left speechless for a moment then. Coffee and chocolate were among the most severely rationed goods in Germany and around Occupied Europe, thanks to the British sea blockade of Germany.

"How much of those items did you take exactly?"

Otto answered him by taking out another folded document and giving it to Dönitz.

"Here is the list of the food staples taken from the M.S. CALYPSO in Miami Harbor, Herr Admiral, along with the quantities taken. Some of this foodstuff has already been consumed during our war patrol, but the great majority of it is still aboard."

Dönitz reviewed with growing awe the list given by Otto, exclaiming himself at the view of some selected items.

"You have seven tons of Colombian coffee and over four tons of chocolate aboard?"

"A bit less now, since we consumed some of it at sea, Herr Admiral. As you can see from this list, many around Germany would be tempted to get their hands on those food supplies, and not for the benefit of our fighting men. That is why I would be grateful to you for ensuring the fair distribution of those staples among our submariners."

Dönitz didn't have to ask him who Otto was alluding to: he had frequent enough contacts with highly-placed Nazi Party leaders and knew very well how corrupt and even kleptomaniac most of them were. In fact, many people in Germany would nearly kill to get their hands on such rare, prized food items. He thus nodded slowly his head while smiling benevolently at Otto.

"You did well to bring back those food supplies, my dear Kretschmer: they will indeed help a lot to maintain and improve the morale of our valiant U-boote crews. Be assured that I will distribute those supplies with utter fairness, irrespective of rank. I will send a few trucks tomorrow morning, along with a strong, incorruptible guard force, to pick up the excess quantities you don't wish to keep. Don't be afraid to keep the quantities that you will deem necessary to supply your crew during your next war patrol."

"Thank you, Admiral. Talking about my next war patrol, how long a shore leave period can my crew expect before returning at sea?"

"Actually, your men will be able to enjoy two full weeks of leave at home, plus travel time, before they will have to return to Lorient in order to prepare your boat for your next patrol. Your U-800 will in the meantime get three weeks of refit and reconditioning to put it back in top shape and also to add a couple of new features to it."

"What new features, if I may ask, Herr Admiral?" Said Otto, interested at once.

"Well, we were able to capture a few months ago an intact copy of a British airborne radar set after a British bomber crashed in North Africa. Our scientists and engineers studied in depth that radar set, which allowed us in turn to improve significantly our own radar technology. As a result of that work, a new, improved model of radar warning device will replace your current model atop your radio mast, while a compact, lightweight radar set will be mounted atop your schnorchel mast. Those two new items are still at the prototype stage but your U-800 will be used as an operational test bed for them. With your new radar, you will be able to detect approaching aircraft at a range of about twenty kilometers, while you will be able to pick up ships up to ten kilometers away."

Otto grinned on hearing that, truly happy: enemy patrol aircraft had proved to be a real impediment for him during his Caribbean cruise, forcing him to stay under the surface during daylight in order to avoid enemy planes detecting his schnorchel head via radar. That had in turn impacted severely on his available choices of tactics, while his lookouts could not ensure the detection in time of enemy aircraft from ranges beyond a few kilometers.

"Then, I will need to have at least two experienced radar operators or technicians assigned to my boat, preferably men trained on those new devices."

"I already took care of that, Kretschmer: they will show up in Lorient in two weeks. Now, let me read that patrol report of yours."

Otto, like Schnee, kept quiet as Dönitz read quickly through his report, taking written notes on a pad when he saw major points of interest. Otto used that chance to serve cups of hot Colombian coffee to his visitors, who savored them with delight. At one point, Dönitz hesitated and looked up at Otto.

"You had Americans aboard your boat?"

"Only for three days, Herr Admiral. They were kept within the living areas of the boat and were not permitted to enter either the torpedo rooms or the engine room. If I would not have picked them up, they would most probably have died at sea, with the two children dying first."

"You did what any honorable seaman would have done, Kretschmer." Said softly Dönitz before continuing his reading. At the end of it, he took a moment to think over what he had read before speaking to Otto.

"Decidedly, you and your U-800 are turning out to be a major strategic asset for Germany, on top of being a prime tactical one. Know that the boats that I sent to the American East Coast after you left there for the Caribbean found lots of easy pickings and very little opposition, thanks to the fact that you attracted nearly half of the destroyers of the American Atlantic Fleet after you. Your destruction of two major refineries and the sinking of all those tanker ships is also bound to severely impact the fuel situation of the Allies. In view of the superior autonomy of your boat and of its large torpedo capacity, I am in mind to have you continue roaming the Caribbean Basin and Gulf of Mexico, with oil targets as your priority. My intelligence staff will however need first to analyze in detail your patrol report before I could give you a new list of specific targets for your next patrol. In the meantime, you will be able to enjoy some shore leave time, like your crew. A staff officer will bring you signed leave permissions for your crew tomorrow morning, at the same time that trucks will come to pick up your excess loot."

"Thank you, Herr Admiral. Before you go, let me give you something else." Getting up from his bench seat, Otto went to one of the cupboards of the mess and took out of it two large tin cans that were still sealed, bringing them to the table and putting them down in front of Dönitz.

"Here are a can of ground Colombian coffee and a can of hot chocolate powder that I put aside for you, Herr Admiral. Just in case that your convoy of trucks gets ambushed tomorrow morning by an army of black marketers."

Dönitz laughed out loud at that and got up to shake hands with Otto.

"Thanks for the idea, Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer. Be assured however that this will not change one word in your next efficiency report. We will speak again tomorrow afternoon, at my local headquarters in Lorient."

"I will be there, Herr Admiral." Promised Otto. His two visitors then departed with the two tin cans given by him, plus his report and the British code book. Now alone, Otto thought about all that he would have to take care of in the next couple of days

before he could himself go on leave. The list was actually quite long, but he told himself that it was one of the prices of command.

13:27 (Paris Time)

Sunday, February 8, 1942

Crew mess of the U-800, Lorient

"...Here you are, Horst. Next!"

As Horst Eberbach walked happily away with his 'care package', one of the Brandenburg Regiment soldiers stepped forward to take his place in front of the table of the crew mess where the cook, Dieter Hannig, was distributing bags of foodstuff to each crewmember. Hannig smiled to Otto Lang while handing him one of the stuffed jute bags, bags originally meant to be used as sand bags.

"Aah, one of our intrepid Heer comrades! I do have a couple of extras for you." Hannig twisted around and grabbed a two pound can of roasted and ground Colombian coffee, a one pound can of hot chocolate powder and ten chocolate bars, to add them to the content of the bag he then gave to Lang.

"Directive from the Old Man: you and your Heer comrades get additional extras as a 'finder's fee'."

"Why, thank you very much, Smutje! I must say that you proved to be one fine cook indeed."

"Danke! Have a good time on leave. Next!"

Going to another table, Lang quickly emptied the jute bag to examine its content. He grinned with satisfaction at the sight of what amounted to a small treasure in rationed Europe: there were six jars of various fruit jams or jellies, a big jar of peanut butter, fourteen small cans of fish or seafood, six cans of processed meat and, most importantly, a total of twenty chocolate bars, two cans of hot chocolate powder and two cans of ground coffee. Grabbing first two of the chocolate bars and pocketing them, with the idea of eating them during his trip home, he stuffed back the rest in the jute bag. He was putting the jute bag, wrapped with spare clothes, inside his service-issue duffel bag, when Michel Drücker and Franz Stein joined him, having received their own care packages. Both soldiers were also smiling happily.

"Wait until my wife sees those treasures." Said Drücker enthusiastically. "We have not seen hot chocolate for over a year now."

"And I have a pretty young neighbor who may be interested in some of my chocolate bars." Added Franz Stein, attracting knowing looks from his two comrades.

"Well, don't eat too much of them yourself, Franz: don't forget the Leutnant's directive to get back in shape during our leave period." Replied Lang, who then patted his belly, which was now tightening his belt. "With the lack of space to exercise aboard the U-800 and with Hannig's cooking, I must have gained a good five kilos myself while at sea."

"Well, I do intend to do some serious exercising...in bed." Said Stein, making his comrades burst into laughter.

About one hour later, with the distribution of care packages completed and with everyone wearing their going out Winter uniforms, the whole crew was called up to form into a single rank on the concrete quay of the submarine pen sheltering the U-800. Otto Kretschmer, himself in full going out uniform and wearing his Knight's Cross with swords, leaves and diamonds medal around his neck, then took position in front of them to address them.

"Men, I will not say enough how proud I am of you. You performed admirably during our last war patrol, thus helping greatly the cause of our nation in this war. However, before I give you your leave passes, signed by Admiral Dönitz in person, I must remind you of how sensitive the secrecy surrounding our U-800 is. Part of our successes at sea came from the fact that the enemy is still mostly ignorant about the true performances and capabilities of our submarine. It is thus in the interest of all of us to be careful and keep mum about what our U-800 can do, especially when with strangers. I don't care if you are trying to impress a pretty girl: impress her instead with the size of your pecker or the agility of your tongue!"

The 72 men lined on the quay burst out briefly into laughter before falling silent again as Otto continued.

"Another consequence of the secrecy surrounding the U-800 is that the usual propaganda circus of post-patrol ceremonies was cut out. However, that does not mean that you won't be properly rewarded for your efforts and bravery."

Otto then came to rigid attention and shouted.

"CREW OF THE U-800, ATTEN...TION!"

Coming to attention, the men of the U-800 were then stunned to see Admiral Karl Dönitz come out with two aides from one of the doors giving access to the quay. The admiral

was greeted with a salute by Otto, who then stepped aside to let Dönitz face the assembled submariners and soldiers. The commander of the German submarine arm looked briefly from left to right at the line of men, then spoke up in a strong voice.

“Men of the U-800 and of the Brandenburg Regiment, your exploits would normally have been celebrated in Berlin, with the Führer presiding, as had happened after your first war patrol, when you collectively received the Iron Cross Second Class, while your captain got his Knight’s Cross with swords, leaves and diamonds. However, for the reasons just given by your commander, discretion is warranted. The Führer thus tasked me to replace him to give you the medals and honors you richly deserve. In view of the incredible exploits of the U-800 during its last war patrol, the Führer has directed that you all see your prior decorations upgraded by one level. Thus, those of you who already have the Iron Cross Second Class will receive today the Iron Cross First Class. The rare few of you who didn’t have already the Iron Cross Second Class will now get it this afternoon. As for those who already have the Iron Cross First Class, of which there are many in fact among you, I will be honored to give you today the German Cross in Silver. As well, all the ones who don’t already have the U-Boote Combat Insignia will get it today. This includes our comrades from the Brandenburg Regiment present this afternoon, who distinguished themselves during the last patrol.”

The seven commandos exchanged excited looks between themselves on hearing the last sentence: to have Heer infantrymen getting the U-Boote Combat Insignia had to be a first.

Dönitz, followed closely by his two aides and by Otto Kretschmer, then started going slowly down the line of men, stopping in front of each of them to speak briefly with them, congratulating them before pinning medals on their chests. That process took a good hour, but no one complained about that, as the awards being distributed now were both significant and prestigious. At the end of the distribution, Dönitz returned to his original spot in front of the men, with Otto behind and to one side of him.

“Men of the U-800, you must now be wondering if I have forgotten one member of the U-800, a member who contributed immensely to the success of your submarine at sea. That man, Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, however has already won the highest award that the Reich could bestow on him...except for one: The Grand Cross of the Iron Cross. In view of the continued exceptional valor shown in combat by

Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, the Führer has directed that he becomes its second recipient, with only Field Marshal Göring of the Luftwaffe having received it before.” Gasps and whispered exclamations went through the men of the U-800 as Dönitz then put the ribbon supporting the big black cross of the Grand Cross around Otto’s neck, then saluted him. On his part, Dönitz added a joke of his own in a low voice as he shook hands with Otto.

“Congratulations: now even Field Marshal Göring will be jealous of you.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy, Herr Admiral.” Replied Otto, grinning with pride.

15:04 (Berlin Time)

Monday, February 9, 1942

Hauptbahnhof (main train station), Munich

Bavaria, Germany

Dieter Hannig, despite the fatigue from his long trip by rail, was nearly jumping up with joy as his train slowed down and stopped inside the Munich’s main train station. Grabbing his precious duffel bag, he made his way through his crowded wagon to one of the exits and soon stepped on the quay. Shouldering the carrying strap of his duffel bag, Dieter walked out of the big building and went north, following Dachauer Strasse towards the district of Max-Norstadt and Augustenstrasse. Once there, at the corner with Karlstrasse, Dieter stopped for a moment to look with growing emotions at the façade of a restaurant, ‘Die Ferkelchen’¹¹, and at the windows of the apartment situated two levels above it. Taking a deep breath, he crossed the street and went to the door beside the restaurant that led to the upper floors. Entering and closing the door behind him, so that the cold air of February could not get in, he gingerly climbed the stairs to the third floor and, pausing for a moment in front of one of the doors on that level to catch his breath, then knocked on it. A strongly-built woman in her forties opened the door after maybe twenty seconds and froze at once, her mouth and eyes wide open as Dieter smiled to her.

“Hello, Mother!”

¹¹ Die Ferkelchen : ‘The Little Piglet’ in German.

"DIETER! MEIN GOTT!" Shouted Greta Hannig before grabbing Dieter in an emotional hug. Both of them stayed in each other's arms for long seconds before stepping back, with Greta opening wide the door and stepping aside.

"Come in, Dieter! I hope that you are coming on a long leave."

"I have two full weeks of shore leave, plus travel time, Mother. We will thus have plenty of time to reacquaint ourselves with each other. I suppose that Father is still at work?"

"He is, but he should be back around six o'clock. Your sister Barbara is downstairs, doing her work as a waitress at your uncle's restaurant, while Frida and Ingrid are at their college."

"And...Klaus, did you get any news from him?" Asked Dieter hesitantly. His mother shook her head, doing her best to hide her anxiety then.

"No! His last letter from Russia was dated from over a month ago and had taken a full two weeks to arrive."

"How is the campaign in Russia going, Mother? I didn't get much access to German radio news while at sea."

"The radio says that our forces are making steady progress despite some stubborn Russian resistance. It didn't say much more than that."

Dieter nodded grimly at that. Most of the citizens in Germany had no illusions about how severely the Nazi propaganda machine controlled the news of the war. His younger brother Klaus had been conscripted into the Heer a year ago as an infantryman, while his unit had departed for the Eastern Front last Summer. While Dieter had effectively not listened to German state news in a while, he had listened to a few American ones while the U-800 was cruising near the United States. What he had heard then, while unconfirmed, had not reassured him about the possible fate of his brother in Russia. He however didn't wish to alarm his mother with some unconfirmed news that could be simply enemy propaganda, thus didn't insist on that subject.

"I am sure that he will go through it just fine, Mother, like I did. Let's go to the kitchen: I have a few gifts for you."

Followed by his now curious mother, Dieter went to the kitchen, where he opened his duffel bag and extracted one by one the items he had wrapped with clothes, both to hide and protect them during his long trip. His mother gasped on seeing the various cans and jars he took out and put on the kitchen counter.

"Chocolate? Coffee? Strawberry jam? Mein Gott, where did you get these? Don't tell me that you went into the black market business! You know the kind of penalties you could get if you were caught doing such things?"

"Don't worry, Mother: this is all completely legitimate and I even have a written note signed by my captain justifying these items in case some policeman becomes suspicious. We boarded and took control of a British merchant ship anchored off the American coast and were able to grab part of its cargo of foodstuff. You probably would have cried in frustration if you would have seen how much more of this we had to sink with that British ship: there was enough aboard to feed the whole of Munich for a few days."

Reassured by those words, Greta Hannig grabbed one of the two cans of hot chocolate powder and examined it with evident glee.

"Do you mind if I take some of this to prepare a cup for me and you?"

"Do as you please, Mother: it's all yours now!" Replied Dieter, a big smile on his lips. That prompted Greta to kiss him joyfully on one cheek.

"You are indeed a good Son, Dieter."

"Thanks, Mother! Uh, do you mind if I first go downstairs to go see Barbara, along with Uncle Johan and Aunt Martha?"

"Go right ahead, Dieter: they will also be most happy to see you."

Leaving his mother inventory her new riches, Dieter walked out of the family apartment and nearly ran down the stairs to the ground floor, where he used a secondary internal door of the 'Die Ferkelchen' to enter his uncle's restaurant. Only a few rare customers, mostly women and old men, were in the dining room at the time as he crossed it and went to the kitchens. There, he nearly collided face-to-face with his sister Barbara, a splendid blonde of twenty years of age. Barbara squealed with joy at once before throwing herself into Dieter's arms. The latter happily hugged her for long seconds before releasing his grip and looking at his uncle and aunt, who had watched the scene with pleased surprise.

"Hello Uncle Johan! Hello Aunt Martha! I am on a two-week shore leave."

"That's great news, Dieter!" Said Johan before his eyes fixed on the black cross pinned to his nephew's left chest. "Mein Gott! You got the Iron Cross First Class? You will have to tell me about that later on...in front of a mug of beer. And I'm the one paying for it."

"Thanks, Uncle Johan! So, how is the business going?"

Johan lost a bit of his enthusiasm then and answered him in a neutral voice.

"Many of our usual customers from the past are gone, having been conscripted and sent to war. That leaves mostly women, old men and wounded men from the front as regular customers. Thankfully, we still can get the meat and vegetables we need for the restaurant from the farms of your uncles Willy and Emil."

"I am glad to hear that, Uncle Johan: it would be a pity to have such a good restaurant as yours running out of pork and cabbage."

"Hopefully, that will never happen, Dieter. Well, if you could be so kind as letting your sister go, she has a few tables to serve. We will see you later tonight."

"I will be waiting for you with impatience." Replied Dieter before kissing his sister on one cheek and going out of the kitchen. He was crossing the dining room to go back to the internal entrance of it when a man walking with the help of crutches tried to enter by the main door on the street side. Seeing that the man had problems opening the door while holding on to his crutches, Dieter ran to him and held the door open for him, earning a grateful smile from the man.

"Thank you, mister! You are too kind."

"You're welcome!" Said Dieter, who only then noticed that the man was missing half of his fingers. His facial expression then betrayed him, prompting the invalid in explaining himself while laboriously getting to one of the tables.

"Frostbites: I lost all of my toes and many of my fingers in front of Moscow last December."

"I am sorry to hear that, mister."

Dieter helped him sit down as the man spoke again.

"You got the Iron Cross First Class? Congratulations! How did you earn it, if I may ask?"

"It was actually a team effort, mister: I am a submariner and our boat hurt the enemy quite painfully during our last war patrol. Uh, you wouldn't by chance have been part of the 218th Infantry Division, would you?"

Dieter was a bit disappointed when the man shook his head: he would thus not be able to tell him about Klaus' unit. The man saw his disappointment and understood at once why.

"You have a family member fighting in the 218th Infantry Division?"

"Yes! My brother Klaus is part of that unit."

"Well, your brother's division is part of Army Group North, which is facing Leningrad, while my division is part of Army Group Center, on the Moscow Sector. I am sorry but I can't help you."

"No need to be sorry, mister. Let me help you in exchange by getting a beer for you: your service amply deserves it."

Not letting time for the man to protest, Dieter went to Barbara and whispered to her as she was cleaning a table.

"Barbara, could you bring a mug of beer to that man with crutches over there? I'm paying."

Barbara looked briefly at the man, then at Dieter and accepted his Reichmark banknotes before going to pour a mug of beer on tap. Dieter went back to the invalid's table and pointed an empty chair facing the man.

"Would you mind if I sit for a while with you, mister? I would like to hear about the Russian Front."

"I would be mean to say no, since you are paying for my beer, mister. Besides, with my toes and fingers gone, there is little left for me to do than sit down, look around and talk."

"Thank you, mister." Said Dieter before sitting down. He then presented his right hand, which the man shook. The lack of fingers did feel quite strange...and disturbing to him.

"Matrosen Obergefreiter Dieter Hannig, cook on the U-800."

"Ex-Gefreiter Hans Lindemann. Uh, did you say the U-800?"

"Yes! Why do you ask?"

"Because your submarine is famous across the Reich, Obergefreiter. You did sink a whole division's worth of troopships on the Canadian coast, on top of dozens of ships, right?"

Dieter didn't know at first how to react to that, still having the possible fate of his younger brother in mind. He finally nodded slowly his head.

"Yes, we did sink all those ships, and more, Gefreiter Lindemann. However, the hardships and dangers we faced couldn't possibly be as much as what you had to endure in Russia."

It was the turn of Lindemann to nod his head then.

"Fighting on the Russian Front is indeed a nightmare, especially in the middle of Winter. We still had not received our Winter clothing allowance and we had to face

colds as extreme as minus forty degrees Celsius. Engines wouldn't start, with the oil in them frozen stiff, while the wind would leave your exposed face without any sensations after only a few minutes. As for the Russians themselves, they may be ignorant sub humans, but they are incredibly tough physically, as well as being fanatical in the defense of their country. I am afraid that the war in Russia may cost us dearly in the long run, my friend."

Dieter could only nod his head, thoughtful, as the man got his beer from Barbara and gave his order for supper to her: Klaus' uncertain prospects now loomed large in his mind.

CHAPTER 12 – A DANGEROUS GAME

10:35 (Paris Time)

Monday, March 2, 1942

U-Boote headquarters, Lorient

Coast of Brittany, France

“Aah, my good Kretschmer! So, how did the sea trials of your new radar go?”

“Well, Herr Admiral: your technicians finally managed to find the faulty connections that marred the first tests. My U-800 is now fully certified to return at sea.”

“Excellent!” Exclaimed Karl Dönitz before pointing a chair near his desk. “But please sit down: I have new orders for you and your boat.”

Otto took place in the chair and waited patiently as Dönitz sifted through the paperwork on his desk, to finally grab a thin file and present it to Otto, who took it.

“As you may have heard, our submarines operating along the American East Coast and in the Caribbean are doing a fine job and have sunk to date an impressive number of ships. However, they are rather thin on the ground and, as a result, had to concentrate on the coastal areas from New York and down to the South, leaving the areas of Halifax and of the New England states uncovered. I believe that your U-800 will be able to fill that hole just nicely. As well, thanks to the British Navy code book you captured, we know that some important naval operation involving American warships is in preparation and may involve a transit towards Great Britain sometime this month. While hitting the commercial sea traffic along the New England coast, your job will also be to keep an eye for such an operation. If you detect such a force in transit, then you will hit it, hard! Those warships must not be allowed to go reinforce the Royal Navy, so they will be priority targets for you. Expend as many torpedoes as you need on them, but hurt them bad.”

Otto nodded his head once, satisfied by this: while sinking enemy merchant ships was well within the laws of war and was actually the main goal of Germany’s submarine warfare, he felt much better at attacking warships that could defend themselves rather than near defenseless merchant ships. Also, almost any green young submarine commander could sink a tanker or a cargo ship, but it took a pro to sink warships.

"I will make their life Hell, Herr Admiral."

"I know you will, my dear Otto. When will you be able to leave for the American coast?"

"I will just need today and tomorrow to complete the resupplying of my boat, Herr Admiral. I will thus be able to depart Lorient at night tomorrow, at around seven in the evening, with your permission."

"You have it! I will come to watch your departure tomorrow."

"That will be a great honor, Herr Admiral. Thank you!"

"Pah, that's nothing! I wish I could sail with you, but unfortunately I am now chained to a desk and snowed in under paperwork. You are now dismissed! Good luck during your next war patrol."

"Thank you again, Herr Admiral." Said Otto, getting up from his chair and saluting Dönitz, who saluted back. Pivoting on his heels, Otto then walked out of the Admiral's office, the mission orders file under one arm. From what he had learned during his own leave period about how the war was going, the future contribution of his U-800 was going to be more important than ever if final victory was to be achieved.

19:12 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, March 3, 1942

Keroman I submarine pen complex

Lorient

Otto, standing rigidly at attention on the open bridge of his U-800, saluted as the military band on the quay of the submarine pen started playing 'Deutschland Uber Alles', the German national anthem. His officers, lined up on the aft deck in front of the men of the crew, with all wearing clean going out Winter uniforms, also saluted. Karl Dönitz, standing on the quay with a dozen senior officers, proudly returned their salutes as the dark blue-green hull of the U-800 slid slowly out of its protective pen. He watched it disappear into the night, then looked at his assembled staff officers.

"Gentlemen, the U-800 is back at sea: the Americans and British better brace themselves now."

11:40 (New York Time)
Saturday, March 14, 1942
Control room of the U-800
Off Portland Harbor, Maine, U.S.A.

Otto, looking through the watch periscope, grinned with satisfaction and spoke out loud.

“We have a thick fog all around us, men. Just what we need to nail on the ground all those pesky American and British patrol aircraft. Radar, power your antenna and give me a ten second sweep, then shut off your set and report.”

Less than half a minute later, Max Roehm, the senior radar operator, spoke up from his station in one corner of the control room.

“I have the outline of the coast at the edge of my scope, Herr Kapitän, with the closest piece of land twelve kilometers away. I have half a dozen small boats on my scope, plus two full-sized ships within ten kilometers. The smaller boats are probably small fishing trawlers.”

“Maine does have a reputation for catching good lobsters.” Recognized Otto. “We will do our best to avoid their nets: we wouldn’t want our U-800 to end on a fish market table in Nantucket, right men?”

As the men in the control room laughed at his joke, Leutnant Hermann Spielberger added to it cheerfully.

“Wasn’t Captain Ahab¹² and his whaling ship based in Nantucket, Herr Kapitän?”

“True, but he would probably find our hide a bit too tough for his harpoon. Alright, let’s recharge our batteries while this fog holds. EXTEND THE SCHNORCHEL TO FULL! SWITCH TO DIESELS! START RECHARGING THE BATTERIES! PURGE OUR SEPTIC TANKS AND FILL OUR AIR TANKS!”

Lowering the optical head of his periscope under the waves, Otto then grabbed his local marine chart and went to see his senior radar operator.

“Thinking about it, Roehm, could you power up again your radar, but leave it on this time: I want to see if I could make a reliable position fix by comparing my chart with your radar image.”

¹² Captain Ahab: Fictitious main character of the novel ‘Moby Dick’.

"From experience, I would say that you should be able to do that easily, Herr Kapitän. My radar set has enough resolution to be used for navigation in coastal waters, even in thick fog."

"With the same fog making coastal observers and ship lookouts blind in comparison. It does..."

Not hearing his captain finish his sentence, Roehm looked up from his radar scope, to see that Otto had what appeared to be a sudden air of revelation, as if he had just been visited by the Holy Spirit.

"Are you okay, Herr Kapitän?"

"Uh, yes! I think that I just had either my best idea ever, or a total brain fart. Let's see what your radar is showing."

While intrigued, Roehm obeyed and lit up his radar set. With Otto spreading his chart beside the screen, both men compared the two for a few seconds before Roehm, more accustomed to reading radar images, pointed first at a few large dots slightly detached from the main coastline, then at a series of small islands featured on Otto's chart.

"These are the islands separating Portland Harbor and Casco Bay, in Maine, from the open sea, Herr Kapitän. That small dot nearest to us must be Ram Island, with the bigger one behind it being Cushing Island."

"You're right, Roehm! Mein Gott, we could really navigate with enough precision despite this thick fog! Himmel, I must try this! LEUTNANT SPIELBERGER, GET ME THAT PRE-WAR AMERICAN YACHTING GUIDE! ALSO, CALL LEUTNANT MARGRAFF TO THE CONTROL ROOM, AT THE DOUBLE!"

"Uh, may I ask what you are thinking, Herr Kapitän?" Asked a befuddled Roehm. Otto didn't take his question badly, instead patting his shoulder while smiling.

"You may just have given me a way to screw the Americans royally, my dear Roehm."

As Otto went to see Spielberger at the tactical plot table, Roehm could only scratch his head, completely lost by this.

17:42 (New York Time)

Two kilometers south of Fort Williams

Cape Elizabeth, coast of Maine

Invisible beyond forty meters in the thick fog, the inflatable rubber boat beached silently on the rocky shore of Cape Elizabeth, south of Portland and near the mouth of the harbor's entrance channel. Seven men in camouflaged uniforms and steel helmets and heavily loaded with weapons and large packs stepped out of the boat at once and hurriedly carried it up the slope of the beach, to finally drop it within thick bushes. They quickly camouflaged their boat before crouching in a tight circle for a whispered orders group, with Lieutenant Hugo Margraff doing the talking.

"Here we are, back on American soil, men. Low tide just came, so we now have no more than four hours before high tide. Our job must be completed by then. While we can't waste time, we will have to advance cautiously, as there is a full coastal artillery battalion posted in and around Fort Williams. We will use only silenced weapons if we need to fire at all. Any questions? No? Then follow me!"

Led by Margraff, the Brandenburg men then went through the bushes at a crouched trot, holding their silenced weapons at the ready.

Forced by the fog to constantly use his compass to avoid deviating from his intended destination, Margraff used to the maximum the bushes and dispersed trees covering the Cape Elizabeth area to stay as stealthy as he could. He had to make detours on the way to avoid a few isolated cottages and residences situated along the coast but didn't meet a single person along the way, which was not surprising in view of the fog and of the fact that it was supper time. After fifty minutes of cautious advance, he finally saw the first defensive works and buildings of Fort Williams. Not having a plan of Fort Williams, in fact having only seen an icon representing it on a tourist's map, Hugo didn't really know what to expect exactly, except that there were supposed to be heavy coastal guns in concrete and stone fortified positions. He had not encountered any outer perimeter wall yet, just a simple wooden low fence easily jumped over, and thus didn't realize that he and his men were already inside the grounds of Fort Williams, just inside the eastern edge of what would become the Southwest Woodland Preserve, and were looking at the southernmost battery of the fort, Battery Garesché. It took Hugo a moment to understand the true setup of Fort Williams. He then made his men gather close to him, so he could speak to them in a low voice.

"It seems that this Fort Williams is not exactly what we were expecting, men. From what I can see, there is no defensive perimeter wall, just a dispersed collection of individual gun battery positions facing seaward, plus a collection of buildings. In a way,

that will make our job much more easy, as we won't have to scale walls to circulate around the fort. On the other hand, we must find the really big guns and, most importantly, their ammunition magazines, which are our priority targets. Thankfully, there seems to be patches of trees all around the fort, which we can exploit to move around stealthily."

"Will we ignore the smaller gun batteries, Leutnant?" Asked his second-in-command, Unteroffizier Franz Stein. Hugo thought that over for a moment before shaking his head.

"They still could hurt the U-800 when it will make its run through the entrance channel, so we will have to take out or sabotage every gun we will find. We will however have to be quiet about it, at least until we can find the main ammunition magazines, thus will have to be imaginative in our work."

"What about the sentries, Leutnant?" Asked Gefreiter Hermann Weiss. "Do we silently kill them or do we avoid them?"

"Any sentry left alive and free in our backs could put us at risk, so we will have to eliminate them. Supper time has now passed, so I expect that the relief of sentries has now been done for the evening and that there will be no other switch of sentries until at least midnight. At the worst, we may encounter a few roaming patrols or inspecting NCOs or officers doing rounds between the batteries. The works we see at our one o'clock seems to be the southernmost gun battery of this fort. We will advance in single file along the trees between here and that position and will act according to what we find over there. Make sure that the silencers on your weapons are well fixed, then follow me!"

Taking the lead, Hugo started walking at a crouch in the bushes, stopping at intervals behind a tree to watch and listen for any sign of sentries. His caution paid off when, now only twenty meters or so from the first concrete bunker, he saw two incandescent red dots appear through an observation slit facing the sea. Hugo smiled ferociously on seeing that: the Americans on guard duty had obviously chosen to take refuge inside one of the bunkers, in order to escape the cold wind sweeping the coast and to smoke cigarettes. This was going to make it rather easy to take them out. Using hand signs, Hugo sent three of his men to quietly go take position on the left of the group of bunkers facing him. Once they were in position, he himself silently advanced, followed by his three remaining men. Slowly climbing at a crouch the right side set of

steps of the small bunker complex, Hugo and his men managed to arrive at the level of the observation bunker without being noticed. Signaling by hand to his men to get ready, Hugo checked for a last time that his silenced P38 pistol's safety catch was disengaged, then turned the handle of the steel door situated at the back of the bunker and calmly entered as if he was simply visiting. The two American soldiers smoking inside instinctively came to rigid attention when they saw a dark silhouette enter, probably thinking that one of their NCOs or officers was coming to inspect their post. The first American to be shot in the chest by Hugo never had a chance to react, while the second American barely had the time to start lunging for his rifle before being shot as well. Hugo then finished both men with point blank shots to the head. Exiting the bunker, he gave orders in a low voice to his three men waiting outside.

"Drag out those bodies and throw them down the cliff to our right. Keep their steel helmets, just in case that we would need them as a temporary disguise, but find my spent brass casings and throw them away."

His men obeyed him quickly and quietly, with the two dead Americans soon thrown down the rocky ledge beside the bunker. Once his men were ready again to follow him, Hugo sent two of them to go explore the lower level of the bunker while he cautiously checked the second upper level observation post. He found that post empty, save for a tripod-mounted artillery optical rangefinder and a field telephone. Michel Drücker came back as Hugo was exiting the second observation post and reported in a near whisper.

"The lower chambers of the bunker are empty, Herr Leutnant. It appears that they once sheltered artillery pieces, but those guns are now gone."

"Very well! Let's go to the next series of bunkers, then."

First linking back with the three men he had sent to guard his left flank, Hugo then led his small group north, staying inside the vegetation-covered area to the right of what appeared to be the perimeter road of the fort. After less than 250 meters, a long, low concrete structure appeared out of the fog and obscurity. Stopping and putting one knee down, Hugo took out of a large equipment pouch carried by a strap passed across his chest a heavy pair of high quality Zeiss binoculars with extra-wide lens designed specifically to help night vision. Hugo looked through his binoculars for maybe ten seconds before twisting his head back to look at his men.

“Bingo! We have a concrete battery position with two heavy guns on disappearing carriages¹³ ahead of us. I can see four sentries: two on the upper level, where the guns are, and two on the lower level, guarding large doors to what could very well be ammunition magazines. Each pair stands at one of the two extremities of the battery complex. Here is what we will do...”

The soldier guarding the southernmost artillery piece of the pair of 12 inch guns forming Battery Blair turned his head when he heard footsteps approaching from his right on the concrete of the gun platform. He then saw coming out of the dark and fog two tall dark silhouettes, each wearing the distinct ‘soup bowl’ steel helmet still widely used by the U.S. Army at this early stage of the war. The soldier quickly but discreetly straightened up his belt and web gear in advance of what he believed to be a surprise inspection and came to attention. He didn’t recognize at first the face of the man who soon stopped in front of him, being little more than a dark shape in the night. The man then spoke to him in English, with a slight, curious accent to it.

“I am here to relieve you of your duties...permanently.”

“Uh?” Could only say the unfortunate soldier before being shot in the throat once, with the bullet fired at an upward angle and going through his brain before exploding the top of his cranium. Hugo then hurried to grab the dead man before he could fall and make some noise, while Michel Drücker similarly caught the rifle the American had been shouldering. Hugo gently laid the body on the concrete, beside the huge mass of the 12 inch gun resting in its cradle behind the thick, three meter-high protective frontal parapet. The gun’s mass in turn prevented the other sentry on this level from seeing the short drama that had just been played. That other sentry soon fell victim to the same trick used to kill his comrade and died without being able to warn the two sentries on the lower level. Splitting up, Hugo and Michel each went down on their belly at the edge of the upper platform, just above the pair of remaining sentries. Both of those sentries soon died from bullets fired from above them that pierced their heads, then continued down their torso, through their internal organs. Four of Hugo’s soldiers who had waited for just that to happen then ran quickly to the dead sentries and hurried to drag them out of sight, carrying them inside what turned to be the ammunition

¹³ Disappearing carriages: Artillery gun mounts designed to lower behind a protective parapet after firing.

magazines for the two 12 inch guns of Battery Blair. Joining them there, Hugo grinned with triumph at the sight of the hundreds of huge half-ton shells, with their propellant charges contained in silk bags, themselves contained in thick cardboard casings.

“Well well, we should be able to make a really nice fireworks display with all this. Drücker, Weiss, go back to the guns above and break their firing pins, just in case the Americans somehow manage to prevent these magazines from blowing up. Once we are finished here, we will go look for more gun batteries around this fort.”

As Drücker and Weiss ran outside, Hugo looked back at the piles of 12 inch shells, a devilish grin on his face.

“Let’s see if we can be creative here.”

21:01 (New York Time)

Control room of the U-800

Slipping up the entrance channel of Casco Bay

Maine

“Helm, veer five degrees to port, keep your speed at four knots and your depth constant at seventeen meters. Sonar, call the depth under our keel at intervals of ten seconds from now on.”

“Aye, Herr Kapitän! Free depth is now three meters, with slight depression ahead... Free depth now four meters, bottom still sloping downwards...”

Otto, bent over the shoulders of his senior radar operator with an old yachting guide map of Portland Harbor in his hands, was concentrated as he had rarely been in the past, listening as well to the reports of his sonar operator as he very cautiously guided his U-800 up the entrance channel leading to Casco Bay and the port of Portland, with the top of his submarine’s conning tower barely under the surface. He wasn’t even sure what he would find inside Casco Bay...if he made it that far without being detected, but he was quite certain that it would contain one or two American warships and a few merchant ships at a minimum. Ulrich von Wittgenstein was presently inside the forward observation dome, ready to help him guide their submarine if and when they would be forced by shallow waters to let part of their conning tower emerge, while Franz Streib stood ready at the attack periscope. This was a truly ‘do or die’ attempt and Otto was hoping fervently that the rewards would be worth the risks. He however tried to reassure

himself by thinking that the golden horseshoe painted on the side of his conning tower, an emblem that had decorated his past submarines, would truly bring him luck tonight.

"We are passing by the southern point of Cushing Island, Herr Kapitän." Said Roehm, his eyes glued to his radar screen. We are right in the middle of the entrance channel."

"Free depth is now seven meters, Herr Kapitän. Sonar however indicates a rise of the bottom coming soon: it could be tight, even with the high tide."

"Helm, hold present heading and depth! Ulrich, you have your infrared night vision scope ready with you upstairs?"

"Yes, Herr Kapitän! Once we break the surface and switch on our infrared projectors, I should be able to see nearly as if in daylight over a distance of close to one kilometer."

"Good! I am counting on you to find me quickly fine, juicy targets for our eels once in the middle of the harbor."

"I will be ready, Herr Kapitän!"

"We are now nearly past Cushing Island, Herr Kapitän."

"Free depth now four meters and diminishing rapidly, Herr Kapitän." Announced Günther Grote, his voice a bit tense. "I counsel that we get up a bit."

"I'll buy that, Herr Grote. Ballasts, bring us up by two meters."

"Two meters up, aye Herr Kapitän!"

The noise of compressed air entering their ballast tanks was heard for barely more than a second, as the ballast operators injected a calculated amount of air to achieve the requested depth change. It took real professionals to do that with precision, but Otto knew that his men, all of his men, were such pros.

"Our top canopy is now nearly breaking the surface, Herr Kapitän." Announced von Wittgenstein from the forward observation dome.

"Free depth now steady at about two meters. The bottom shows flat ahead of us."

"Excellent! The high tide still has not reached its maximum, so we are now mostly in the clear, depth wise. Radar, where are we now?"

"We are about to pass by the southern tip of House Island, Herr Kapitän. I now have a direct radar line of sight on the main anchorage area beyond House Island."

The tone of voice of Max Roehm suddenly changed, denoting triumph.

"Herr Kapitän, I have a total of nine ships anchored side-by-side in the middle of the bay, to our one o'clock and at a distance of 900 meters and closing. I read eight of them as being of destroyer size, with a bigger ship sandwiched in the middle of the row." Otto grinned ferociously on hearing that and shook a triumphant fist.

"A destroyer squadron at anchorage with a destroyer tender! Leutnant Spielberger, be ready to enter target data in your calculator! Helm, slow down to two knots and be ready to do a tight half-turn on my command. Leutnant Streib, has the fog dissipated by now?"

"Partly, Herr Kapitän: I can now see through the periscope the position lights of the ships at anchor. Light levels are poor but I confirm that the row of ships ahead is composed of warships."

"Yes! Open the outer torpedo tube doors! Flood all tubes!"

21:27 (New York Time)

Bridge of the destroyer tender U.S.S. DENEbola (AD-12)

At anchor at Diamond Island Roads anchorage area

Casco Bay, Maine

"Sir, I have what appears to be some private yacht roaming the entrance channel at low speed, with no navigation lights on. It is now at our ten o'clock, at an approximate distance of 600 meters."

The visual report from his young bridge duty officer ticked off the captain of the U.S.S. DENEbola, Commander Robert C. Starkey, who was a bit of a stickler where rules of navigation were concerned. Getting up from his command chair, where he had been enjoying the sight of the city of Portland at night, he walked across the semi-obscure bridge and approached his subordinate to look by himself. He effectively saw after a few seconds of searching with his binoculars an oblong dark mass low on the water, from which jutted up what looked like two sailing masts. The boat was seemingly wandering around and was presently turning slowly towards his ship.

"What is that idiot doing? Send him the following message by lamp: move on and clear the channel at once."

"Aye, sir!"

Starkey continued to watch the dark boat as the junior officer made a signalman send the message. The response to it took nearly too long to his taste before being sent by

the boat. Starkey, who knew his signal lamp code about as well as the best signalman on his ship, read the response for himself as it was being transmitted.

“Go..to..Hell... What the fuck?”

Starkey was about to explode in indignation when a second part to the response arrived.

“...Signed..U-800...”

For a second, his brain refused to believe what those two last words meant. Then, he understood that this was not a joke and twisted around to shout orders to the stunned bridge crew members.

“BATTLE STATIONS! ENEMY SUBMARINE IN THE HARBOR!”

To his fury, his subordinates stayed frozen from the surprise and were slow to react, making him scream again.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU WAITING FOR? I SAID ‘BATTLE STATIONS!’”

The young bridge duty officer finally pressed the large red button that called the crew to action, starting a loud bell alarm, and was about to speak into the ship’s intercom when the first of eight torpedoes slammed in the destroyer at the end of the row of ships, the U.S.S. WARRINGTON, exploding against its port bow section. The underwater explosion created a shockwave that hit the next destroyer in line, the U.S.S. SOMERS, with considerable force, caving in some of its underwater hull plates and ripping open a hole through which water rushed in. Then, the second and the third torpedoes hit, each exploding against the hull of different destroyers, shaking them violently and opening big holes in them. The fourth torpedo however caused the most mayhem when it hit the U.S.S. SAMPSON, which was anchored directly beside the U.S.S. DENEbola, at the level of its forward five inch gun ammunition magazine. The blast from the torpedo’s warhead touched off the hundreds of shells stored in the deep magazine, starting a lightning-quick chain reaction of sympathetic detonations. The whole forward section of the U.S.S. SAMPSON, including its two forward five inch gun turrets and parts of the bridge superstructures, disappeared in a devastating explosion that caved in and ripped open the hulls of the DENEbola and of the destroyer anchored along the starboard side of the SAMPSON, the U.S.S. MOFFETT. The shockwave from that explosion also blew in all the windows of the destroyer tender’s bridge, cutting to shreds Commander Starkey and the members of the bridge crew. Four more torpedoes then hit the anchored American warships, causing a carnage among their crews and either disabling or condemning all the destroyers and their destroyer tender.

As the series of powerful blasts and explosions echoed around the Portland area, awaking its inhabitants, the U-800 turned around and, before speeding back down the entrance channel in the dark and remaining fog, fired in succession the four torpedoes in its stern launch tubes, aiming them at the row of destroyers and at a single, large tanker ship also anchored in Casco Bay. That tanker, loaded with over 5,000 tons of aviation gasoline destined for Great Britain, blew up in a spectacular fireball that rose slowly in the night sky, illuminating the whole bay area for a few seconds. The National Guard artillerymen whose battery of old three inch guns armed Fort Preble, situated on the corner of the port facing the Diamond Island Roads anchorage area, took way too long to react, having been taken completely by surprise by those sudden events. Most of them had been inside their barracks at the time, with only a few men left outside to guard the guns. By the time that the old three inch guns were manned and ready to fire, the U-800 had disappeared into the night. More ammunition exploding aboard the destroyers and their tender also continuously sent up all kind of metallic debris and unexploded ordnance that then fell back down all around the port area and the city of Portland, making hazardous just the fact of being out in the open.

Aboard the U-800, Otto Kretschmer was not celebrating yet, as he still had to exit intact the entrance channel and get to the open sea. Nagging him was the fact that he had not seen yet any explosions inside Fort Williams, the fort that would be the most dangerous for him during his exit run. Otto, while guiding his boat down the channel, started praying that nothing untoward had happened to Leutnant Margraff and his men.

Inside Fort Williams, the noise and flashes of light from the exploding torpedoes and ship ammunition had the same effect as that of a kick against an ants nest. The more than 700 artillerymen in the fort ran out of their barracks or messes in disorder, many of them not taking the time to grab their weapons before going outside to see what was happening. Some of the officers proved to be nearly as lost as their men, being old career officers with no experience of war and little imagination or sense of initiative. A few officers who acted with more energy and celerity finally forced some order and purpose in their men, making them man at last their guns in proper fashion. There, at the gun mounts, two bad surprises awaited the American artillerymen.

“HEY, WERE ARE THE SENTRIES THAT WERE GUARDING THE GUNS?”

“SIR, THE FIRING PINS ARE EITHER BROKEN OR ARE MISSING FROM THE BREACH BLOCKS!”

The brigadier general that commanded the forts defending the Portland area, and whose headquarter was located in Fort Williams, nearly became mad on hearing these words.

“GODDAMMIT! THEN GO GET NEW FIRING PINS AT THE GUNSMITH’S STORE, QUICKLY!”

One of the general’s aides suddenly pointed towards the flag mast of the fort, situated on one side of the parade grounds.

“Hey! Somebody forgot to lower the flag at Sunset.”

Being sure of having seen a color party lower the American flag from that mast earlier at six in the evening, as tradition called for every day, the brigadier general snapped his head around to look at the top of the mast. Sure enough, there was a flag hooked at the top, floating limply in the wind. A stronger wind suddenly made the flag fully deploy, making the general’s eyes bulge and nearly giving him a heart attack.

“A NAZI FLAG? FLYING OVER MY FORT?!”

Those were his last words before the more than 200 twelve inch shells and their powder bags stored inside the magazines of Battery Blair erupted into a titanic explosion, completely obliterating the heavy coastal gun battery and leaving a huge smoldering crater in its place. The blast wave killed or severely injured everybody in the open within 150 meters and also shattered all the windows in the South Portland District. Within three minutes, the ammunition magazines of Battery DeHart and of Battery Sullivan, full of ten inch shells, also blew up in succession, finishing to destroy Fort Williams and killing hundreds of American soldiers just after the U-800, still half submerged, had sailed past the fort and had reached the open sea. The men assigned to the fire control rooms commanding the remotely-detonated sea mines protecting the harbor approaches were killed by the explosions of the ammunition magazines of the fort. None of those sea mines were thus activated in time to stop the U-800.

23:14 (New York Time)

Forward deck of the U-800

Off Cape Elizabeth, Maine

As soon as all of his six men were safely on the deck of the U-800 and had pulled their rubber boat out of the water with the help of the sailors present on deck,

Hugo Margraff hurried towards Otto Kretschmer, who was also on the open deck, to report to him. Otto surprised him by coming to attention first and shouting to his crewmen on deck.

“CREW OF THE U-800, ATTEN...TION!”

Otto then saluted Hugo. Stunned, Hugo returned the Captain’s salute.

“Leutnant Margraff, of the Brandenburg Regiment, you and your men have performed tonight in a manner that could only be qualified as truly heroic. Be sure that your actions will be fully and favorably reported to Admiral Dönitz on our return to port. In the meantime, you would honor me by accepting to come to the officers’ wardroom with your men, so that we could have a toast to your health.”

Hugo nodded once, deeply touched by this.

“We will be most happy to accept your kind invitation, Herr Kapitän.”

CHAPTER 13 – STATE OF SHOCK

06:02 (New York Time)

Sunday, March 15, 1942

Control room of the U-800

Arriving on station off Boston Harbor

“Here we are, men: our next target area is in sight. Can anybody tell me what ships headed to a specific port would do if that port would suddenly be declared closed to traffic?”

“Uh, they would then go to the next nearest major port, Herr Kapitän.” Ventured Franz Streib, making Otto smile.

“And what is the American major port nearest to Portland, children?”

“**BOSTON!**” Replied in unison the men in the control room, turning Otto’s smile into a grin.

“Excellent, class! You just passed your examination in basic naval strategy. Let’s see now how well protected this port is. Herr Zimmer, scan for enemy radar emissions with your radar warning receiver set. Herr Junker, power up your radar for a minute or so, time for us to update our position in relation to the coastline. Herr Hartmann, switch on our high definition active sonar, in case there are minefields protecting Boston Harbor.”

It didn’t take long before Otto, who first took care of updating his present position with the help of the picture of the coastline contours provided by his radar set, started getting a few unsettling pieces of information. Hans Zimmer, operating their Metox radar warning receiver set, was the first to report to Otto.

“Herr Kapitän, I am detecting the signals from at least three meter-band radar stations posted in and around Boston. If we could continue on the present heading and in a straight line, I will be ready soon to give you a triangulated approximate fix for those three radars.”

“We will certainly do so. HELM, STEADY ON PRESENT HEADING! REDUCE SPEED TO THREE KNOTS!”

"AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!"

Michel Hartmann, at the high definition sonar console, was next to report, his voice betraying sudden nervousness.

"Herr Kapitän, we are about to broach what seems to be a very dense underwater minefield to our starboard bow. I can detect dozens of moored mines within the narrow detection arc of my sonar set. We however should be able to avoid the nearest mines by about 300 meters."

"Leutnant Streib, you are now in charge of mapping those minefields as best you can while we pass beside them. Good job, Hartmann!"

Otto, checking frequently with his operators and Streib and also periodically looking through his search periscope, soon had an early picture of the Boston Harbor defenses. That included visual sightings of a series of coastal towers that were most probably coastal artillery observation and fire control towers. As the U-800 was doing a second run in front of Boston Harbor after performing a 180 degree turn, one particular area to the North started attracting his attention. Consulting his charts and his old but useful American yachting guide to the American East Coast, he called Franz Streib to his side and pointed at a peninsula jutting out of the coast.

"I think that we should concentrate our attentions on this Nahant Peninsula, about five nautical miles to the north of Boston Harbor. One of the three radars that we detected is situated on it, plus there is at least one artillery observation tower visible along its southeast shoreline. I am tempted to land Leutnant Margraff and his team there to go investigate that place tonight. With luck, they may be able to capture some pieces of American radar technology, about which we know very little up to now."

"It sounds like a good idea, Herr Kapitän: our intelligence information on the Americans is rather skimpy, if I could say so. We will have to go grab more info on the spot if we want to know more about them."

"Then, Leutnant Margraff will be playing tourist again tonight. In the meantime, I want those minefields mapped as accurately as we can without risking ourselves in the middle of them. Use direct observation via our infrared scopes to help identify and plot those minefields."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän! What if some targets show up in the meantime?"

"We will skip on them for the moment, unless they are truly juicy 'pièces de résistance': I want to give the maximum time possible to Leutnant Margraff and his men to prepare and then conduct their next land raid before we start hunting ships."

15:18 (New York Time)**Navy docks, Port of Portland****Maine**

Rear Admiral Theodore Stark Wilkinson and his two assistants had just finished interviewing the various survivors who actually had something useful to report about last night's devastating attack. With Admiral Ernest J. King and his own retinue of aides and subalterns joining in on the discussion, Wilkinson was reviewing what they now knew when General George Marshall, the powerful head of the U.S. Army, entered the Navy offices, closely followed by half a dozen officers. Admiral King, a man intensely jealous about the control he exerted on 'his' navy, promptly faced Marshall while also blocking his way.

"General Marshall? I didn't know that you were in Portland today."

"I am here probably for the same reason that I am finding you here, Admiral King: the mess that the Germans left here behind them. Specifically, I now have one of my coastal artillery forts that has essentially ceased to exist, along with its whole garrison. What I found in their place are three huge craters...and this!"

King and the naval officers around him held their breath, indignation flaring up in them, as Marshall unrolled and unfurled a large, ripped Nazi flag.

"This flag was found still tied to the flagpole of Fort Williams, which was itself broken and surrounded by the bodies of dead artillerymen. The culprits who caused all this mayhem left their calling card behind. So, what happened here, according to the Navy side, Admiral King?"

King, a man known to have a mean, explosive temper, managed to control his anger at the sight of the Nazi flag and answered Marshall in an even voice.

"It seems that one German submarine managed to slip up the entrance channel of the harbor last night, at around nine in the evening, using the night and a thick fog to sail in unnoticed. Once inside Casco Bay, it fired salvos of torpedoes and sank eight of my destroyers, along with a submarine tender and a merchant tanker ship, before leaving. It however laid as well a number of sea mines as it went back down the entrance channel. Two merchant ships which tried to leave the harbor in the panic that ensued blew up on mines, partially blocking the entrance channel. The port is now

closed to all maritime traffic until the channel could be properly swept, something that will take at least another day.”

“And the German saboteurs who blew up Fort Williams? Were they from that submarine, Admiral?”

“We do believe so, General Marshall. Furthermore, we have a pretty good idea of who to blame for all this. I will let Rear Admiral Wilkinson, the head of the Office of Naval Intelligence, tell you the sordid details.”

Marshall looked critically at Wilkinson as the latter got up and approached him, a file in his left hand. The exchange and coordination of intelligence information between the Army and the Navy in this war had been up to now abysmal to non-existent and it seemed that things were not improving very fast on that front.

“Could a single submarine really cause this much mayhem by itself?”

“Oh, the U-800 has already caused plenty more mayhem than this, General Marshall.” Replied Wilkinson before handing him the file he held. “This is what we know up to now on the U-800 and its captain, Otto Kretschmer. Kretschmer is by far the top submarine ace of the German fleet to date and he has been associated lately with a squad of elite soldiers of the German Army specializing in commando raids, sabotage and the like. Those soldiers are from the Brandenburg Regiment and were previously seen on American soil when they landed on the North Carolina coast and sabotaged the Cape Lookout lighthouse last December. Those same German soldiers may also have been involved in the boarding and hijacking of two merchant ships which were subsequently used to attack Miami Harbor and the Colombian port of Cartagena, respectively. If anybody could infiltrate your fort and blow it up through sabotage, it would be those men. They are to be considered very well trained and extremely dangerous. As for the U-800, we believe it to be the prototype unit of a new and revolutionary class of German attack submarine. Captain Kretschmer and his wonder boat have cost up to now to our Navy a total of one aircraft carrier, one battleship, three cruisers, sixteen destroyers, four Coast Guard cutters and six large troopships. This does not count the dozens of merchant ships they have sunk to date, plus quite a few British and Canadian warships.”

Marshall, having problems believing Wilkinson, nonetheless read through the file given by him. What he saw was however enough to make him rethink his opinion on the subject. Thoroughly shaken, he gave back the file to Wilkinson and looked at King.

"So, where could that U-800 be now? Could it be on its way back to Germany after such a feat of arms?"

King grimly shook his head in response.

"Not a chance, General! This is typically just the opening shot of what promises to be another bloody campaign by Kretschmer at our expense. As for where he is, I could not say, apart from the certainty that he is still off the American East Coast, preparing his next hammer blow. Unfortunately, my Atlantic Fleet has lost up to now a good quarter of its destroyers, thanks to Kretschmer, and also has to deal with more German submarines that are presently operating further south, around the coasts of North Carolina, Virginia and New Jersey."

Marshall pondered all that for a moment, thoughtful, before speaking.

"Then, I better put all of my coastal defense units and air squadrons on full combat alert, to prevent more damage."

A Navy commander then approached and whispered in the ear of Admiral King.

"Sir, Task Force 39 was due to start assembling here in three days, prior to leaving for Great Britain. In fact, the eight destroyers we just lost in Casco Bay were due to form the destroyer screen of Task Force 39. What should we do now, Admiral?"

King couldn't help bang his fist out of rage then, totally frustrated: the sensible thing to do right now would be to simply cancel Task Force 39, but he couldn't do that, due to political reasons. President Roosevelt had promised to Prime Minister Churchill to send a strong naval task force to Great Britain, in order to support the hard-pressed Royal Navy in the North Atlantic area. King had vehemently protested that drain on his already insufficient Atlantic Fleet, but in vain. He knew that arguing with Roosevelt again on that point would do no good, thus that mission would have to be fulfilled somehow, despite this latest disaster.

"Tell Admiral Ingersoll to change the assembly point of Task Force 39 to Boston and to assign a new destroyer squadron to it. Those ships are to stay away from Portland for the time being but their mission and departure dates will stay the same."

"Understood, Admiral." Said the commander before walking away, leaving Marshall to stare questioningly at King.

"Something new happened, Admiral?"

"Not really, General Marshall. I was just dealing with a late adjustment in naval unit deployments."

Marshall, not really convinced, however let it go at that: he had plenty of problems of his own to deal with right now.

In another section of the port, the Spanish Naval Attaché in Washington, Captain Rodrigo Garamon, was accompanying the Spanish Consul in what was officially a visit to various Spanish nationals and shipping companies in Portland, to inspect the damage and losses caused by last night's pandemonium. Consul Pedro Morales actually had quite a few people to visit relative to that matter, as debris and unexploded ordnance had rained all over the port and town area, causing dozens of civilian casualties and some extensive damages to property. Morales, who was a strong fascist sympathizer, fully intended to dump those damages and losses at the door of the U.S. government in general and the U.S. Navy in particular, claiming that American Navy negligence had caused them. Garamon's motives were however more subtle. While he had come to Portland with Morales to officially advise him and lend him his competences in naval affairs, Garamon also worked for the Spanish Military Intelligence, which in turn had close ties with the German Abwehr. He already had bought a number of copies of local newspapers, which had published hyperbolic articles and striking pictures about the sinking of destroyers in the harbor and the destruction of Fort Williams, and this despite the efforts of the official government censors to hide that double disaster from the American public. In that last respect, censorship could not possibly hide everything: panicked telephone conversations between residents of Portland and their friends and family members around the rest of the country had already made impossible to deny the extent of the damage, or the culprits who had caused it. As he was looking at the blackened, twisted remains of destroyer superstructures sticking out of the waters of the harbor, Garamon couldn't help mentally praise the daring and abilities of the German submarine captain who had managed to pull such a feat.

21:36 (New York Time)

East Point, northeast shore of Nahant Peninsula

Five nautical miles north-northeast of Boston Harbor

"Maybe we should apply for tourist visas at this rate, Herr Leutnant." Joked in a near whisper Unteroffizier Franz Stein as he helped carry the team's rubber inflatable boat out of the surf and up the pebble shore on which he and his six comrades had just

landed at night after a silent but strenuous approach on paddle power. That made Hugo Margraff smile as he pictured such a scene.

“Yeah! I could imagine the face of the American customs officer as he stamps our passports...at gunpoint!”

There were a few chuckles then before they regained their seriousness. Unfortunately for them, the shoreline near the water's edge was devoid of vegetation and they had to actually climb the moderate slope of a short cliff while carrying their boat before finding bushes substantial enough to hide and camouflage it. The seven German commandos, led by Hugo, then started their stealthy exploration of the peninsula, walking slowly at a crouch and making as little noise as possible. They already knew the approximate location of the radar previously detected by the U-800, having seen its tall antenna rotate in the night and having been helped by the poor light discipline displayed by the crew of that radar set. Hugo was however resolved to thoroughly explore the whole peninsula before jumping into action: he didn't want to attack that radar station only to find out too late that more enemy units were nearby and able to react quickly to him.

It took little time to the Brandenburg men before they encountered multiple evidence that a major construction project had been initiated on East Point: dozens of pieces of excavating equipment, along with big piles of bags of concrete mix covered by waterproof tarps and of sand and gravel lay around a large excavation dug on the East-facing side of a long North-South ridgeline cutting across the peninsula. There were even piles of reinforcing steel bars of the kind used to build massive reinforced concrete structures. Exploring cautiously the construction site, which appeared to be unoccupied at this late hour, Hugo soon stumbled onto something that brought a mean smile to his face: a small corrugated steel shack set apart from the rest of the site and bearing warning signs in English.

“A depot of dynamite! This could come quite handy later on.”

Checking the rather flimsy door of the shack, he found it unlocked, another proof of the general carelessness the American military had displayed to date. Silently opening the door and using his flashlight, fitted with a red filter, he saw deep stacks of boxes of dynamite, stacked nearly to the ceiling, along with boxes of detonators, dozens of spools of detonator wires and a few plungers.

"Nice! There must be over 600 kilos of dynamite in this shack, enough to do some serious work. This could help us save on our own explosives, men. First, though, let's continue our scouting work."

Closing back the door of the shack, Hugo was about to walk away when the hand of Franz Stein urgently tapped his shoulder.

"One sentry up the top of the ridge, Leutnant!"

Crouching and then freezing at once, Hugo looked up the ridge and saw the incandescent red dot of a lit cigarette, moving from left to right at a slow pace atop the ridge.

"I see him! Since that sentry is near the northern end of that ridge, I think that it would be safe to assume that there is at least one other sentry patrolling near the southern edge. We will avoid them for the time being, but they will probably be the first ones to be eliminated once we go into action. Let's go inspect that radar station now."

That radar station, situated on the top of a small, low hill east of the ridgeline, proved to be composed of a tall mesh radar antenna mounted on a flatbed trailer and connected by thick wires to a radio van and a generator van. A disconnected prime mover truck was parked on lower ground, along with a pair of army trucks, while a pair of large tents were erected at the foot of the hill. Hugo was able to see as well the dark outline of a small building atop the hill.

"Hmm! This has all the appearances of a temporary setup. That mobile radar set is probably filling in until more permanent equipment can be brought in, possibly once that big bunker under construction is completed. My bet is that this future bunker is destined to house a large coastal artillery gun."

"Should we quietly get rid of the operators of that radar station now, Herr Leutnant?" Asked Franz Stein, making Hugo shake his head while pointing at a small group of men standing in front of one of the tents and smoking cigarettes while chatting in English.

"Not yet! We will visit them later on, when most of them will be asleep. There is also that small building near the radar antenna. It could very well be a visual observation post for artillery spotters...which would mean that there actually are operational artillery guns on this peninsula. Let's find them first. We will now go towards the southern shoreline of the peninsula and follow it westward. That way, we are liable to encounter any gun position located to cover the approaches to Boston Harbor."

Again taking the lead after marking the radar station on a rough, hand-made map of the peninsula, Hugo went southward through the light vegetation and dispersed trees covering this part of the peninsula. Soon arriving at the ledge of a low cliff marking the southern shoreline, he then turned right and started following the ledge, more cautious than ever. After maybe 400 meters of stealthy advance, Hugo stopped and crouched behind a bush while signaling by hand for his men to stop and crouch. Using his wide lens binoculars, he saw in fair detail what had attracted his attention: a big towed gun set on a wide concrete pad, with its split towing trails opened and spread. The gun was facing southeast and had a fine view of all of the Bay of Massachusetts. A row of camouflaged tents stood behind and to one side of the gun, with two medium army trucks parked beside the tents. Two sentries stood next to the towed gun, chatting while watching the sea. Hugo silently pointed the gun position to his men, then signaled them to bypass it from the rear. It took a good fifteen minutes to complete that move but Hugo was in no real hurry: for him now, stealth was much more important than speed. That in fact allowed him to find a second, similar towed gun position about 200 meters further west, without being detected or triggering a single cry of alarm. He also was able to see at the same time a second giant excavation site near the southern end of the ridgeline. Noting the position of that gun and of the second construction site as well on his crude map, Hugo continued westward, skirting the foot of the hill dominating the two towed gun positions. Beyond that hill, the coastline twisted north, with a sort of valley sandwiched between the ridgeline containing the gun casemates under construction and a steep hill forming the western corner of East Point. More construction equipment and supplies were stored in that valley, while concrete buildings under construction and rows of tents were also in evidence. The whole peninsula was proving quickly to be the site of some major construction project, probably the building of coastal artillery gun casemates destined to protect Boston Harbor.

Hugo was still quickly sketching the construction sites and tent groups on his map when Michel Drücker lightly tapped his shoulder and pointed at something in the distance, a couple of kilometers directly to the West.

“Leutnant, there is something really big over there. Look at those two distant white patches on the eastern slopes of that far hill. I believe that I also just saw the tip of burning cigarettes from those white patches.”

"Alright, let's look at them."

Taking out again his night binoculars, Hugo examined for a long moment the two white patches, which now appeared to him far from inoffensive through his lenses.

"Bingo! Those two white patches are in reality the concrete faces of big gun casemates looking southeast towards the open sea. I see two dark masses in the middle of those concrete faces that must be heavy coastal guns. As well, I can see an observation and spotting tower behind that battery, with a whole village's worth of lit buildings behind and to the right of the gun casemates. This has all the looks of a coastal fort."

While still observing, Hugo started thinking furiously about his next moves. His men however stayed silent, being used to his tactical style and knowing better than to bother him at such a moment. He finally lowered his binoculars and made a sign for his men to gather close to him, then spoke in a low voice.

"Those coastal gun casemates are now our top priority targets, along with the radar station we saw earlier. There however appears to be a sizeable garrison lodged near those gun casemates, thus we can expect a quick and fierce reaction once we start blowing shit up over there. Before that happens, I want to eliminate the enemy soldiers in the eastern half of the peninsula that could block our withdrawal route. That will also give us a chance to go grab some dynamite at the construction site. Let's go back to the two towed gun positions: they will be our first objectives. We will use only silenced weapons or knives until further notice."

Going back to the nearest of the two towed gun positions took a mere ten minutes, now that they knew the terrain better. Most of the crew of that towed gun, a 155mm piece, was now asleep, with their tents obscure, leaving two bored sentries standing and chatting near the field gun. Evaluating quickly the distances and the ground, Hugo sent Heinrich Bayerlein and Karl Haussmann to perform left and right hooks around the gun position, in order to kill the sentries from close range. Taking his four remaining men with him, he then slowly approached the two darkened tents, from which snores could be heard. Cautiously looking in turn inside both tents by raising slightly a rear flap, he counted the number of occupied camp cots inside them, then waited for Bayerlein and Haussmann to complete their job. That didn't take long, with both American sentries killed with silenced pistols from a distance of merely three meters. With the way now free, Hugo waited for his two men to return to the group, then

led them quietly inside one of the two tents, his silenced pistol in his hand. At a single word from him, seven pistols coughed once, with three pistols shooting a second time a second later to finish executing the artillerymen sleeping in that tent. Going next to the other tent, they found only three sleeping men there, which were executed as well. Using his red-filtered flashlight afterwards to inspect the inside of the second tent, Hugo found an American Army detailed map of the Boston area on a folding table, covered with transparent plastic and bearing a number of symbols written with felt pens. There was also a heavy HF radio set on that same table, along with a radio log book and a notepad. Noting down in his own notepad the frequency on which the radio was tuned, Hugo then eagerly grabbed the 1:10,000 scale military map and examined the symbols and markings on it, grinning nearly at once.

"Hey, guys, the gun battery we saw to the West is part of a Fort Ruckman and is called Battery Gardner. I also see a lot of other potential juicy targets for us within a few miles from here, enough in fact to keep us busy for a couple of days. I will try to contact by radio the U-800 to pass some information and ask for a delay in pickup. In the meantime, each of you will grab an American Army overcoat that can fit, along with a steel helmet, rifle and web gear: we may need to go around Boston in disguise. We will also use one of the two medium trucks here to go around. Stein, search the dead Americans and their uniforms for possible interesting documents, likes lists of passwords and radio call signs. Grab as well all the American cash money and field rations you can find: they could prove useful during the next couple of days."

"I'm on it, Herr Leutnant!"

As his men got busy, Hugo sat at the table supporting the HF radio transceiver and changed its frequency, tuning it to the frequency used by the U-800, then put on the ear set and grabbed the microphone, pressing the 'talk' switch and speaking in German.

"Silent Wolf, this is Lander, over."

Hugo had to repeat his call another two times before finally getting a response in German.

"Lander, this is Silent Wolf. Go ahead, over!"

"From Lander, request a two-day delay in pickup at alternate site Bravo. We will have some extra work to do here, over."

There was a slight delay before a new voice, that of Otto Kretschmer, answered him.

"This is Silent Wolf. Two-day delay and pickup at site Bravo accepted. Anything else, over?"

"Affirmative, Silent Wolf! Main big sticks located on Nahant Peninsula, Hog Island and Outer Brewster Island. Control centers for floating eggs on Great Brewster Island and Deer Island. That's all for the time being, over."

"I copy your information, Lander. Good luck and out."

Satisfied, Hugo put down his ear set and microphone and changed back the frequency on the radio to the original one, then went to find an American overcoat, helmet and pistol belt for himself. That didn't take long, with Hugo also filling a U.S. Army haversack with field rations, on top of stuffing his captured map and notepad in it. Franz Stein had a smile on his face when he came to Hugo to hand him fourteen dollars in small bills and coins.

"Your portion of the money loot, Herr Leutnant. It seems that the soldiers of the U.S. Army are paid better than our own soldiers."

"Well, we were not exactly planning on stopping at some four star restaurant, Franz, so this should prove enough for our immediate needs. Let's hide the bodies first before we move on. We will take the truck after all the opposition to the East of here is taken care of. Our next objective is now the second towed gun position."

Leading his team eastward on foot, Hugo was approaching the other towed gun and its small camp fifteen minutes later. The sentries there didn't prove more vigilant than at the previous gun position and were quickly and silently dispatched, with their sleeping comrades also dying a minute later. The search of the dead men and of the tents yielded more cash money and rations, plus a pair of something that impressed Hugo quite a bit: hand-held transceiver radios which weighed about two and a half kilos each and were the size of a brick. Inspecting them quickly, he found a nomenclature plate on their back sides, along with a panel opening for a battery housing.

"SCR-536 AM Radio Transceiver... Hmm! This looks handy as hell. I'm buying!"

Looking around the tent, he soon found spare batteries, pocketing a few while giving the others, along with one of the hand radios, to his second-in-command.

"Here you go, Franz: this should prove quite useful."

"Indeed, Herr Leutnant! This is much lighter and handier than our own field radios."

"Then, let's tune them to a common frequency before we go visit that radar station."

While tuning them proved easy, the radios providing only a few preset frequencies to choose from, it took them longer to figure out how to switch them on, as they could not find an 'on/off' switch. Hugo finally found the trick when his radio came alive after he pulled out the short telescopic antenna.

"Aaah, here we go! How do you read me, over?"

Stein, who had walked a few paces away, also pulled up his antenna and spoke.

"I hear you loud and clear!"

"Excellent! Close your radio, then let's go!"

Now loaded quite heavily, with captured enemy equipment and uniforms added to their original loads, the seven Germans left the now lifeless gun position and walked towards the East-northeast, where the tall, rotating antenna of the radar station was barely visible in the dark. Once near the improvised station, Hugo decided to eliminate first the men who were sleeping, before taking care of the operators on shift. Again, that proved to be nearly child's play for the experienced assault troopers, with all fifteen Americans manning both the radar station and the adjacent coastal artillery observation post being quietly killed in less than twenty minutes. Eagerly inspecting the inside of the radar van while his men got rid of the bodies, Hugo found inside one drawer something that made him grin.

"SCR-270 Radar Set Operating and Technical Manual... Yes! Come here, baby!"

Putting the precious technical manual in his haversack after quickly leafing through it, Hugo felt a surge of satisfaction: just that manual and the hand-held radio he now had would qualify his present mission as a great success. However, there was still more to do, a lot more.

02:41 (New York Time)

Monday, March 16, 1942

Battery Gardner, Fort Ruckman

Nahant Peninsula, Boston area

Crawling quietly up the earthen slope leading to the wide opening in the concrete face of the southern bunker, from which jutted out the huge barrel of a twelve inch gun, Hugo stopped just below the bottom ledge of the opening and waited for Michel Drücker

to be also ready and in position at the other end of the gun embrasure. Checking one last time that the silencer at the end of the barrel of his MP-41 submachine gun was well screwed in place and that his safety catch was off, the young officer slowly cocked his weapon and went to a crouched position. With the light that came from inside the gun casemate, his subordinate was easily able to see him and he imitated him, then rushed through the wide embrasure with his MP-41 pointed when Hugo gave the signal to do so. All the men of Hugo's squad were now in German camouflaged combat uniform and field kit and were carrying only ammunition and explosives, having left the rest of their kits and supplies in the captured GMC 2½-ton medium truck they had driven and then parked in a hide well behind and to the north of Fort Ruckman, under the guard of Gefreiter Otto Lang. One lone American artilleryman was present inside the gun casemate at this late hour, busy greasing the gears of the gun's carriage, when Margraff and Drücker jumped inside. The unlucky young man barely had time to notice the two Germans before being killed outright by a short burst in the chest fired by Drücker, burst that sounded like a number of Champagne bottles being opened in quick succession. First checking quickly that nobody else was present in the gun position, Hugo then spoke briefly in the SCR-536 radio he was carrying.

"Southern gun casemate secured! Take the northern casemate now!"

"Going in now!" Replied Franz Stein a second later. While Drücker hid the dead American by throwing his body out by the embrasure, Hugo took position behind the steel door of the casemate, covering him in case someone walked in. A someone did walk in then, a soldier wearing a mechanic's coverall and carrying a tool kit in one hand. The American's eyes widened on seeing Drücker and his mouth started opening as well, but three bullets pierced his upper chest from behind before he could scream. It was then the turn of Hugo to drag the body to the embrasure and then thrown it out. Returning to the door, now guarded by Drücker, he patted gently his left shoulder.

"At the count of three, we both jump out in the main corridor. You face left, I face right. Shoot at once any American in sight. I know that there should not be too many of them left awake at such an hour, but let's not take any chances. One...two...three!"

Opening the steel door in a flash and letting his subaltern jump out first, Hugo followed him half a second later, his silenced MP-41 pointed. Both found themselves in a long, wide and high-ceiling concrete corridor with a set of rail tracks embedded in the concrete floor and running the length of the corridor. Overhead electrical lamps provided strong illumination, which showed to the Germans that nobody was in sight, while they could

hear only the noise of the central ventilation system. Looking down at the rails, Hugo saw that a bifurcation and switching system allowed what had to be shell and powder carts to enter the gun casemate through a set of heavy double steel doors. Closing back the smaller door he had just used, Hugo then pointed down the corridor towards the northern casemate.

“The ammunition magazines must be situated between the two gun casemates, in this direction. Follow me and cover my back.”

“Understood, Herr Leutnant!” Replied Drücker, keeping his voice very low, so that his German words would not reverberate down the concrete corridor. That made Hugo think about it for a second.

“On second thought, let’s speak English for the moment: it will sound much less suspicious from a distance to any American still up and awake.”

Advancing cautiously down the corridor, the two Germans soon started passing by a number of steel doors, each of which conveniently carried a plate identifying the room or rooms it gave access to. Hugo tensed up on seeing a door marked as ‘personnel quarters’ and kept his submachine gun pointed at it while he walked past it, but nobody came out of it, thankfully. He however sucked air up on arriving at a set of doors, including those of a cargo lift and of a hoist shaft marked as giving access to the twelve inch ammunition magazines. Opening the smaller door of the set, Hugo saw that he was now looking inside a large concrete room with huge shells piled along its walls. An overhead crane system and a series of rail carts occupied much of the rest of the room. Seeing a side door to his left, he went through it and found himself in a wide circular well with a steel staircase going down in it. Telling Drücker to stay on the top level, Hugo quickly went down the staircase, his jackboots clanking on the steel stairs. He went down three full levels, finding at each level a steel door that gave access to either a shell room or a powder magazine. Having seen enough, he went back up and joined up with his subaltern. He was quite happy to find Drücker in the company of his remaining men.

“Aaah, Stein! It is nice to see you. Any problems so far?”

“None, Herr Leutnant! Most of the garrison must be asleep, while those on watch are probably inside the command center. We saw the door to that center on our way to here and it was closed.”

“Excellent! I want Bayerlein and Haussmann to stay here, inside the top level ammo room, to watch our back and kill any American that will show up. The rest of us will split and start planting explosive charges on each magazine level, among the shells and powder bags. Hide the charges well, so that the Americans can’t find them easily and disarm them. Use the dynamite and detonators we stole and set the timers to ignite in one hour from now, at four o’clock sharp. Once that is done, we will place further charges to sabotage each of the big guns, then we will get the hell out of here and join Lang at the truck. Go!”

Working quickly while making sure that things were done correctly, all the magazine levels were finished rigging with explosive charges on timers a good forty minutes before the critical hour, with no Americans showing up to disturb them. That last fact did not surprise Hugo, at least not anymore: the American soldiers were evidently still thinking like peacetime soldiers, with long-entrenched habits and rigid regulations that were detrimental to combat alertness and sense of initiative. One example of that was the seemingly widespread practice by American soldiers of smoking in the open while standing sentry duty, something that would have promptly warranted a boot up the ass of any German sentry caught doing so by his NCO or officer. Splitting in two groups of three again, the Brandenburg men installed more explosive charges under the two big twelve inch guns of Battery Gardner and in the ready ammunition rooms adjacent to them. Even though everything apparently went smoothly, Hugo was more than happy to leave the fort by the gun embrasures and walk away with his men into the night: the place was going to become very bad to one’s health in less than 25 minutes. Twenty minutes later, his team was driving down the road connecting the peninsula with the coast.

04:01 (New York Time)

Fire Control Tower 130

Nahant Peninsula

Captain William Bartlett, wanting to shake his legs a bit, got up from behind his duty desk inside the top level of Fire Control Tower 130. He then walked through the blackout curtain that masked the light from the duty section from showing outside through the observation slit of Battery Gardner’s command post. Inside the observation

section of the top level, he found the two artillerymen on watch duty peering through their optical scopes and rangefinders.

“Anything, guys?”

“Absolutely nothing except for the announced ship traffic, sir.” Replied Sergeant Greg Lasker, who was manning the rangefinder. “Is this U-800 for real, sir? How could one single submarine supposedly cause so much damage?”

“Well, we did lose eight destroyers and Fort Williams in Portland, didn’t we?”

“Then, why aren’t we on full combat alert here, sir? Why are we still only at Condition 2 instead of Condition 1?”

Bartlett shrugged at that pointed question, which was sensible enough.

“That was not my decision, Sergeant Lasker. You will have to raise that subject with the Sector Commander. He seems...”

The 340 tons of shells and powder charges stored in the magazines of Battery Gardner then erupted in a titanic, sub-kilotonic explosion. The shock wave hit the fire control tower in a fraction of a second, entering it through its observation slits and instantly killing its occupants, the overpressure bursting their lungs and stomach. A second later, a 46-ton fragment from the reinforced concrete roof of Battery Gardner, blown up high by the explosion, hit the tower sideways with tremendous force, reducing its top half to rubble. More concrete and steel debris rained down all over the Nahant Peninsula, with some even landing inside the coastline.

On the coastal road going through the town of Lynn, eight kilometers to the northeast of Boston, Hugo Margraff was watching intently the Nahant Peninsula, with frequent looks at his watch, while sitting in the front cab of his captured truck, now temporarily stopped on one side of the road. He was starting to grow worried when Battery Gardner finally blew up in a spectacular fireworks display. Pumping his fist in triumph, he then grinned to his driver, Gefreiter Herman Weiss.

“Let’s roll, Weiss: we have more mayhem to cause around Boston.”

CHAPTER 14 – LENDING A HELPING HAND

09:55 (New York Time)

Monday, March 16, 1942

Control room of the U-800

Cruising submerged at schnorchel depth off the Bay of Massachusetts

U.S. East Coast waters

Otto Kretschmer was having a nap in his cabin when the ship's telephone fixed to the partition near the head of his bed rang. Accustomed to have his sleep interrupted frequently by his boat's business, Otto took a deep breath to wake up, then grabbed the telephone's handset and spoke in it.

"Captain speaking!"

"This is Leutnant Spielberger, Herr Kapitän. We just intercepted a message from the U-503 to the U-Boote Command: it has been seriously damaged by a patrol aircraft and is in trouble off Cape Cod."

"I'm coming!" Replied at once Otto, who put down the receiver before swinging his legs out of his bed and starting to dress quickly. Less than two minutes later, he was joining Spielberger at the sides of their chart table, on which the young lieutenant pointed a location to the east of Cape Cod to Otto.

"This is the location given by the U-503, Herr Kapitän. According to the message we intercepted, the U-503 is now unable to dive and also can move on only one diesel engine. It is trying to sail to Lorient by itself but they are rating their own chances to arrive alone as minimal."

Grabbing a compass, Otto measured quickly the distance between the two submarines and made a mental calculation.

"We could be there in about eight hours, just before sunset, at our maximum schnorchel speed. We may encounter an hornets' nest once there and I want us to arrive with a full battery charge. Steer a course for the U-503 at fourteen knots, Leutnant."

"Yes, Herr Kapitän!"

Next, Otto grabbed a ship's intercom microphone and switched it to ship-wide call.

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain speaking! We will now leave temporarily our patrol area to go lend a hand to our comrades of the U-503, who are in trouble off Cape Cod. Doctor List, be ready to receive possible combat casualties in about eight hours. We will go to battle stations in seven hours, or earlier if we encounter enemy ships or planes on the way."

Hooking back the microphone, Otto reviewed mentally what he knew about the U-503. It was a Type IXC long range submarine that had been commissioned less than a year ago. Its captain, Kapitänleutnant Otto Gericke, was a bit older than Otto but was a beginner as a submarine skipper, being presently on his first war patrol. Gericke and his crew had probably been taken by surprise by enemy patrol planes through lack of experience or vigilance, or both. A couple of years ago, Otto would have looked severely at such failings, but his years of combat experience had taught him that no human being was infallible, including himself. While still insistent about proper conduct and discipline, Otto was now ready to accept minor mistakes, as long as the culprit learned from the experience. He next thought about the kind of situation he was going to find when he would join up with the U-503. If the patrol plane that damaged it saw it stay on the surface, then it was a certainty that more planes and possibly some warships would come to try sinking for good the submarine. Either he was going to find a patch of sea covered with debris, or he would find one big pack of troubles.

17:50 (New York Time)

Control room of U-800, at schnorchel depth

East of Cape Cod, coast of Massachusetts

"HERR KAPITÄN, I HAVE BOTH SURFACE AND AIR CONTACTS!"

Erik Junker's call attracted at once Otto to his radar station, where a number of blips were showing on the operator's PPI¹⁴ display. Junker then pointed in succession at each of the five dots on his screen.

¹⁴ PPI : Plan Position Indicator, or PPI, is the type of electronic display used in modern radar systems, with a round display showing both azimuth and distance of targets, contrary to older oscilloscope displays, which used two separate linear displays. PPI displays were first used by the Germans in WW2.

"This immobile dot ahead of us is most probably the U-503, Herr Kapitän: it is on the surface, is hardly moving and is trying to head East. The other surface dot, coming in at over thirty knots and presently nineteen kilometers from us, must be an American destroyer called in by a patrol aircraft. Of the three air contacts I have, two of them are probably patrol bombers heading for the U-503 to finish it off. The third one, a big and slow aircraft, seems to be circling overhead of the U-503. In fact, it is both very big and quite slow for a plane. I don't know exactly how to classify it."

Otto thought about that for a moment while fixing the large blip on the radar screen. A smile then appeared on his face.

"A blimp! It must be a coastal patrol blimp. Their low speed and long endurance actually makes them ideal for anti-submarine work. If we don't want it to trail us after this, we will have to shoot it down, if it proves low enough for our gunners to hit it. Those two patrol bombers, when will they arrive over the U-503, Herr Junkers?"

"In maybe four minutes, well ahead of us, Herr Kapitän. The U-503 may well be sunk before we can get to it."

"Then, at the least, we will be able to save its crew. Let's hope that those bombers will prove lousy at bomb aiming."

Not believing himself his own pious wish, Otto then returned to the tactical plot table, where he marked the location of the U-503 and of the oncoming American destroyer on the situation plot. Next, he grabbed an intercom microphone and switched it to ship-wide broadcasting.

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain! We are soon going to engage in combat against both an incoming destroyer and against enemy airplanes. Gunners are to make themselves ready now to man their guns, both our deck gun and our anti-aircraft guns, as soon as we surface. I also want the rescue team ready to get on the open deck as soon as we are up. We may have only minutes to recuperate and save our comrades from the U-503, so you will have to work fast. I am however confident that all of you will perform your duties in the competent, professional manner that I have come to expect from you. Captain out!"

Going next to the electronic warfare section, aft of the control room, Otto bent over the operator manning the radio listening station, Josef Knocke.

"Can you hear the American planes heading for the U-503, Herr Knocke?"

"I sure can, Herr Kapitän!" Replied Knocke, smiling while looking up at Otto. "Two of them keep babbling all the time on the radio like a couple of busybodies. They

just sighted visually the U-503 and say that visibility is fair to poor. The third aircraft present has a rather unusual call sign: ZNP-K-4. It is communicating on the radio in a rather more disciplined manner with the American destroyer rushing towards the U-503.”

“ZNP-K-4... That must be the coastal patrol blimp we have presently on radar above the U-503. Do your best to jam its radio transmissions from now on, along with those of the two American bombers.”

“Will do, Herr Kapitän!”

With that taken care of, Otto took a few steps to stand near the passive hydrophone station’s operator.

“Can you hear that incoming American destroyer, Hartmann?”

“Hell yes, sir! It must be pushing its engines to the limit. On the other hand, it will be impossible for him to hear anything with his sonar until he slows down drastically.”

“Good! That should give us the element of surprise for the engagement to come.”

Michel Hartmann raised an eyebrow at those last words: for a submarine commander to plan to attack a destroyer while enemy planes were overhead would have been described by many German submariners as ‘suicidal’. However, they were here to try to help comrade submariners in difficulty, while Otto Kretschmer’s legendary tactical prowess made him one of the rare submarine commanders who could possibly pull such a stunt and survive it.

Otto, returning inside the control room, waited another few minutes, until Erik Junker announced that the two American bombers were now heading back towards the coast after attacking the U-503. Once they were at a safe distance, Otto raised his watch periscope, hoping fervently that the U-503 had survived the aerial attack. He felt some relief on seeing in the distance the low silhouette of the Type IXC submarine still floating on the surface. However, it had a definite list to port and seemed to be slowly sinking by the stern. Cranking up the optical lens of the periscope to survey the sky, he saw at first only a thick, low cloud cover. On his second tour of the horizon, a big gray mass suddenly appeared in his field of view, floating just below the cloud cover.

“I HAVE AN AMERICAN PATROL BLIMP TO OUR TWO O’CLOCK, FLYING AT AN ALTITUDE OF AT MOST 2,000 METERS. I WANT OUR GUNNERS TO SHOOT IT

DOWN AS SOON AS WE ARE ON THE SURFACE. HELM, PULL UP ON THE DIVE PLANES! BLOW THE BALLASTS! SURFACE! SURFACE!”

The crew of the control room obeyed at once quickly but also methodically and efficiently, soon making the 4,300 ton submarine burst through the surface of the sea.

Some 1,700 meters above the waves, the crew of the U.S. Navy patrol blimp ZNP-K-4 were watching intently the German submarine they had first discovered and then hunted down, when one of the observers shouted out a surprised warning.

“ANOTHER SUBMARINE JUST CAME UP ON THE SURFACE TO OUR SEVEN O’CLOCK, MAYBE HALF A MILE FROM THE FIRST SUBMARINE.”

The pilot of the ZNP-K-4, Lieutenant-Commander John Bisset, twisted his neck to look at the newcomer and couldn’t help let out an exclamation.

“Holy shit! Look at that mother! It is like nothing I have seen before. Reynolds, grab your camera quickly and start taking picture of this baby. I bet that Navy Intelligence will want to learn about it.”

As one of the observers hurried to get his camera, Bisset examined avidly the submarine that was now approaching the U-503. Its hull shape was completely different from those of other known submarines, being well rounded and streamlined, like the body of a killer whale or of a sperm whale. Its conning tower was also finely streamlined and was quite larger and longer than usual, giving a racy silhouette to the submarine. A tall vertical rudder fin stuck out of the water at the stern, completing a very unusual shape he had never seen before. At first, Bisset saw no guns on the deck of the submarine, but that changed soon...for the worst.

“What the hell? I can see two gun mounts now appearing on the decks of that sub, apparently coming up from under deck wells.”

His copilot, who had grabbed binoculars and was looking down at the newcomer, suddenly swore out loud.

“SHIT, THOSE MOUNTS ARE ANTI-AIRCRAFT CANNONS! WE BETTER GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!”

Bisset, knowing full well how vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire his big, lumbering blimp was at low altitude, didn’t argue with that and started at once a turn to the right, while pushing his two radial piston engines to maximum power. Despite his best efforts, however, a thick stream of tracer shells bracketed his blimp, followed by a second burst that hit its target. A number of shells pierced the gas envelope of the blimp, making helium gas

escape from holes and rips, while more shells hit the command and control nacelle suspended under the sausage-shaped gas balloon. Two sharp explosions and a scream of pain told Bisset at once that he had been seriously hit. A third burst then hit his port side engine, on top of piercing more holes in the balloon. With one engine on fire and with his blimp starting to slowly lose altitude, Bisset realized that he would never make it all the way back to the coast. That left him only one viable option.

"WE'RE GOING DOWN, GUYS! I'M GOING TO STEER TOWARDS THE U.S.S. MAYO, WHICH IS NOW ONLY FIVE MILES AWAY. REYNOLDS, WHATEVER HAPPEN, MAKE SURE THAT YOUR CAMERA AND ITS FILMS ARE NOT LOST. SEAL THEM IN A WATER-TIGHT BAG!"

"ON IT, SIR!"

"CLARK, CHECK ON THE CREW! WHO WAS WOUNDED AND HOW BAD?"

"IT'S MARANZANO, SIR: HE'S DEAD!"

Tightening his jaws, Bisset had a last look at the mystery submarine, which had stopped firing at him and was now nearly side by side with the first German submarine.

"You will pay for this one day, you kraut, I promise!"

On the surface, Otto didn't waste time celebrating his latest victory: the hard part of this job was still ahead. While the weather was relatively fair for a March day in the North Atlantic, the waves were still quite strong and the wind, presently blowing at maybe thirty kilometers per hour, gave signs that it was picking up strength, with dark clouds on the horizon. To make things even harder, the Sun was about to set and would force him very soon to work in the dark, in a moonless night. Adding the fact that an American destroyer would soon show up, it all promised a frantic, risky rescue work. He would probably have clapped hands if he had known that the American blimp he had shot up was going to delay by precious minutes the arrival of the said destroyer by ditching beside it in the sea, forcing the destroyer to stop in order to retrieve the crew of the blimp. Climbing up to the open bridge of the U-800, Otto grabbed a signal lamp and started sending a visual message to the U-503.

'To U-503, from U-800: state status and prepare to transfer your crew to me.'

Thankfully, someone occupied the kiosk of the damaged submarine and he got a lamp message response after less than a minute.

'From U-503: am sinking slowly by the stern. Batteries leaking toxic vapors and diesel room flooding. Have number of wounded men. My men will start coming on deck for evacuation. Thank you for coming, U-800.'

Knowing that time was now counted, Otto didn't take the time to reply to that, instead giving orders via the bridge intercom system.

"Attention all hands! Secure from gunnery stations! All rescue teams on deck! Prepare to put our row boat and one inflatable boat in the water: we will use ropes to run a ferry operation between the two submarines. Make it quick, men: time is short."

His experienced crewmen went to work at once. First lowering back the two anti-aircraft quad 20mm cannon mounts back into their under deck storage wells, his sailors then pulled out on deck the four meter dinghy stored in an aft deck well, plus one large inflatable raft taken out of the forward access airlock room. Tying ropes to both ends of the dinghy and of the inflatable and holding the stern ropes, Otto's men quickly put the two boats in the choppy, freezing waters beating against the flanks of the U-800. The men of the U-503 could have at the worst jumped into the sea with their life jackets and swim to the U-800, but the icy waters would more than probably claim a number of them through hypothermia, while the wounded would be nearly assured of dying. Otto thus wanted those men to stay as dry as possible by running his two boats like small ferries. With four men in each of the two boats paddling energetically, the boats quickly covered the twenty or so meters now separating the two submarines, with the rowers throwing to men on the deck of the U-503 the ropes attached to their bow. With strong pulling teams at each end and ready to run the boats back and forth between the two submarines, the first wounded men started loading up in the boats after less than six minutes. Here, another unusual feature of the masterfully designed U-800 helped in no little measure. Gustav Premingen, evidently bent on making the U-800 as easy to operate and as comfortable as possible, had added on each side sets of access stairs between the upper deck and the waterline of the submarine, stairs that were covered by hydrodynamic, streamlined covers when not in use. Those stairs, meant to facilitate the transfer of personnel and supplies arriving by small boats, now proved priceless, making the transfer of the wounded men from the U-503 so much more easy and saving precious minutes. Roundly conducted, the ferry operation succeeded in bringing aboard the U-800 a total of 41 men in less than twenty minutes. By the time that the last man from the U-503, its captain, arrived aboard the U-800, the U-503's stern aft was completely under water. Otto went on the forward deck to personally greet the captain

of the U-503, Kapitänleutnant Otto Gericke. Gericke, a man in his mid-thirties with a youthful face, saluted Otto as soon as he stepped on the deck to face him.

“Permission to come aboard, Herr Kapitän!”

“Permission granted! Have you lost men in those air attacks? I counted only forty men, apart from you, who came aboard.”

Gericke’s shoulders sagged and he lowered a bit his head before answering.

“Seven of my men were overcome by acid fumes from our damaged batteries inside the engines compartment. We tried to get them out but that resulted only in five more men being sickened by vapors before the incoming water forced us to seal the compartment.”

“We will have time to mourn them later, after we leave: an American destroyer is approaching and should be here at any time now. In fact, I am surprised that it is not here yet. Have you secured or destroyed your codes and your Enigma¹⁵ machine?”

Otto, who had assumed that Gericke would have taken that elementary security precaution, tightened his jaw when he saw his fellow officer hesitate, his eyes becoming shifty.

“I...I gave the order to do so, but I didn’t actually see it being done.”

Doing his best not to explode, Otto stared hard at Gericke for a moment, then twisted his head to shout an order at his men present on deck.

“MAN THE MAIN GUN! SCUTTLE THE U-503! QUICKLY!”

Otto then returned his eyes on Gericke, who had stiffened on hearing him shout.

“Get inside, Kapitänleutnant Gericke: we will discuss this later.”

Gericke saluted him again, then went to the opened forward access hatch of the conning tower. Temporarily taking his mind off that incident, Otto then looked on as his gunners manned their 10.5 centimeter deck gun and started pumping shells into the U-503 from a distance of twenty meters, aiming at the waterline. In the meantime, other crewmen stowed back into place the dinghy and the inflatable boat, readying the U-800 for a quick dive. After four shells, the sinking rate of the U-503 increased noticeably, but Otto ordered his men to fire more shells, wanting to insure that the Americans would have no

¹⁵ Enigma : Name of the cryptographic machine used by German forces in WW2 to encode high level radio messages. Deemed by the Germans as impossible to decypher, Enigma traffic was actually decoded by the Allies as early as 1940. That decoding operation was codenamed ‘ULTRA’ and was the Allies’ best kept secret of the war.

chances of capturing the precious codes and Enigma machine aboard the U-503. The Type IX submarine finally shook for a last time after the seventh shell had hit it, then disappeared for good under the waves. Now satisfied, Otto motioned to his gunners with one arm.

“STOW BACK THE GUN UNDER THE DECK, THEN GET INSIDE AT THE DOUBLE!”

By then, the Sun had set and Otto could hardly see anything around his submarine. A sudden flash of light from a distance on his starboard side made his head snap around as the last of his gunners was running inside the conning tower. That flash was followed a few seconds later by the scream of a shell passing overhead: that American destroyer was finally arriving and was probably shooting with the help of its radar. Otto ran inside the forward airlock compartment of the conning tower and closed and locked the heavy access hatch before slapping the intercom button located near the hatch.

“DIVE! DIVE! DIVE!”

Letting a crewman who had been waiting by the interior hatch close it behind him, Otto ran to the control room and shouted more orders.

“DIVING PLANES FULL DOWN! ELECTRIC MOTORS TO MAXIMUM POWER! TURN NINETY DEGREES TO STARBOARD AS SOON AS WE ARE FULLY SUBMERGED!”

“AYE, KAPITÄN!”

As he went to the attack periscope, which was presently down in its storage well, Otto realized that Gericke was standing in the back of the control room, apparently unsure what to do. Ignoring him from the moment, Otto grabbed the tube of the attack periscope, using it to stay on his feet as his submarine quickly adopted a fifty degree nose-down angle while accelerating. The helmsman then turned hard to starboard, making the U-800 perform a tight diving turn that a dive bomber pilot would have applauded.

“CALL UP DEPTH AND SPEED AT TEN SECOND INTERVALS!”

“PASSING 120 METERS! SPEED: TWELVE KNOTS!... NOW PASSING 230 METERS! SPEED: SEVENTEEN KNOTS!”

“PULL UP FROM DIVE ONCE AT 300 METERS! CONTINUE ACCELERATING!”

“AYE, KAPITÄN!... NOW PASSING 300 METERS, PULLING UP DIVING PLANES. SPEED: 21 KNOTS!... WE ARE NOW LEVEL AT 360 METERS. SPEED: 26

KNOTS!... SPEED: 31 KNOTS! WE ARE NOW AT OUR MAXIMUM SPEED, HERR KAPITÄN."

Otto Gericke, still standing in his corner and watching, opened his eyes wide in disbelief on hearing the last announcement from the helmsman.

"You can do 31 knots underwater? But...that's incredible!"

"Welcome aboard the U-800, Kapitänleutnant Gericke." Said Otto, his tone sarcastic. He waited about two minutes as his submarine took its distances from its previous surface location, then gave more orders.

"SLOW DOWN TO THREE KNOTS! TURN TO HEADING 290! SONAR, START LISTENING ON PASSIVE MODE: TELL ME WHERE THAT DESTROYER IS NOW."

As if to answer him, a series of distant underwater explosions started reverberating through the hull of the U-800, with the senior sonar operator speaking up after a few more seconds.

"The enemy destroyer is dropping depth charges blind all over the zone where we were on the surface, Herr Kapitän. That destroyer is now at around our one o'clock and has lowered its speed considerably, probably in order to be able to use its sonar. Herr Kapitän, I am also picking up a distant group of ships coming our way from the South. From the power of their machinery and their speed, I would classify them as warships."

Otto raised an eyebrow on hearing those words, immediately interested.

"Concentrate on that group of warships, Herr Grote. Helm, take Heading 190, start rising gradually and as quietly as possible to periscope depth."

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!"

Gericke gave Otto an alarmed look then: most U-boote commanders would have stayed away from an enemy flotilla, instead of getting near it.

"You are going to attack those warships?"

Having grown quite annoyed at him by now, Otto nodded his head, then looked at Franz Streib.

"Leutnant Streib, please escort Kapitänleutnant Gericke and his officers to the officers' wardroom, so that they can have some hot coffee. See also that the men of the U-503 are led to the cafeteria for some hot drinks and food."

"Right away, Herr Kapitän."

Soon, Otto found himself able to concentrate properly on his plan of attack as his submarine slowly rose towards the surface like a silent shark. The American destroyer that had dropped depth charges for many minutes had apparently abandoned its attacks by now, giving up after failing to make sonar contact with its prey. Otto however promised himself that this destroyer would soon become his prey. What his senior sonar operator said after a moment of concentrated listening to their 'Gross Balkon' hydrophone array lit up his mind at once.

"Herr Kapitän, I can now better identify those approaching warships. They are doing approximately fifteen knots and I can count over a dozen ship signatures, including machinery and screw noises from four heavy units."

"A surface battle group!" Said Otto, a ferocious grin appearing on his face. "A perfect target to avenge the U-503. Torpedo officer, load all tubes with G7e eels, then flood the tubes in advance. Once the tubes will be emptied, reload with G7a eels: we will be dealing with a swarm of angry warships buzzing around or trying to escape."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän."

As his men worked feverishly to obey his orders, Otto felt at peace despite the fact that he was going into combat again: at least this time he was going to attack men able to defend themselves, contrary to merchant navy sailors, who were basically sitting ducks when faced with a submarine. Also, sinking more enemy warships meant that those warships would not be able anymore to fire at Germans in the future. Otto did understand full well how important it was for Germany to be able to strangle the economy of Great Britain by cutting its maritime lifelines, but sinking enemy warships, especially destroyers and other escort ships, would in turn make the job of other German submariners that much easier.

"Herr Kapitän, I can now tell that the enemy is approaching in three parallel columns, with the heavy units in the center column."

"Good! Guide Herr Schültz at the helm and help him position us to pass between two of the columns, with our nose pointing at the center column."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän."

Letting his men do their job without interference while watching attentively, Otto was soon able to hear by himself the noises from big propellers passing nearby and reverberating through the hull of the U-800. With the night on and with no Moon to illuminate the ships' wakes, there was no point in going up to the forward underwater

observation dome. He however had another mean to accurately fire his torpedoes, a mean that he had not used up to now since the U-800 had entered service.

"Herr Wittgenstein, use our 'Nibelung' fire control system to calculate solutions for our torpedoes. Launch eels as you finalize each solution. I want four eels each from the forward tubes against the two leading enemy heavy units and two eels each from the aft tubes against two of the destroyers of the eastern column."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän! Initiating Nibelung attack procedures!"

Using the acoustic signatures detected by their Gross Balkon passive hydrophone array, Ulrich von Wittgenstein then used their S-Gerat active sonar, firing directional sound 'pings' to find the precise distance, heading, speed and direction of travel of each of his targets. Without raising a periscope mast once above the surface, the U-800 started firing volleys of torpedoes within a minute, with the enemy ships still apparently unaware of the presence of the submarine in their midst, less than 400 meters from the center column. That last point did not surprise Otto, though: the vaunted ASDIC used by the Allies became nearly useless when travelling at high speeds, with the screw and machinery noises blanketing any sounds it could have picked up. Thus, a well-handled diesel-electric submarine sitting in a silent ambush position would nearly always end up on top against a hunting surface ship. The key words were however 'well-handled', something that was not always the case. Twenty seconds after the first torpedo launches, a series of distant underwater explosions was heard through the hull of the submarine, making its crew cheer: they had marked the first hits against enemy ships tonight. Out of the twelve torpedoes of the first salvo, a satisfying total of eleven found their mark, distributed among four separate targets. As the men in both the bow and stern torpedo rooms worked frantically to reload the twelve torpedo tubes, Otto moved discreetly his submarine to aft of the second enemy heavy unit that had been hit. He soon had the hissing, sinking big hull of that enemy warship nearly on top of him, making in turn the U-800 nearly impossible to detect by ASDIC. Using fully that opportunity, Otto stayed in that position, reloading his torpedo tubes while the American destroyers went amok, speeding up and pinging their sonar sets like madmen all over the place. Some of them even threw depth charges in the water but were careful not to drop them close to where sailors from torpedoed ships were swimming in the frigid water. The operator manning the radio intercept/DF station of the electronic warfare section then called via intercom to give news that made Otto grin in triumph.

"Herr Kapitän, the enemy just sent a mayday message in clear on the radio. It said 'U.S.S. WASHINGTON, U.S.S. WASP and two destroyers torpedoed by German submarine 26 miles south of Cape Cod. WASP sinking, WASHINGTON gravely damaged, destroyer LANG broken in two and destroyer MADISON dead in the water'."

"Gott und Himmel! We hit a battleship and a fleet carrier! Let's make sure that they get to the bottom. Leutnant Spielberger, light up our infrared external projectors and check if you can then see our targets from our forward observation dome."

"I'm on it, Herr Kapitän!"

The young lieutenant scrambled up the ladder leading up to the forward observation dome and reported less than a minute later via intercom, excitement in his voice.

"I can see clearly the hull bottom sections of the enemy ships through my infrared scope, Herr Kapitän. One large ship, possibly a cruiser, has left the central column in order to avoid the carrier and is going to pass by us, close to our stern."

"Excellent! He will be our next target. Herr Wittgenstein, how are we doing with the reloading of our tubes?"

"We will need another four minutes before our first four bow tubes are reloaded, plus another twelve minutes until all tubes are reloaded, Herr Kapitän."

"Well, it will have to do. Reserve those four first bow tubes for that cruiser. Sonar, what do you hear on your hydrophones?"

"A cacophony of ASDIC pings all over the place, Herr Kapitän. These guys are stepping on each others' toes and are not following a group search pattern. It's amateur night out there!"

Otto chuckled at that last remark.

"Then, show them how things are done. Track that approaching cruiser and pass its bearing to the helm and the tactical plot table: we will follow it and shoot at it as soon as we have tubes reloaded."

"I'm on it, Herr Kapitän!"

On the heavy cruiser U.S.S. WICHITA, the second-in-command of Task Force 39, Rear Admiral Robert C. Giffen, was swearing under his breath as he contemplated the disastrous situation in which the task force found itself now. Formed in order to go to Great Britain to help the British in the North Atlantic and relieve some of the pressure on the hard-pressed Royal Navy, Task Force 39 represented a sizeable part of what was left of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, which had suffered some stinging losses in the last few

months, thanks to German submarines. Or should he say 'a German submarine'? The latest intelligence and operational reports concerning that dreaded U-800 had shaken Giffen, but not as much as he was now, with the fleet carrier U.S.S. WASP about to capsize in the heavy seas thanks to four solid torpedo hits that had flooded its machinery space and had cut all internal power. As for the battleship U.S.S. WASHINGTON, it was now making way at a much reduced speed due to part of its engine rooms having been flooded. Giffen's dilemma was that Admiral Wilcox, the task force commander, had reportedly been killed or had fallen overboard, which technically put Giffen in charge of TF 39. Did he continue with his diminished force towards Boston, as planned, leaving behind the WASP, or did he stay with the carrier to defend it and save its crew? He finally decided to leave behind three destroyers, leaving him five intact destroyers to protect his remaining ships from the submarine or submarines that had attacked the task force. The one thing that he did not realize or thought about was that, by staying at a relatively high speed of fourteen knots, he was preventing his destroyers from being able to operate their sonar sets effectively. He was in the process of passing on new orders to his task force when a tremendous shock jarred the whole 14,000 ton heavy cruiser, sending Giffen down on his knees on the deck of his bridge. A second, then a third shock and explosion followed in quick succession, all hits apparently being around the stern area. Getting up on his feet, his first reaction was to step out on the open bridge wing to survey visually his ship. He could not see much at first in the dark night, with the wind and salt spray further impeding his vision. Then, he realized with a shock that the stern part of his cruiser had broken off and was quickly sinking: his ship was now doomed, however way he looked at it. As he stood on the bridge wing, he was able to see three torpedoes explode against the port flank of the U.S.S. WASHINGTON. That was too much for the already wounded battleship, commissioned less than a year ago. Its last working engines gone, it slowly stopped while starting to sink by the bow. As furious as this scene made him, Giffen knew that he now had no choice but to give an order he never imagined that he would ever give in his naval career.

"CAPTAIN ALEXANDER, HAVE THE CREW ABANDON SHIP!"

18:45 (New York Time)

Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot Annex

Hingham, South Boston area

"Finally, soldiers who look and act professional. I was getting tired of this amateur show."

Herman Weiss, sitting behind the wheel of their captured U.S. Army medium truck parked at a dark street corner, smiled as he looked at his officer.

"You really want the enemy to be professional, Herr Leutnant? The more amateur they are, the easier it is for us."

"True!" Said Hugo Margraff, disguised like his men to look like an American soldier. "However, it is a lot more satisfying professionally to overcome a competent enemy rather than to slaughter a bunch of klutzes. With this said, however, I think it is time to do our move. Get your silenced-pistol ready and within easy reach."

Hugo, checking first his own silenced P-38 pistol, then twisted his head to speak through the small rear window of the cab to his other men, sitting in the rear cargo compartment of the GMC truck.

"We are going to enter the ammunition depot by a secondary gate guarded by two soldiers. We will use silenced weapons and knives only until I say otherwise. Me and Weiss will take care of the sentries, but be ready to act if more American soldiers suddenly show up. Speak only in English for the time being."

Looking back at his driver, Hugo pointed the gate that they had been observing from a distance for nearly half a hour.

"Okay, let's roll! Once at the gate, turn into the entrance and then stop, level with the sentries."

"You're the boss, Loutenant!" Replied Weiss, exaggerating his American accent. In reality, Weiss could speak English to perfection, without accent, and could also sound like a true British man. His disguise, like that of Hugo and of the other Brandenburg men, was however good only for a glance at night, as they had simply draped American Army greatcoats over their German combat uniforms and temporarily replaced their German helmets with helmets taken from dead American soldiers. Engaging gears, Weiss rolled out of its parking spot and turned on the street that ran parallel to the limits of the ammunition depot annex, which were marked by a ten foot-high chain link fence topped with barbed wire. On the opposite side of the street from the depot were a long row of warehouses and fenced commercial storage yards. Thankfully for Hugo and his men, this area had little to no residential buildings, meaning that there were precious few potential witnesses to spot them and give the alert around. Hugo had actually spent the whole day rolling around the Boston area, doing visual reconnaissance in passing of the

various locations of interest marked on his captured U.S. Army map as being government installations or public facilities. In this, that map had proved to be utterly priceless, saving him a lot of blind prodding around the city. Now, he had a detailed list of the targets he wanted to strike tonight, along with numerous written down notes about them, the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot and Annex being the first and most important on his list.

As Weiss rolled at moderate speed towards the guarded gate, 300 meters ahead, Hugo examined again the ammunition depot annex, mentally choosing the first spots where he would plant explosive charges. The annex, recently built as an enlargement of the naval ammunition depot, consisted of rows of big, well spaced and illuminated concrete storage bunkers linked together by a network of paved roads and connected to the main depot and nearby South Boston Port by a rail line terminal, complete with loading cranes and loading docks. The annex and depot proper, which was situated next to it, covered a good four kilometer square of surface and had to contain thousands of tons of ammunition and explosives, enough to devastate most of South Boston if set up to explode. Even if they could manage to destroy only this depot tonight, it would be enough by itself to constitute a crippling blow to the contribution of Boston to the American war effort. Hugo took his mind off that just before Weiss turned into the secondary gate driveway and stopped as planned, level with the two sentries, who stood on each side of the driveway in front of a steel pole gate. The sentry on Weiss' side, who wore the rank insignias of a corporal and was armed with a Thompson .45 caliber submachine gun, eyed the truck markings suspiciously before addressing Weiss.

"What are you doing here, buddy? This is a Navy installation, not an army depot! Army trucks have no business here."

"You're right, Corporal: my mistake!" Replied Weiss before raising in a flash his silenced pistol and shooting the guard in the chest from a distance of three meters. Hugo followed suit half a second later, shooting the other sentry in the head before he could react. He then jumped out of the cab and started dragging the man he had killed towards the small gate guard shack.

"Do as I do, Weiss: let's hide their bodies inside that shack."

Weiss jumped out at once and dragged the dead corporal inside the shack, piling his body over that of the other sentry. Looking at the insignias on the dead man's uniform, he pointed them to Hugo.

"Look at those patches, Leutnant: they were Marines, not Army soldiers."

"That would explain why they were instantly suspicious about us. You were right, Weiss: maybe I prefer my American opponents to be amateurs rather than professionals. I think that I will grab that Thompson submachine gun and its spare magazines: they could prove useful in the near future."

"Shouldn't we post two of our men here while we are inside, Leutnant? Leaving that gate apparently unguarded is bound to attract attention rather quickly."

"Gefreiter¹⁶ Weiss, you are right, again. Remind me later to recommend you for promotion to obergefreiter. Tell Bayerlein and Haussmann to come out and take the place of the sentries."

"Yes, Leutnant!"

Taking a minute to brief Bayerlein and Haussmann about what to do in case of visitors showing at the gate and also to inspect their disguises, Hugo then got back in the truck with Weiss, with the GMC rolling down and turning into the outer loop road linking nearly half of the ammunition storage bunkers in the depot annex. Stopping in front of the first bunker, Hugo quickly got out and ran to the steel double doors of the semi-buried bunker to inspect them. He found no lock or chains blocking the doors, so cracked open one of the heavy door panels and walked inside, grabbing his flashlight and lighting it to see around him. His heart nearly jumped out of his chest when he saw the long, deep rows of huge shells piled high on each side of the central alley.

"Mein Gott! Battleship shells, hundreds of them!"

Going to the nearest shell and examining it, he found markings on them.

"Fourteen inch shells! This should make quite a nice bang."

Running back outside, he went to the back of the truck, where his men were nervously waiting for his orders.

"Lang, you go inside that bunker to our left and hide an explosive charge among the shells stored in there. Make sure to place enough explosives to set off those shells: they are fourteen inch battleship gun shells and have a rather thick steel body. Set the

¹⁶ Gefreiter : Rank equivalent to 'corporal'. Obergefreiter is the equivalent of 'master corporal'.

fuse to explode in two hours. Drücker, you go do the same in the bunker to our right. Once you two are done, advance by two bunkers and repeat the process. We will use first what is left of the dynamite we found in the Nahant Peninsula. If you find raw explosives in a bunker, then tell me at once, so that we can loot part of it for our use. Me and Stein will take care of the two next bunkers, while Weiss will stay with the truck and keep watch around us. Let's get to work!"

The next forty minutes or so passed like a blur for the Brandenburg men, who stealthily ran from bunker to bunker and placed explosive charges. To Hugo's relief and content, Gefreiter Lang stumbled on a bunker full of one pound TNT blocks and ten pound TNT demolition packs probably meant to be used by navy clearance divers to destroy beach obstacles. That bunker also contained hundreds of spools of electric initiation wires and of so-called 'death chord', flexible plastic tubes filled with explosives meant to initiate chains of explosive charges, plus boxes and boxes of detonators. Hugo didn't hesitate then and took ten minutes of their precious time to load as much of those explosives, detonators and death chord spools as he could in the GMC truck before continuing to plant explosive charges inside the bunkers of the depot annex. As his men were placing charges inside the last bunkers of the annex, Hugo looked at the buildings of the adjacent naval ammunition depot complex, which included manufacturing and warhead filling facilities, debating if he should take the time to go plant explosives there as well. He finally decided against it, as some of the buildings seemed to be in operation, probably manned by an evening shift. Those buildings could also have guards around them, thus increasing the risk that his team be discovered before the charges they have placed could detonate. Beside, once the bunkers of the annex started to blow up, the depot complex itself would become too dangerous to work in it and could very well be destroyed by the blasts of exploding ammunition in the annex. He thus had his men get back in their truck and rolled back to the secondary gate where Bayerlein and Hausmann were still playing the role of American sentries. To Hugo's surprise and shock, he saw that three more dead Americans were piled up inside the guard shack.

"What the hell happened here, Bayerlein?"

"Oh, just one Marine sergeant who showed up with a pair of men meant to relieve the guards we killed, Herr Leutnant. Thankfully, they were too slow to react and

didn't have time to raise the alarm. By the way, we recuperated two more Thompson submachine guns, along with this."

Hugo grinned on seeing the backpack radio that Bayerlein presented him.

"Excellent! This will give us the possibility of listening on to enemy radio chat. Alright, get in the back of the truck...and please don't smoke inside!"

Climbing aboard the cargo compartment of the truck, the two soldiers quickly understood the warning given to them by their young officer, with Bayerlein exclaiming out loud.

"Himmel! We have enough here to blow half of Boston!"

"Not quite, Bayerlein, but we did rig enough charges to ammunition piles here in this depot to effectively blow up half of Boston." Replied Franz Stein with a smile. "In about one hour, it will be decidedly unhealthy to be around here."

"So, what's our next stop, Unteroffizier?"

"The naval yard fuel depot annex, in East Boston. We will go light a nice bonfire there."

"Yes! It is somewhat cold tonight and I wouldn't mind something to warm myself up."

The men then fell silent as their truck started rolling again.

In the front cab, Hugo Margraff used his captured map to help guide Weiss through the large metropolitan Boston area. They first went westward, leaving Hingham along Highway 3A and going through Weymouth, then Quincy, joining Highway 93 and then turning north towards downtown Boston and its adjacent Seaport District. To get to their next target, the Boston Naval Yard Fuel Depot Annex, they needed to cross the downtown area and pass the Charlestown Bridge to go into Charlestown, where they would be able to cross the Highway One bridge into Chelsea and get to the fuel depot in East Boston. As they were temporarily stopped at a red light on the corner of Boylston Street and Tremont Street, Hugo's eyes suddenly fell on a big khaki army staff car that came from his right and was about to turn north on Tremont Street: it sported a red plate with three silver stars hooked to its front bumper! Reacting purely by instinct, he pointed at once the staff car to Herman Weiss.

"That khaki staff car: follow it and don't lose it!"

Weiss didn't respond verbally but obeyed him at once, passing the intersection as soon as the light was green and accelerating to catch up with the staff car, then slowing down to keep a discreet distance. While doing that, his pre-war experience as a taxi driver in

Berlin proved quite handy indeed and he managed to stay within sight of the staff car without being noticed. As they were passing by the Boston Common Park, near the state capitol, the staff car turned left on Park Street, following it up to Beacon Street, which ran across the front of the Massachusetts State House. There, the staff car turned right on Beacon Street, then nearly immediately left, rolling along the eastern façade of the State House before turning into what had to be a parking lot reserved for politicians and important visitors at the back of the building. All the while, Herman Weiss followed from a respectful distance, slowing down further when he saw the staff car enter the reserved parking lot of the State House. By then, Hugo Margraff had a good idea about why that general officer was here: it could only be to meet with the Governor of the State of Massachusetts. Taking a quick decision, Hugo gave an order to Weiss.

“Don’t turn into that parking lot yet! Continue for maybe a hundred meters, then turn around to come back to the parking lot to enter it.”

“Understood, Herr Leutnant!”

Rolling until the next street intersection, Weiss went around a small park at the back of the State House and returned to the reserved parking lot, where the staff car they had been following was parked near a rear entrance. A policeman watching the parking lot came at a near run when the GMC truck entered the lot and started to back up to take a parking spot next to the staff car.

“HEY, YOU CAN’T PARK HERE! THIS LOT IS RESERVED FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE STATE HOUSE AND THEIR GUESTS.”

“I’m sorry, officer,” replied Hugo while stepping out of the cab, “but I have an important and urgent message to deliver to the General. Where could I find him?”

The policeman hesitated for a moment while glancing at the staff car parked nearby, but finally answered Hugo, who still wore the greatcoat and cap of the American lieutenant he had killed in the Nahant Peninsula.

“Uh, General Drum came to meet with the Governor in his office.”

“And where is the Governor’s office, please?”

“The Governor’s offices occupy the west end of the main building, on the third floor, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, sir!”

As the policeman returned to his post at the eastern entrance of the parking lot, Hugo went to the back of his truck, where he spoke in a near whisper to his men.

"We have a Lieutenant General Drum presently meeting with the Governor of the state of Massachusetts. We are going to crash that meeting, but I want live prisoners as much as possible. We will trick our way inside, then will shed our disguises. If we are to attack the Massachusetts State House, then we will do it as German soldiers. Unteroffizier Stein, I will call you on your hand-held radio once the way inside is free. Then, rush in with the men, but keep the silencers on your weapons. Weiss will stay here and guard the truck. Questions?"

"No, sir!"

"Good! Change now and be ready to run inside."

With that said, Hugo then went to the staff car and bent down to look at the driver, a sergeant. The latter stiffened on seeing the rank insignias on Hugo's American greatcoat and promptly saluted him while still sitting behind the wheel.

"Lieutenant? What can I do for you?"

"Nothing really." Replied Hugo before raising his pistol and shooting the sergeant in the head from point blank range. Rearranging the dead man's posture so that he would appear to be sleeping, Hugo then hid back his silenced pistol in a pocket of his coat and readjusted the silenced MP-41 submachine gun he carried in his back before walking towards the rear entrance of the State House, where two policemen were on guard duty. The two policemen watched him approach but didn't react suspiciously to him, allowing Hugo to get within three steps of them before he raised his pistol again and shot both men in less than a second, hitting them in the head and killing them instantly. Looking quickly around him to ensure that nobody had witnessed that, he grabbed his captured hand-held radio and pulled its antenna out before speaking.

"Margraff to Stein: the way is clear. You can come in."

"On our way!"

As he watched his men discreetly come out of their truck and then running at a crouch towards the rear entrance while using parked cars as partial cover, Hugo started shedding his American greatcoat and replaced his captured service cap with his German steel helmet. Once his men had joined him, he pointed the two dead policemen to them.

Let's hide those bodies first, then we will go in. The Governor's offices are on the third floor of the west side of the main building. We will have to do things quickly, as I expect the alarm to be given soon. Have one man bring back my American coat and cap to the truck, then come back."

“Understood, Herr Leutnant! Lang, take care of the Leutnant’s disguise. Drücker and Bayerlein, you go hide those bodies.”

Two more minutes and the whole group was back together and ready. Taking a deep breath first, Hugo then opened the rear door and jumped inside, his MP-41 at the ready. He found himself inside a well illuminated sort of lobby, with an opened door at the end of the room that seemingly connected with a large decorated rotunda. A man sitting behind a desk to the left of the entrance and wearing the uniform of some kind of security guard nearly jumped out of his chair on seeing Hugo’s German uniform. The latter shot him dead before he could scream or grab the telephone on the desk. Going quickly to that desk, Hugo ripped out the telephone wire as his men ran towards the open door to the rotunda. Running to take back the lead, Hugo quickly glanced past the door and around the rotunda to check for people. Seeing no one but catching a glimpse to his far left of a staircase going up, he signaled his men to follow him before sprinting towards that staircase. The second and third person they saw were two more security guards posted in a large rotunda lobby facing the main entrances to the building. Those men, taken utterly by surprise, were also shot down mercilessly before they could shout the alert. Running up the stairs ahead of his men, Hugo nearly collided with a young civilian man carrying a pile of documents, who was about to come down the stairs. The horrified look that came to his face was frozen in place by a bullet to the forehead that exploded the back of his skull. Hugo stepped on the second floor, only to face a terrified woman who had just been sprayed by the blood and gore from the young man that had preceded her and who was about to scream with horror. Running to her, Hugo slapped his open hand over her mouth and pressed the muzzle of his submachine gun under her chin.

“Where is the Governor’s office? Speak or you die!”

The woman’s eyes rolled in their sockets as she visibly fought to stop her urge to scream. Apparently unable to speak right away, she raised her right index and pointed to a set of double doors to Hugo’s left.

“That’s the entrance to the Governor’s offices? But, we are only on the second floor! I was told that the offices were on the third floor. Are you trying to trick me?”

The woman desperately shook her head, then managed her first words.

“This is the third floor, sir. The building changed since it was built but they kept calling it the third floor.”

"Thank you!" Said Hugo before punching her hard on the chin, knocking her out and projecting her backward down to the floor. She was going to have a hell of a bruise and would possibly lose a couple of teeth, but that was still better than being killed. Somehow, he still had problems with killing women. Posting one of his men near the top of the stairs in order to cover his back, Hugo ran to the set of double doors, pushing them open and bursting inside a sort of anteroom where a mature woman sat behind a desk, typing a letter. She immediately froze with fear and her mouth opened as if to scream. Hugo prevented that by shoving the muzzle of his silenced submachine gun inside her mouth, then smiled and spoke in a polite tone to the secretary.

"Can I have an appointment with the Governor, like right now, miss?"

Her eyes as wide as saucers, the woman slowly raised a shaking left hand, pointing at a polished wood door with shiny brass handle.

"Thank you!"

Hugo ripped off the wire of the secretary's telephone before entering with four of his men a large, comfortable, finely furnished and decorated office. Inside, he found three men in civilian suits and one man in army uniform discussing around a low coffee table in one corner while sitting in padded sofas. Raising and pointing his MP-41, he nearly barked a warning.

"THE FIRST MAN TO SCREAM OR TO TRY GIVING THE ALARM IS DEAD!"

While the face of the man in army uniform, who had gray hair and who sported three rows of medal ribbons on his left chest, reddened with fury, the three civilians became suddenly pale and hurriedly raised their hands up. Walking to them and with his men covering him from multiple angles, Hugo went first to the army officer, who wore the three stars of a lieutenant general on his epaulettes, and took away the pistol he wore in a belt holster.

"Lieutenant General Drum, I presume?"

"How dare you coming here, you young bastard?" Spat the American general. Hugo stared back into his eyes and replied in a calm voice.

"Who dares win! Now, get face down on the carpet and put your hands in your back, or I will kill you right where you stand, General."

Furious but unwilling to trigger what could turn into a massacre, Drum slowly obeyed him and went down on his belly. As one of his men quickly tied up and gagged the general, Hugo pointed his submachine gun at the three civilians.

"Present yourselves, gentlemen!"

One of the men, a tall, thin one with a distinguished air, spoke first, doing his best not to sound intimidated.

"I am Leverett Saltonstall, Governor of the State of Massachusetts. Why are you doing this? Are you planning to kill us?"

"Me, kill you? No, Governor: I am planning to leave with you and the general, at the least. Now, please get on your belly."

The Governor obeyed him reluctantly, allowing Hugo to face one of the two remaining civilian men. That one spoke at once even before Hugo to ask him, fear apparent on his face.

"I'm Senator David Ignatius Walsh. The one to my left is the Mayor of Boston, Maurice Tobin."

Hugo stared hard at him for a few seconds: that one seemed like it would be quite easy to interrogate him.

"A senator will also make a good catch. Get down on your belly! You too, Mayor Tobin! Unteroffizier Stein, we will bring the general, the governor and the senator with us. Tie their hands but not their feet and gag them. As for the mayor, we will leave him behind, so tie his feet as well."

"Yavoll, Herr Leutnant!"

As the politicians were being tied and gagged, Hugo bent down over Mayor Tobin and spoke to him.

"Mayor Tobin, you will be able to tell your government that it better starts thinking about how many Germans presently held in American jails it would be ready to exchange in order to get back your governor and your senator. As for General Drum, he will stay in Germany for the duration of the war."

"You really believe that you will be able to escape us?"

"Why not? It has been quite easy up to now: you Americans are quite soft as soldiers."

Hugo then shoved a handkerchief inside Tobin's mouth, gagging him. Getting back up, he signaled his men to grab their three prisoners and to put them back on their feet.

"Time to go, men!"

Leading his men and the prisoners, Hugo passed by the man he had posted near the staircase and started going down, taking some advance on his group. Down at the level of the entrance rotunda, he found a small group of civilian men and women

watching one man who was checking out one of the dead security guards. A woman in the lot saw him first and screamed, becoming hysterical in an instant.

“NAZIS! NAZI SOLDIERS ARE HERE, IN BOSTON! EEEK!”

Before he could even threaten them, the group dispersed at once at a run, disappearing through the various doors around the rotunda. Unwilling to simply murder a whole bunch of civilians and knowing that the alert would now be given anyway, Hugo led them flee and urged his group to hurry down the stairs. Thankfully, no one else confronted them afterwards inside the building and they were able to go out and walk to their truck, where the three prisoners were unceremoniously pulled up and inside the canvas-covered cargo compartment. Getting back in the cab of the truck, Hugo pointed the nearby street.

“Go! Direction: the naval fuel depot.”

Herman Weiss engaged at once his truck into gears, his engine already running, and pushed hard on the accelerator. Just as they were exiting the parking lot of the State House, the night sky to the Southeast suddenly lit up with a series of huge flashes that kept lighting up on the horizon. Maybe forty seconds later, the noise from titanic explosions started shaking the whole city, making Hugo grin with ferocious pleasure.

“The concert has now started, gentlemen. It should be quite a show to watch all night long. We just need to add a little bonfire to it to make it perfect.”

20:53 (New York Time)

Ammunition ship U.S.S. RAINIER (AE-5)

At dockside, South Boston Seaport District

The captain of the ammunition ship U.S.S. RAINIER, tied at dockside in the South Boston Seaport District, watched with horror as the continuous string of powerful explosions from the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot projected countless pieces of debris and unexploded ordnance all around, destroying or damaging buildings, starting fires and shaking the whole Boston area. The Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard, Fore River Shipyard and Victory Destroyer Plant, all close to the ammunition depot, must have been turned into hell grounds by now. While his ship was quite far from the ammunition depot, some debris and pieces of ordnance had already fallen as far as South Boston and its Seaport District, causing random fires and spreading panic. His ship had just finished being loaded with 5,000 tons of aircraft bombs, most of them being high-

capacity 500 and 1,000 pound general purpose bombs meant to be shipped to Great Britain, to be used there by the heavy bombers of the still forming United States Army 8th Air Force. Unfortunately, his ship had not yet being resupplied with fuel and food for the transatlantic trip to come and he was not ready to leave dockside yet, but wished right now that he could. One explosion bigger than the others then lit up the whole night sky, projecting more debris many kilometers up and away. The captain of the RAINIER instinctively ducked when a heavy shell flew over past his ship and fell in the water just off the Boston Downtown District, creating a big geyser of water. He was straightening up to look again when a sinister whistling noise froze his blood. While he was unable to see it coming, his eyes caught the flash caused by the impact of an unexploded fourteen inch caliber, half ton battleship shell, against the forward weather deck of his ship. The shell, armed by the acceleration imparted on it by the explosion that had sent it high up in the air, was initiated by its delayed impact fuse as it was plowing through the piles of aircraft bombs stored in the Number Two Hold of the U.S.S. RAINIER. Those high capacity general purpose bombs in turn exploded nearly as one into a titanic blast with a force of 2.3 kilotons, vaporizing the 13,855 ton ammunition ship and its crew. The fireball and blast wave in turn destroyed or heavily damaged the docks, ships and warehouses in the Seaport District, obliterating all the buildings within 600 meters and killing or gravely wounding everyone within one kilometer of the epicenter of the explosion. The water around the unfortunate U.S.S. RAINIER was evaporated instantly by the fireball, exposing momentarily the harbor floor and causing in turn a tsunami formed by water surging in to fill the void. That tsunami, reaching a height of fifteen meters, threw many ships docked across the bay in East Boston against their quays and damaged or even sank them. Thousands of Boston citizens who had been in front of their windows to watch the blasts from the Hingham ammunition depot were either killed, disfigured or blinded when their windows blew in their faces due to the shockwave from the explosion of the U.S.S. RAINIER. The debris that then rained all over the Boston area crashed through roofs, starting a multitude of fires around the city that instantly overwhelmed the city's fire department. The South Boston Army Base, covering 23 hectares of surface and situated adjacent to the Seaport District and its Army Port of Embarkation, was utterly destroyed by the gigantic blast, its warehouses and barracks blown away and its occupants, including some Army troops waiting to be shipped overseas, killed to the last.

The GMC medium truck carrying the Brandenburg men was nearing the Highway One bridge linking the Charlestown and Chelsea Districts, on its way to the Boston Naval Fuel Depot Annex in East Boston, when the U.S.S. RAINIER blew up. While greatly diminished by the distance, the shockwave hit the back of the truck nearly strongly enough to make Herman Weiss lose control of his vehicle, while the men inside the rear cargo compartment were blown into a pile against the front partition, on top of their three prisoners that had been laid on their belly on the floor of the compartment. The Germans picked themselves up with difficulty, swearing, as Weiss slowed down but continued on his way, to cross the bridge into Chelsea District.

"Mein Gott, that was much closer! What could it be?" Exclaimed young Heinrich Bayerlein while taking back his place on one of the side benches. Franz Stein, watching the huge fireball now rising above the Seaport District, understood quickly what had happened.

"Probably an ammunition ship hit by debris from the Hingham Ammunition Depot. Thousands of people must have died in that blast."

He said those last words with sorrow in his voice, as he fully realized the amount of pain that this explosion must have caused, even though he also understood how damaging to the American war effort this catastrophe was going to be.

16:27 (New York Time)

Tuesday, March 17, 1942

The Oval Office, White House

Washington, D.C.

Both Admiral King and General Marshall expected the President to lose his temper on hearing all the bad news coming from the East Coast. Surprisingly, Roosevelt didn't scream or banged his fist on top of his desk. Instead, he stared hard at his two top military commanders, with his chief of staff, Admiral Leahy, looking on from one side with Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox. Maybe the cascade of bad news from the last few months had inoculated him against more bad news.

"So, you are telling me that a handful of German soldiers landed by submarine on our East Coast was able to turn Boston into a disaster area, and this after having

blown up Fort Williams in Portland and Fort Ruckman, north of Boston? Is that it, General Marshall?"

The Army Chief of Staff, standing at attention with King in front of Roosevelt's presidential work desk, did his best not to show his embarrassment as he answered.

"Basically: yes, Mister President! From what we know about those soldiers, they are part of an elite unit of the German Army, the Brandenburg Regiment, which engages in sabotage, infiltration of enemy lines, raids deep in the enemy rear and the like. While their actions infuriate me, I must give them dues for daring and competence as soldiers. On the other hand, most of the men we use to defend our coasts, while brave and patriotic enough, have had only basic or even rudimentary training and had no prior experience of combat. Our coastal forces are also wholly insufficient to properly cover and protect all the ground they are tasked to defend and often have to use obsolete or inadequate equipment, Mister President. The truth is that we are presently trying to multiply the size of the Army by a factor of more than ten and are only half way at best in the process of training and equipping our new divisions. To stop the training of those divisions now to redeploy them along our coasts would prove very damaging in the long run in my opinion, Mister President."

"And what am I supposed to say in the meantime to the American public, especially to our citizens living along our East Coast, General? To hunker down and hope for those Germans to go away? By the way, do we know at least approximately where they are right now?"

"Not really, Mister President. Their last noted act of sabotage was the blowing up of the Boston Naval Fuel Depot Annex, at around ten o'clock last night. Since then, they have disappeared from sight. Some of my staffers believe that they have gone back aboard their submarine by now, with their three prisoners. I however gave orders to keep our coastal forces at maximum alert and to watch for any landings or embarkations along our shores, in case they are still on our soil."

Roosevelt grunted, apparently not very convinced, before looking at Admiral Ernest King, the head of the Navy.

"And that submarine that landed those soldiers, that U-800: why are your ships apparently incapable of finding and sinking it, Admiral King? We didn't have that much problem chasing other German submarines before, don't we?"

The irascible admiral tightened his jaws at first, keeping in the words he would have preferred to use now, and forced himself to speak in a calm voice.

"Mister President, you should understand that this U-800 is no ordinary German submarine. It is the prototype of a revolutionary class of boat that is vastly superior in performances and armament to any other submarine in the World. First, it is very heavily armed, with up to twelve torpedo tubes and with launch tubes for sea mines. It also carries aboard a very large quantity of torpedoes, more than forty if some are to believe, thus can stay on station along our coasts for extended periods of time. Secondly, it is a very quiet design equipped with advanced sonar systems, which makes it extremely difficult to locate when submerged. Third, and most important of all, is the fact that it has submerged speed, endurance and diving depth performances that we are still assessing but that are way superior to those of our own submarines...or to those of other known German submarines. During the last battle with the U-800 last night off Cape Cod, when it sank the battleship WASHINGTON, the carrier WASP, two cruisers, five destroyers and one destroyer tender of Task Force 39, one sonar operator on one of our surviving destroyers swore that he briefly detected the U-800 as it was speeding underwater at 25 knots or more."

All the others present stared in disbelief at King on hearing his last words, with Roosevelt speaking first after that.

"Twenty-five knots, underwater? How is that possible?"

"Our experts think that it has a lot to do with its hull shape, Mister President: it is highly streamlined and could be said to be looking like the race car of submarines. It is definitely a very impressive design, which I would love to know more about, so that we could improve our own submarine designs."

A nasty thought then came to Roosevelt's mind, who gave a cautious look at King.

"That U-800, you said that it was a prototype, Admiral. Do you have any information about more submarines like it being either built or in service in Germany right now?"

"We have no information about that, Mister President. Our intelligence services are however working on that as a high priority intelligence requirement. I do fervently hope that there are no other submarines like that U-800: it has already cost us some dreadful casualties in ships and men."

"Talking of casualties, what is the present status of Task Force 39, Admiral King? Prime Minister Churchill is still expecting it in Scapa Flow within three weeks."

King nearly lost control of his temper then, having had more than enough about British 'requests' and 'suggestions'.

"Mister President, Prime Minister Churchill can forget about Task Force 39, or indeed about any other American naval reinforcement for the moment. The sad truth is that we lost so many ships in the last few months due to German submarine activity along our coasts that we are now in no position to send warships to the aid of the Royal Navy."

King then continued right away, not letting time to Roosevelt to protest.

"Since last November, we lost a total of two light fleet carriers, two battleships, five cruisers, 22 destroyers, two destroyer tenders, four Coast Guard cutters, one supply ship, six large troopships and two minesweepers to German submarines along our East Coast, Mister President. We also lost dozens of merchant ships, including many tanker ships. In fact, I suspect that this U-800 may have done all that damage by itself alone. What is left of our Atlantic Fleet is presently grossly insufficient to protect our own coasts or even our merchant ships. To strip more ships in order to send them to Great Britain now would be completely irresponsible. Furthermore, with the destruction of the Boston Naval Ammunition Depot and of the Boston Naval Fuel Depot Annex, the port of Boston is presently unable to support major naval activities, while the entrance channel of the port of Portland and of Casco Bay is still blocked by ships sunk by mines three days ago. Worst still, with the loss of the Boston Ammunition Depot, we have lost our primary point of naval ammunition supply on the East Coast. I am sad to say that those German saboteurs did a masterful job in both Portland and Boston, Mister President."

The President's shoulders sagged on hearing so many bad news, news that he could not deny or ignore.

"Does anybody have any good news for me this afternoon, gentlemen?"

"I may have, Mister President." Answered King. "We have not detected any activity that could be connected to the U-800 or its team of saboteurs in over twelve hours. Those saboteurs may have gone back to the U-800, which may itself be on its way back to Germany after expending a godly amount of torpedoes during its cruise."

"I do hope that you are right, Admiral." Could only say Roosevelt, who then looked at his chief of staff. "Admiral Leahy, Mayor Tobin was told by these German raiders that Germany would be ready to return Governor Saltonstall and Senator Walsh in exchange for German nationals presently held in our jails. I want you to canvass the FBI and the Army to compile a list of Germans presently held in the United States or Canada, including especially any captured German spy. We will then start negotiations

with the Germans via our respective embassies in Spain. Oh, if any of these Germans is about to be executed for acts of sabotage or spying, suspend their execution at once.”

“I will get on it right after this, Mister President.”

“Good! Now, let’s discuss how we are going to help the people of Boston...”

21:55 (New York Time)

Beach shoreline, Salem area

North of Boston

Hugo Margraff, annoyed at hearing Lieutenant General Drum starting to mumble and twist around again while lying on his back behind a group of bushes, went to him and administered a hard knock to the groin of the American general, turning his mumbling into a muffled scream of pain.

“You really are having a hard time understanding your situation, General. If you continue like this, we will have to knock you unconscious and I don’t care how big the bruise will be on your head. Now, for the last time, stay still and be quiet!”

Hugo then went back to his initial place between two bushes, where he had been at the predetermined hour to send by flashlight a visual signal towards the sea that would tell the U-800 that they were present and ready to be picked up. Hopefully, the U-800 was also going to be present for the rendezvous and would signal back to him that they could put their rubber boat in the water and return to the submarine. At precisely ten o’clock by his watch, he raised his flashlight, its lens towards the sea, and made the prearranged signal, repeating it at every fifteen seconds intervals for one minute. To his immense relief, his signal was answered by a blinking light from the dark sea after his second signal, to which he sent a confirmation signal. Patting the shoulder of Franz Stein, he gave a short order to his men.

“Time to hit the water, men! Carry the boat to the waterline, then come back for the prisoners: I will watch them in the meantime.”

Stein and the five other soldiers under Hugo quickly grabbed their inflatable rubber boat and, lifting it from the sandy shoreline, ran with it to the waterline. With two men staying with the boat, Stein and four men soon returned to pick up and push their three American prisoners towards the boat, Hugo carrying the rear, ready to cover their retreat in the case someone spotted them. Thankfully, there was nobody else on this deserted stretch of beach and they were able to row away into the night, starting their outboard

engine once fifty meters off the beach. Using his compass to head towards where he had seen the light signal from the U-800, Hugo saw a low, long dark mass appear ahead of him on the water after a minute of sailing. Heading towards the port side boarding staircase of the submarine, his boat finally bumped gently against the steel hull of the U-800. Men present on deck immediately threw ropes to the Brandenburg men, who grabbed them and secured them to their boat, which was then pulled alongside and held in place. Franz Stein was the first to step on the submarine, in order to help the three prisoners come aboard. Once the three Americans and seven German commandos were safely on deck, their boat was pulled out of the water, in order to be stowed back inside the submarine. Otto Kretschmer, who had been watching the operation from the open bridge of the conning tower, came down to greet Hugo and his men with enthusiastic handshakes.

“Great job, men! We were able to watch the explosions and fires in Boston from out at sea. You really blew and burned your way through Boston!”

He then noticed a bit late the three prisoners, two of them wearing civilian suits, being pushed towards the opened forward access hatch.

“Uh, who are these three men, Leutnant Margraff?”

“Prisoners we took after storming the Massachusetts State House, Herr Kapitän. They are Lieutenant General Hugh Drum, Commander of the U.S. Eastern Theater of Operations, Governor Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts and Senator David Walsh, representing Massachusetts in Washington. We basically accidentally encountered the general's staff car as it was going to the State House and decided on a whim to follow it. I figure that the good Governor and Senator Walsh could be very useful in arranging an exchange with the Americans and thus get back some of our citizens presently held in the United States. As for General Drum, I believe that the Abwehr will be most happy to chat with him.”

“I guess so! Uh, if you find that my submarine is a more crowded place now, it is because we went to retrieve the crew of the U-503, which had been disabled by American aircraft bombs. We however made the U.S. Navy pay a high price in return for the loss of the U-503. Since I have now only five torpedoes left aboard and with so many more men to feed, I believe that it is now time for us to go back to Lorient. Again, great job, Leutnant!”

“Thank you, Herr Kapitän!”

Before going inside the submarine, Hugo had a last look in the direction of Boston, where multiple fires were still burning fiercely, including the one they had started at the Navy Fuel Depot Annex. He could truly say now that he had left his mark on the city.

CHAPTER 15 – A TALL ORDER

11:06 (Berlin Time)

Friday, April 3, 1942

Reich Chancellery, Berlin

Germany

Adolf Hitler, already in a meeting with his new armament minister, Albert Speer, made a happy smile and got up from his chair as his military aide let Admiral Karl Dönitz and Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of the Abwehr¹⁷, inside his huge private office.

“Aaah, my dear Dönitz! I must say that your U-800 has brought us some really nice news lately.”

Dönitz, giving the Nazi salute to Hitler, bowed slightly to acknowledge the compliment.

“Admiral Canaris and me in fact came in to bring you a little gift from the U-800’s latest war patrol, Mein Führer.”

“Oh? I can’t wait to see what you brought me. By the way, I don’t believe that you have yet met with the new Minister of Armaments, Herr Albert Speer. We were in fact in the process of discussing the attribution of priorities in armaments production.”

“Then, my timing was indeed perfect, Mein Führer.” Said Dönitz before shaking hands with Speer, a tall and solidly built man in his forties wearing a Nazi Party uniform. Hitler was however rather less warm in receiving Canaris, whom he suspected of not being truly dedicated to the Nazi cause. The four men then sat down around a low round table set in a corner of the office, where Hitler ordered tea to be served. Sitting down in a padded easy chair, Hitler looked inquiringly at Dönitz.

“So, what do you have for me, my dear Dönitz?”

“I have this for you, Mein Führer, while Admiral Canaris recently received something via Cuba that should brighten your day.”

Now truly curious, Hitler took the leather-bound photo album given to him by Dönitz and the file handed out by Canaris, opening first the photo album. His eyes widened and a grin appeared on his face when he saw that the album was full of large pictures of

¹⁷ Abwehr : German military intelligence service during World War 2.

sinking warships, alongside with pictures and short descriptions of the same ship when intact and sailing or in port.

“These are all the American warships the U-800 sank during its last patrol, Admiral?”

“They are indeed, Mein Führer. Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer of the U-800 took pictures of the ships he attacked, while more photos were provided via the services of Admiral Canaris, who has a friendly contact in the United States who was able to take pictures on the spot. In total, the U-800 has sunk during this war patrol a total of over 116,000 tons of American warships, including one light fleet aircraft carrier and one battleship. It also sank a total of 57,000 tons of merchant ships. As for the accomplishments of the soldiers of the Brandenburg Regiment embarked on the U-800 and which conducted raids along the American East Coast, the Americans did their best to censor their medias and prevent the true extent of the damages caused by our soldiers to be known by the American public and by us. However, those damages were too great to be hidden. The Spanish Military Attachés in both Washington and in Havana were able to secure newspapers and pictures concerning those coastal raids and they sent copies to us via Spain. Admiral Canaris’ services compiled and analyzed their reports and pictures and produced this file that you now have, Mein Führer.”

Already deeply impressed by what he had seen about the results obtained by the U-800, Hitler opened the file given by Canaris. The first thing he saw were two photos clipped side-by-side inside the file. One showed Boston from the air, probably before the war. The other was dated from March 18 and had been taken by an aircraft flying over the Boston area. In it, the whole area around the Hingham and Seaport Districts was flattened and blackened, with a huge, partially submerged crater visible on the South Boston waterfront. There was also a large number of fires around those districts, plus a huge fire in the East Boston District that covered nearly the whole city with a thick black cloud of smoke. An ecstatic grin came on Hitler’s face as he examined the picture of ravaged Boston.

“Mein Gott! A fleet of bombers would hardly be able to cause this much damage. This is fantastic! Do we know exactly what level of damage our soldiers did in Boston?”

“Our analysts were able to estimate the extent and size of those damages by reviewing the pictures taken by the Spanish Attaché and by interviewing our soldiers on their return to Lorient, Mein Führer.” Answered Wilhelm Canaris. “The charges set up by our soldiers completely destroyed Fort Ruckman, north of Boston Harbor, the Boston

Naval Ammunition Depot, which was the main ammunition supply point for the American Atlantic Fleet, plus the Boston Naval Fuel Depot Annex. The exploding ammunition stored in the naval depot in turn caused massive collateral damages to three nearby shipyards: the Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard, the Fore River Shipyard and the Victory Destroyer Plant, all of which produced both warships and merchant ships. An ammunition ship that was tied at dockside in the Seaport District was apparently hit by some debris or falling ordnance from the ammunition depot and then exploded, devastating everything within nearly one kilometer and also destroying the nearby American Army base used to ship troops and supplies overseas. Overall, our soldiers basically took Boston out of the American war effort for months, on top of forcing the Americans to devote massive amounts of efforts and men in order to help the disaster-stricken city.”

Hitler was left speechless for a moment, overwhelmed by joy.

“This...this is incredible! Such feats must be rewarded properly!”

“I fully agree, Mein Führer. Those men have however already stated their wish to be able to sail again with the U-800 when it will leave for its fourth war patrol. It seems that they and Korvettenkapitan Kretschmer work quite well together.”

“Granted!” Said Hitler at once. “Anything else?”

“Yes, Mein Führer! My services are presently interrogating at length but in a legal manner Lieutenant General Drum, who was the commander in charge of American Army forces stationed along the American East Coast. He has refused to give us any information to date, but one of the politicians who were also captured in Boston, a Senator Walsh, was actually much more malleable and easy to trick and unwittingly gave us some precious information about military contracts and bases constructions around the state of Massachusetts. Concerning those two captured politicians, the Americans gave to our ambassador in Madrid a list of the German nationals presently held in the United States or Canada and who they would be ready to give back in exchange for the return of their two politicians. I believe that the proper decisions concerning that kind of exchange are out of the competences of my Abwehr, so I brought you the list provided by the Americans. My analysts made notes when appropriate beside the names of the Germans listed in it. Here is that list.”

Hitler took the list offered by Canaris and scanned it quickly. He did a double-take when his eyes fell on a particular name.

"Herr Karl Schumann, the big industrialist and Party member who was doing business out of Mexico? How did he end up in an American jail?"

Canaris made a bitter smile then, having been surprised himself on seeing that name.

"It seems that Mexico, like many supposedly neutral countries in the Caribbean Basin, Central and South America, have allowed the United States to grab our citizens living or working in their countries and deport them to the United States, where they are now held in jails, Mein Führer."

A flash of anger appeared in Hitler's eyes at those words and he became agitated, waving the list in front of him.

"If these countries want to play the hypocrites with us, then they will pay for it! As for the good Herr Schumann, he will certainly figure prominently on the list of persons we want back from the Americans. Thank you for bringing me that list, Admiral Canaris. Admiral Dönitz, when are you planning to send the U-800 back to sea?"

"In about a month, Mein Führer. As it is our most advanced and sophisticated submarine, I am using it as a test bed for our newest equipment and had plans to add a few things to it before sending it back on patrol. In particular, it will get a bigger, more powerful deck gun that will allow the good Kretschmer to do a lot more damage when bombarding enemy coastal installations, plus a few improved sensors and counter-measures systems."

"This sounds good with me. How are you doing about the design of a new class of attack submarines based on the U-800? Herr Speer and me were in fact discussing U-Boote production when you arrived."

"That is proving a bit more complicated than I was hoping for, Mein Führer. Our shipyards are already close to maximum production capacity and they have to compete for steel with the requirements of the Heer and of the surface fleet of the Kriegsmarine. Also, the blueprints for many of the U-800 sub-systems were irremediably lost when the Kiel shipyard was bombed and Doctor Premingen was killed early last year. If things go as they do right now, we should be able to start building our first Type XXI submarines late next year."

Hitler, visibly not pleased by that, was silent for a moment before looking at Albert Speer.

"Herr Speer, see what you can do to accelerate that project. We certainly could use a good dozen boats like the U-800 right now."

"I will get on it, Mein Führer."

Returning his gaze on Dönitz, Hitler bent forward while smiling to him.

“So, what kind of mission orders do you intend to give to the U-800 when it will put to sea again?”

“Frankly, I wish that I could send it to quite a few places at the same time, Mein Führer, as it is proving so useful to our war effort. One idea I had was to send it back to the Caribbean Basin, so that my other submarines could concentrate their efforts against the American East Coast.”

“That certainly sounds like a good plan to me, my good Dönitz. However, the Japanese Military Attaché in Berlin, on hearing about the exploits of our U-800 and of its Brandenburg commandos, proposed to us a target of mutual importance to us, a target whose destruction could greatly help their own war effort and also hurt a lot the Americans.”

“The Japanese, Mein Führer?” Said Dönitz, completely taken off balance by that. “And what are they suggesting precisely as a target for our U-800, if I may ask?” The answer Hitler gave him both stunned and shook Dönitz: stunned because of the audacity of the idea, with the target in question being undoubtedly of huge strategic importance; shaken because of the implied risks to the U-800 on such a mission. After thinking hard about it, Dönitz reluctantly nodded his head.

“I will see what can be done about this, Mein Führer.”

15:24 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, April 29, 1942

Submarine Pen Number One, Keroman I bunker complex

Port of Lorient, coast of Brittany

France

When Hugo Margraff and his men, fresh back from shore leave and some refresher training, entered the concrete pen sheltering the U-800, they found Otto Kretschmer on the forward deck of his submarine, watching a large crew of technicians and welders working on the deck main gun mount. It however took them little time to see that the gun they now saw was not the same with which the U-800 had made its last war patrol. For one thing, it was a twin gun mount! Also, the guns were visibly of a bigger caliber than the previous 10.5 centimeter caliber piece. Using the gangway linking the concrete quay and the forward deck of the U-800, Hugo and his men went to Otto to present themselves, coming to attention and saluting.

“Brandenburg Regiment’s contingent back aboard for raiding duties, Herr Kapitän!”

“Welcome back aboard, men!” Replied Otto, returning their salute before shaking hands with them, noting the new ranks worn by many of them, including Hugo, who wore the insignias of an Hauptman¹⁸. “It is truly nice to see you back. So, how was your leave time?”

“Very nice, Herr Kapitän! We also went back to our regiment for full debriefs and tactical discussions about our raids, plus got back into proper shape again and received some new kit.”

On saying those last words, Hugo took out of his duffel bag a most unusual type of rifle and showed it to Otto.

“This is the MKb 42(H)¹⁹, the latest in infantry weapons. It uses a short version of the 7.92mm rifle round and can fire in full automatic mode. It is fed by a thirty round box magazine and has an effective range of 300 meters. It is presently being field-trialed with a number of light infantry units, including our regiment, and should be a real game-changer in a firefight. We fired it on the range to adjust our sights and it is a truly great weapon.”

Otto took the weapon presented by Hugo and examined it for a few seconds before returning it.

“It certainly looks like a quite modern and deadly weapon, Hauptman Margraff. Let me in turn show to you and your men my latest toys. Just drop your kits on the deck for the moment and follow me.”

The group then walked towards the gun mount being worked on, stopping a few paces short of it and with Otto then speaking again.

“Since our main deck gun proved itself unusually useful to us compared to the limited use made by other U-Boote captains of their own deck guns, Admiral Dönitz decided to upgrade the main gun of my submarine. Now, instead of my old 10.5 centimeter caliber gun, the U-800 will have a twin 12.7 centimeter caliber gun mount, with each gun shooting shells nearly twice as heavy as the old 10.5 centimeter gun and to a much longer range. That twin mount will also have a fair anti-aircraft capability

¹⁸ Hauptman : German Army rank equivalent to that of a captain.

¹⁹ MKb 42 (H) : Maschinenkarabiner 42 (Haenel). The first name given to what would become the first modern assault rifle in history, the StG 44.

against low-flying aircraft. This twin mount had been built originally for a Type XI long range cruiser submarine that has been cancelled. As such, it was then modified by the deletion of the original armored turret that contained it and by the waterproofing of its parts. With this mount, the U-800 will be able to hit hard from the surface against both land and sea targets. It was also further improved by adapting to it the same model of infrared night vision scope and projector that are used by the U-800 for night and bad weather navigation, contained in pressure-proof special casings. With those, we will be able to sight on surface targets at night and in fog conditions, albeit at short ranges only.”

“Wow!” Exclaimed Hugo, truly impressed. “I must say that your new gun is definitely bigger than my new gun, Herr Kapitän.”

The whole group then laughed at that thinly veiled crude joke. Otto next led the Brandenburg soldiers to the aft deck, using one of the walking platforms that surrounded the wide base of the conning tower. The Heer men were then able to see a sort of large, teardrop-shaped pod fixed to the top of the upper vertical rudder.

“This is the last project that the designer of the U-800, Doctor Gustav Premingen, worked on before being killed in a British air bombardment: a towed hydrophone array. When cruising submerged at low speeds, this array is winched out of this pod and made to trail up to 300 meters behind our ducted propeller. It can also be made to float at selected depths above the level of the U-800, in order to operate above thermal water layers that would otherwise reflect sound waves. Since it is located far from the noise of our machinery and propeller when operating, that hydrophone array can detect ship noises that would otherwise be masked, especially in our aft sector, and is very effective against distant targets. With this towed array, the U-800 is now a true hunter-killer submarine. Lastly, our new modifications include a small counter-sonar jammer system called ‘Bold’, which releases under the water small chemical canisters that then generate hydrogen bubbles. Those bubbles reflect ASDIC pings and make the enemy think that it has detected us, instead of a temporary cloud of bubbles.”

Hugo couldn’t help nod his head then, truly impressed.

“Your U-800 is definitely in a class of its own with all this, Herr Kapitän.”

“Correct, Hauptman Margraff, and we will need it to be so for our next mission.”

The changed tone of Otto’s voice made Hugo raise an eyebrow at the last words.

“What do you mean, Herr Kapitän?”

"Not here, Hauptman: this is too sensitive to speak about it on this open deck. Go down to your assigned bunks first and store your kit and weapons. Then, come alone to my cabin, so that we can talk in complete confidentiality."

As a disciplined soldier, Hugo understood the need for operational security and didn't ask further questions then, instead saluting again Otto Kretschmer before leading his men, heavily loaded with their kit and weapons, inside the submarine.

Twelve minutes later, Hugo was knocking on the door of Kretschmer's suite. Entering on hearing a welcoming shout, he found the captain sitting behind his desk, a file and charts laid in front of him on the desk.

"Please sit down, Hauptman Margraff. What we are to discuss is of the utmost strategic importance for Germany in this war."

Even more curious now, Hugo sat in the sofa set opposite Kretschmer's desk, who then spoke again, his expression most serious.

"Hauptman Margraff, know that Admiral Dönitz gave me a very risky but also most important mission, a mission that he received from the Führer himself."

Hugo stiffened at those words: this meant that the mission, whatever it was, would have to be completed, even if that implied some suicidal tactics. His attention now sharpened to the fullest, he listened on as Otto spoke.

"My new mission is actually two-fold: first, to attack the Panama Canal locks and to disable or destroy them by any means possible and, second, to bring to Japan some very important items. On our return trip, we will be transporting a few tons of highly-sought metals which are in very short supply in Germany and that are vital to our war efforts. The riskiest part of our mission will obviously be the disabling of the Panama Canal locks, which are both well defended and also inaccessible to the U-800 when it is fully submerged. This means that we will have either to attack while only semi-submerged, or find a way to indirectly attack and destroy the locks. You and your men could well give us that indirect way of attacking, thus saving my U-800 from having to conduct a near-suicidal direct attack. Here is an intelligence file containing what the Kriegsmarine knows about the Panama Canal. Take the time to study it and to think about our possible options, then come and see me tomorrow when you will have ideas about this."

His mind now boiling, Hugo took the files and slowly rose from his chair. Before he could go, Otto stopped him with a few words.

"Oh, by the way, Hauptman: a Japanese naval officer that was employed as the Assistant Naval Attaché at the Japanese embassy in Berlin will accompany us during our trip. He apparently went through the Panama Canal a number of times before this war started and will also serve as our liaison officer with the Japanese authorities. He is due to arrive aboard tomorrow. Please make sure that your men show him the proper respect due to a senior allied officer."

"I will pass the word, Herr Kapitän."

"Thank you! You are now dismissed."

Hugo came to attention and saluted Kretschmer, then pivoted on his heels and walked out of the cabin, the file on the Panama Canal under one arm.

08:06 (Paris Time)

Thursday, April 30, 1942

Submarine Pen Number One, Keroman 1 bunker complex

The two armed sailors posted at the foot of the gangway linking the concrete quay with the deck of the U-800 came to rigid attention and saluted when Admiral Dönitz in person arrived in the submarine pen and went to the gangway, followed closely by an oriental man wearing a foreign black uniform, complete with a curved ceremonial saber in a beautifully decorated scabbard, and by a German sailor carrying a suitcase and a duffel bag. The sentries then let the three visitors cross the gangway and step on the deck of the U-800, where Dönitz stopped briefly to let the oriental officer examine visually the big submarine, with its smoothly contoured shapes and tall conning tower.

"Here you are, Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka: the U-800, the jewel of my submarine fleet."

"A most impressive boat indeed, Admiral." Replied the Japanese naval officer, truly awed by what he was seeing. "It looks like a racing purebred."

"And it would easily win any underwater race against any other submarine, with its top submerged speed of 31 knots. More importantly, its huge battery capacity allows it to stay underwater for days if need be, albeit at much slower speed. Add its sophisticated sensors to this and it makes the U-800 a most deadly hunter at sea."

"As it proved to be by its list of victories, Admiral. I have no doubts that Captain Kretschmer will prove as exceptional as his boat is."

"He is, but you will also find him to be quite unassuming and quiet as an officer, even though he is an incredibly daring submarine commander. Quite a rare combination, actually."

Takeshi Nagaoka nodded his head at that: a strong but quiet personality was something that was truly admired in Japan. He then saw from the corner of one eye a German officer wearing a white service cap nearly run out of the forward access hatch of the conning tower. That German, like so many others, was distinctly taller than Takeshi and appeared to be solidly built. His face had an intelligent, open expression and he appeared to be still in his late twenties, a bit younger than Takeshi. The newcomer nearly ran to them and stopped at attention in front of Admiral Dönitz, saluting him.

"Welcome aboard, Herr Admiral! May I deduce that you brought a passenger for me?"

"You deduced right, Korvettenkapitän! May I present you Lieutenant-commander Takeshi Nagaoka, of the Imperial Japanese Navy?"

Turning slightly on his heels to face Takeshi, Otto exchanged a salute, then shook hands with him.

"Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer. Welcome aboard, Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka. I will lead you now to your cabin, then we will go speak with the Admiral in the officers' wardroom. This way, please!"

Takeshi bowed to Kretschmer before following him, with Dönitz close behind and with the German sailor carrying his luggage last. Passing first through what was evidently an airlock, the group then went down a hatch and inclined ladder, with Kretschmer going to one of the cabins lining a short passageway, pushing open the curtain closing the door of the cabin to let Takeshi look inside.

"You will be sharing this cabin with Doctor Konrad List, our boat's surgeon. I hope that you will be satisfied with it."

Takeshi had one quick look before bowing, truly satisfied.

"This is actually much better than what I had been expecting, Captain. This is a palace compared to what you would find on a Japanese submarine."

"Or on other German submarines." Added Dönitz with a smile before looking at the sailor following him. "Put the lieutenant-commander's luggage inside and then go."

"Yes, Herr Admiral!"

"Well, I believe that we have things to discuss, gentlemen." Said Dönitz after facing back Kretschmer and Nagaoka. The latter opened his eyes wide and held his breath when he stepped inside the officers' wardroom, situated only two doors away.

"By the Kamis²⁰! This is...huge!"

That made Kretschmer smile with pride.

"I must say that my U-800 is exceptional in many ways. I believe that we will be most comfortable sitting around the dining table, Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka."

The trio took place around the said table, with Dönitz taking the padded captain's chair at one end that was normally reserved for Kretschmer and with the latter and Nagaoka sitting on each side of him.

"Well, since the good lieutenant-commander is here because of your next mission, let's talk about it a bit. First, have you decided yet on a plan of action about how you intend to strike the Panama Canal, Kretschmer?"

"Not definitely, Herr Admiral, but I have three options in mind. The first one would be to discreetly board a merchant ship waiting to pass through the canal and then ram it through the lock gates. The second option is for my commando team to land and sabotage the pumps and valves used to fill and empty the locks. No pumps, no water and no lock transits. The third option, a last resort one, would be to take my U-800 right to the first locks and blow the gates with torpedoes. That last option would however probably be a suicidal one, as the approach channel to the locks is not deep enough to allow my submarine to fully submerge. Since Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka is said to have sailed through the Panama Canal a few times in the past, maybe he will have another option to present to us."

"Not another option, but rather opinions on your three options, Captain Kretschmer. I passed through the Panama Canal a total of four times, while travelling with my family between Japan and Europe as a child and a teenager. The approaches to the locks are well defended against sea and air attacks, with guns of various calibers in Fort Sherman, adjacent to the northern entrance of the canal, and in Fort Amador, on the Pacific side. However, due to the large volume of maritime traffic going through each day, individual ship inspections were short and limited mostly to collecting the passage fee. Even if the Americans decided to boost security there, there are simply too many ships passing through to contemplate seriously complete searches of every ship

²⁰ Kamis : Name given by the Japanese to their various gods.

by American boarding parties. Thus, your commandos would have a good chance of taking control of some cargo ship and to ram it against the gates. The one drawback of that option is that only one side of the canal would be blocked, allowing traffic to continue both ways through one set of locks, albeit at a much reduced rate. I do like your second option, as taking out the pumps would probably be much easier and less risky to do, if your men manage to infiltrate on foot the locks area. As for your third option, it would certainly take out the locks for a long time...if you could get close enough to launch your torpedoes with enough precision to blow the gates up. I do agree however that this last option would give you very little chances to withdraw intact, but the results would be a severe strategic blow to the American war effort.”

“And how tight is security on land around the locks, Lieutenant-commander?”

“At the time I went through the canal, quite lax I would say. However, the Americans, unless they are complete fools, are bound to have significantly increased security in that aspect since the start of the war.”

“I would tend to think so as well. So, Option Two seems the most promising and less risky way to take out the locks for any significant length of time. I will act accordingly, but will still keep the two other options as backup solutions in case of unexpected problems. Either way, this whole thing will depend greatly on surprise being on our side. How many people know about this operation right now, Admiral?”

“Only the Fuhrer, his top aides and the Japanese ambassador.”

The mention of the ambassador made Otto raise an eyebrow in concern.

“Was any radio message talking about the operation sent, or is going to be sent?”

Dönitz couldn't help feel a bit of irritation at that question.

“Look, Kretschmer, I understand that you are leery about radio traffic being triangulated by the enemy, but our ENIGMA codes are quite secure.”

“And what about Japanese codes, Herr Admiral?”

Those words made Dönitz turn his head to look at Nagaoka, who gave him a wry smile.

“Ambassador Oshima does send regularly detailed reports by radio to Tokyo, but he uses our diplomatic code to do so, Admiral. This operation would have definitely been mentioned in one of his reports.”

“In how much detail?” Asked Kretschmer, none too pleased.

“Ambassador Oshima is quite meticulous in his reporting, being an old-fashioned officer.”

"Great!" Exclaimed Kretschmer. "Let's hope that your diplomatic code is indeed secure. Admiral, could we at least stop sending any further radio traffic that could inform the enemy about our planned operation against the Panama Canal, at least until it is completed safely?"

"Mmm... I suppose that it could be done, Kretschmer. I will take care of that. Now, for the second part of your mission, trucks parked outside the bunker complex are presently unloading barrels containing ten tons of uranium oxide, which the Japanese government have requested on an urgent basis. They will be transported to Tokyo aboard your submarine, in exchange of which you will be able to return to Germany with a load of tungsten, chromium, molybdenum and gold."

"What about refueling and resupplying while on my way, Admiral? My submarine has long legs, but the trip to Panama and then Japan adds up to about 20,000 nautical miles...one way."

"Do not worry, my dear Kretschmer: my offices and the Abwehr are busy arranging with friendly contacts a pit stop for you in Chile, one of the two nations in the Americas that we still can consider true friends."

"Chile it will be then, Admiral." Said Kretschmer, satisfied.

Two days later, the U-800 slipped out of its pen under the cover of the night, its departure kept much more discrete than previous ones. Dönitz was however present for the occasion and watched with a heavy heart the submarine disappear into the night: this could well be the last time that he set his eyes on the U-800 and its crew.

15:15 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, May 5, 1942

BdU (U-Boote Command) Headquarters

Lorient, France

"Come in!"

Dönitz, raising his nose from the report he was reading, was alarmed by the shocked expression evident on his signals officer.

"What is it, Mackel?"

The senior officer walked to his admiral's work desk and put a message form on it.

"Herr Admiral, this is the decrypted version of a British Admiralty message sent yesterday to all its ships in the Caribbean Sea and North Atlantic areas. Thankfully, the British codebooks that the U-800 captured in Miami late last year are apparently still valid and we were able to decrypt this, along with the rest of the British naval radio traffic. It deals with the U-800."

Already feeling dread, Dönitz grabbed the message form and read it quickly.

"Warning to all ships in the Caribbean Sea and North Atlantic. The German submarine U-800 departed Lorient late on May 2, headed for the Panama Canal, with the mission of destroying the locks. It is then to proceed to Japan, with a Japanese liaison officer aboard, for an exchange of strategic materials. All ships are to exercise extra anti-submarine precautions and are to report any sighting of the U-800 at once. The U.S. Navy is already aware about the U-800."

Rendered furious by the lecture of the message, Dönitz slammed his fist on his work desk and shouted at his senior signals officer.

"How the hell could the British and the Americans know so much about the U-800's mission? Did we send any message talking about its departure or its mission, Mackel?"

"Absolutely not, Herr Admiral! We strictly enforced your order to avoid discussing the U-800 or its mission in radio messages. Maybe there was a leak on the Japanese side."

Dönitz nodded his head, then remembering what Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka had said about Ambassador Oshima being meticulous in his reporting to Tokyo via radio.

"That could very well be. Please inquire quickly but discreetly with the Japanese embassy and ask if they sent any message announcing the departure on mission of the U-800."

"Yes, Admiral! Right away!" Replied Mackel before saluting and leaving the office. Dönitz then reread the message that was still in his hands, feeling an urge to kill rise in him.

Mackel was back in Dönitz two hours later, a grim expression on his face.

"Admiral, the communications officer of the Japanese embassy confirmed to me that Ambassador Oshima sent a long coded message to Tokyo early yesterday morning. While he refused to give me the content of the message, he did say that it concerned the U-800."

"GOTT UND HIMMEL!" Shouted Dönitz, truly enraged. "That Oshima idiot just compromised completely the mission of the U-800. This also means that both the Americans and the British can probably read the Japanese diplomatic code. Any information that we passed to the Japanese embassy should thus be considered compromised as well."

Mackel reeled for a moment on understanding the full implications of this affair.

"Should we warn the U-800 that its mission is compromised and that it should avoid Panama and go directly to Japan, Admiral?"

Dönitz was about to answer him when a nasty thought crossed his mind.

"Mackel, you have been involved from the start in our ENIGMA encoding system. Didn't the Japanese base their present encoding systems on our own ENIGMA?"

The signals officer paled and nearly stammered his answer.

"Yes, they did, Herr Admiral! But, our ENIGMA machine is considered by all experts to be unbreakable."

"What if it isn't? What if the British are able to decode our messages?"

"Then, it would be a true catastrophe for us, Herr Admiral! All our radio traffic to our submarines at sea is sent via ENIGMA encryption."

Dönitz sat back in his chair, looking grim.

"We need to make sure that our traffic is not read by the British, and quickly! But how could we do that?"

Mackel was silent for a moment, his mind working furiously. An idea then sprang inside his head.

"A Canary Trap! We could set up a Canary Trap to see if the British can decipher either our codes or the Japanese codes, or both."

"A Canary Trap? What's that?"

"A Canary Trap is an old trick meant to find out leaks in an organization. Basically, you send out multiple copies of a letter or message, but with slight variations in wording in each copy. If one of the copies is then leaked, one can see where the leak is by seeing which version of the letter or message was leaked. In this case, we could send some false, altered information to the Japanese embassy about the U-800 and then see if the British pick it up and react to it. We could do the same for our own traffic in a separate false message."

Dönitz smiled at those words and slapped a hand on his desk.

"Do it! Just run the false messages by me before sending them out or transmitting them to the Japanese embassy. About the U-800, we will inform the Japanese embassy of an updated position report received from our submarine. If the British then reroute warships towards that position, then we will have our confirmation that the Japanese code is compromised."

"An excellent idea, Herr Admiral! I will get to it at once."

As Mackel walked out of his office, Dönitz couldn't help hope fervently that he wouldn't find that their own ENIGMA codes had been compromised as well, as the consequences of such a discovery would be truly staggering.

21:32 (Greenwich Time)

Thursday, May 7, 1942

U-800, south of Ireland

North Atlantic

Josef Knocke had a weird expression on his face when he entered Otto's cabin after getting permission to do so.

"Herr Kapitän, we just received a coded message from Lorient, but it is a bit of a weird one."

Otto, who was about to go to bed, raised an eyebrow at that and put his left hand forward.

"Very well: let me see it!"

Taking the message form offered by his radio operator, Otto read it quickly once, but found it necessary to read it again more slowly.

"From Dönitz to Kretschmer. Your mission looking good, with no enemy interference detected on your path. Your wife advised and sends you her love, asks that you bring gifts back."

Otto was left confused for a moment and looked up at Knocke.

"But, I don't have a wife! Admiral Dönitz knows that very well. And how would he know that there are no enemy ships along my route?"

Knocke, who long knew that his captain was celibate and who had wondered about that part of the message, then offered the only explanation he could think of.

"Maybe this message was sent to warn us about something concerning our mission, Herr Kapitän. The admiral would certainly never divulge the details of a mission to an officer's wife: she could talk to others about it afterwards."

"Talk to others...That's it! Somebody leaked information about our mission to Panama and the admiral is warning us about it. That mention about bringing back gifts may mean that our subsequent trip to Japan has also been blown in the open."

"But, why use such cryptic wording to warn us, Herr Kapitän? This was sent fully encoded by ENIGMA machine."

The explanation came to Otto like a hammer's blow to his head.

"Because our ENIGMA codes have been compromised as well."

"Our ENIGMA machines, compromised? But, they are theoretically impossible to decode, as the settings in them change constantly. The enemy would need both an intact ENIGMA machine and the settings that go with it in order to be able to decipher our radio traffic."

"The British may just have captured a machine intact somewhere. This is the only plausible explanation for the sending of such a weird message. Knocke, I want you to go through all the coded radio traffic we received since our departure from Lorient. Look for any other message that looked weird or out of place."

The embarrassed look that then appeared on Knocke's face made Otto frown and look hard at his radio operator.

"What? Did you fail to pass to me a relevant message, Knocke?"

"Uh, no, Herr Kapitän! It is just that we intercepted two days ago a message from Lorient addressed to our submarine pack operating along the American East Coast, advising it that the U-68 had departed Lorient and was going to take a watch station off Iceland."

"The U-68? But it was severely damaged by enemy depth charges and only recently left for a lengthy refit in Kiel. It couldn't possibly have been repaired fast enough to go back on war patrol now and everybody in Lorient knew that."

"Everybody but the enemy, sir. I now remember that the message ended with a firm warning not to reply to it."

Otto couldn't help slam his fist against the nearest steel bulkhead on hearing that.

"TEUFFEL! THE BRITISH CAN READ OUR ENIGMA TRAFFIC!"

He then looked up at Knocke and spoke in a firm tone to him.

"I want all the British messages sent since two days ago and intercepted by us to be decoded as quickly as possible, to see if the British reacted in any way to that message from Lorient about the U-68. Admiral Dönitz may just have sent it to confirm if the enemy could decode our messages or not. I know that we don't have enough manpower to normally decrypt all the British messages we intercept and that we relied on our headquarters in Lorient to do that, but I want all the messages covered by the period I gave you to be decrypted at once. I don't care if nobody in the radio section gets to sleep during the next 48 hours. Now, go!"

Knocke saluted crisply, then hurried out of the cabin, leaving Otto alone and thinking furiously. After a minute or so, he punched the 'talk' button of his intercom to pass an order that reverberated throughout the submarine.

"This is the Captain speaking! All the officers are to assemble at once in the wardroom for an urgent meeting."

With that done, Otto started putting his uniform back on to go to the wardroom adjacent to his cabin.

Within five minutes, all of his six Kriegsmarine officers, plus Hugo Margraff and Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka, were assembled with him around the dining table of the wardroom, with a World chart spread over the table. Otto looked in turn at his understandably curious officers before starting to speak in a grim tone.

"Gentlemen, I have some bad news for all of us, news from Lorient. Apparently, somebody leaked information about our mission to the British and possibly the Americans as well, probably thanks to coded messages being intercepted and decrypted, and the enemy is now apparently waiting for us at the Panama Canal. Even worse, our ENIGMA encoding system may have been broken into by the British or the Americans and cannot be relied upon anymore. Our headquarter in Lorient is now incapable of communicating securely with us and we are thus mostly on our own. While it would be pointless for us to start speculating on what really happened to cause that security breach, we now have to decide what we are going to do next. While our initial plan to attack the Panama Canal Gatun locks was already very risky, with the enemy now alerted to us being on the way makes that plan downright suicidal. We can fully expect the Americans to flood the area around the lock gates with troops, ships and aircraft and our chances of getting even close to the locks are now about zero. As a result of this, I intend to change our route and to stay away from the Caribbean Sea.

While the enemy will be waiting for us in Colon, on the Atlantic coast of Panama, we will go south and transit the Drake Passage²¹, sail around the southern tip of South America and go directly to Valparaiso, on the Chilean coast, where a Chilean ship will be waiting to resupply and refuel us.”

Takeshi Nagaoka reacted at once to his words but did his best to keep a respectful tone.

“But, Captain, our planned attack on the Panama Canal was a very important strategic move. Can we really abandon our mission there without at least trying?”

Otto made a malicious smile before answering the Japanese officer.

“I said that we won’t strike the canal locks on the Atlantic side, Lieutenant-commander, not that I had completely abandoned our mission concerning the canal. While the enemy will waste his time and energy patrolling the approaches to Colon, we will be going around the Cape Horn and go refuel in Chile, then will approach the Pacific side locks of the canal after a trip that will take us about five weeks. By then, the Americans will have either exhausted themselves in fruitless air and sea searches, or will have decided that we are not coming after all. Thus, the Panama Canal defenses may just be back at their normal level of alert by the time we show up on the Pacific side. Then, we will try to apply our original attack plan, but against the Milaflores Locks instead of the Gatun Locks.”

It was Nagaoka’s turn to smile then.

“A fine idea that actually would have a good chance of succeeding, Captain. Please forgive me if I appeared to question your dedication to our mission.”

“No offense taken, Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka. Now, if our mission against the Milaflores Locks is successful and we don’t incur damages there, I intend to make the rest of our trip towards Japan as useful to our cause as possible, meaning that we will take any reasonable opportunity to attack American ships and bombard American shore installations along our way. While one of our mission’s goals is to transport some rare metals to Japan, our U-800 is still first and foremost a ship of war and the Americans will get to feel our bites in the Pacific.”

The wide grin that appeared on Nagaoka’s face then was enough to tell him what the Japanese officer thought about that.

²¹ Drake Passage : The body of open ocean situated between the southern tip of South America (Cape Horn) and the South Shetland Islands of Antarctica. The Drake Passage connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean.

07:24 (Paris Time)

Friday, May 8, 1942

BdU (U-Boote Command) Headquarters, Lorient

Coast of Brittany, France

Karl Dönitz arrived at his office earlier than usual, thanks to a near sleepless night. The last three days, spent dealing with the disaster that the compromising of the ENIGMA encryption system was, had been Hell to him. Apart from having to find quickly a new way to resume secure communications with his submarines at sea, his efforts to alert the other heads of armed services and convince them that ENIGMA could be read by the British had been mostly met with incredulity. As a last resort, Dönitz was attempting to secure a meeting with the Führer, to convince him to force the removal from service of ENIGMA machines. However, he had low expectations about that meeting.

Taking place behind his work desk, he sifted quickly through his 'in' basket, to sort them by order of importance and urgency. His eyes immediately caught on a particular message received only two hours ago: it was from the U-800! His heart suddenly beating faster, he read the message quickly.

"From U-800, Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer, to the personal attention of Admiral Dönitz. Tell my wife that I will be careful and will bring her a nice oriental gift."

Dönitz felt some relief after reading the message: at least Kretschmer had understood the message sent to him to be a hidden warning. The mention about bringing a nice oriental gift also told him that Kretschmer had not abandoned his project to attack the Panama Canal locks but would probably do so from the Pacific side instead, to take the Americans by surprise. This meant in turn that he was going to have to accelerate the pace of Operation WEST WIND.

12:31 (Santiago Time)

Wednesday, June 10, 1942

Terrace restaurant, downtown Valparaiso

Chile

Carlos Stein made a genuine smile when he saw Juanita Cruz, sitting at a table of the small restaurant and waiting for him while sipping on a cup of coffee: he may have come here for business but it was always nice to be able to meet the plump young woman with long black hair and generous chest. Going to her table and sitting opposite her, he gently pressed her left hand.

"Hello, Juanita! It is nice to be able to see you again."

Juanita smiled in return while admiring the tall, athletic man in his early thirties, who sported a short, carefully trimmed beard. Carlos Stein was definitely a handsome man in any woman's eyes and would easily fit the image of the stereotypical Latin seducer. That Carlos could also be a very dangerous man didn't bother her: after all, they both worked for the same cause.

"And it is nice to see you too, Carlos. You have time to have lunch with me, I hope?"

"I will always have time to be with you, Juanita." Replied Carlos in a suave voice, making Juanita's smile widen and her eyes sparkle.

"Then, you would have a couple of hours to consecrate to me after lunch, hopefully?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

"No, but I like to confirm things first. Let's look at the menu, will you?"

Both of them grabbed a menu and looked at it, taking a minute to decide on their choice of meal and to place their orders. With cups of fine Chilean red wine to accompany their food, the couple ate slowly while exchanging pleasantries and flirting verbally. Paying for their meal after forty minutes and leaving the restaurant hand-in-hand, the couple then loaded up in Carlos' car, a well-used but impeccably maintained Ford sedan, and drove off. Going out of the downtown district of Valparaiso, Carlos drove to his small home, which sat on the coast, in direct view of the city's busy commercial port. Closing the entrance door behind him and locking it, Carlos then turned around to face Juanita, who now looked most serious.

"So, what do you have for me, Juanita?"

"The embassy in Santiago received a coded radio message saying that the U-800 will arrive off Valparaiso late tonight and will send a contact team ashore on receipt of the proper visual signal."

"I will be ready for them. Have you found if ships of interest are presently in port or about to arrive?"

"I have a couple of interesting prospects in fact, one of which is already in port and loading up cargo, while the other is due in tomorrow, according to the Port Master's manifest. Here is the information I was able to find about those two ships."

Taking the two sheets of papers presented to him by Juanita, the Abwehr²² agent read them quickly. A big grin appeared on his face as he was reading the second sheet.

"An American bulk carrier due to load 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate? This is nearly too good to be true."

"Why so? Chile is one of the biggest World producers of nitrates and ammonium nitrate is actually a very common cargo, at least here. The American industries need huge amounts of nitrates, both as fertilizers for agriculture and to make explosives for their war effort. The German embassy's commercial attaché is already aware about that ship and is busy arranging a quick buy via a third party of a few crates of dynamite and detonators that could serve to detonate all that ammonium nitrate at the right moment. That dynamite will be delivered to your house late this afternoon, using intermediaries in order to hide the trail of those explosives. As for the diesel fuel, a fuel barge manned by a crew in which we have full confidence will be on standby to meet with the U-800 at sea. Here is the contact information for the captain of the barge."

Carlos took the third sheet presented by Juanita and smiled warmly to her.

"Decidedly, you are irreplaceable, Juanita. What would I do without you?"

"You would muddle through, the way you did so successfully in the past." Replied the young woman before walking to him and gluing her front to his chest, her eyes sparkling.

"Now that we have taken care of business, do you mind if we take some time together for ourselves, Carlos?"

"How could I say no to that, my beautiful Juanita?" Said the German agent before taking her in his arm to kiss her.

02:43 (Santiago Time)

Saturday, June 13, 1942

Bulk carrier JOHN F. DICKSON, port of Valparaiso

²² Abwehr : German military intelligence service in World War Two.

The sailor placed on duty to guard the access ladder connecting the quay with his ship could only think of his warm bunk as he stood shivering in the cold night wind. It may have been June, but Chile was in the Southern Hemisphere, where the seasons were reversed from those in the Northern Hemisphere. His job consisted mainly of preventing stowaways and thieves from setting foot on the bulk carrier, but it was proving up to now to be a boring, miserable job. Rubbing his hands together to warm them up a bit, he stumped his feet a few times as well. That prevented him from hearing the very soft noise of feet cautiously approaching in his back. A strong arm suddenly covered brutally the mouth of the unfortunate American merchant sailor and pulled his head back, with another arm then coming down in a flash, a knife in its fist. The long blade struck between the two top left ribs, penetrating deeply and piercing the heart. The American crumbled to the deck without so much as a whimper and was immediately dragged out of sight behind a nearby ventilation trunk. A second black shape then came out from a nearby dark corner, whispering in German.

“Good job, Bayerlein. Stay here for the moment, while we go take care of the rest of the crew.”

“Understood, Herr Hauptmann!”

The Brandenburg men quickly found that only one more American sailor, a radio operator, had been awake at this hour. Well, awake was actually an exaggeration, as Franz Stein found that operator fast asleep at his post, his head down on his forearms on top of his desk and snoring while wearing a headset. Since a German would have to sit in that chair and since he didn't want to have to clean up a pool of blood, Stein elected to use his garrote instead of a knife or pistol and strangled the sleeping man, who only woke up to die in the next twenty seconds. The rest of the crew of the bulk carrier, including the captain, was found sleeping in their bunks and was quietly killed with silenced pistols in a few minutes. Making first his soldiers do a complete reconnaissance of the ship to ensure that no American had escaped their attention, Hugo Margraff then used one of the handheld U.S. Army radios captured in Boston, going up to the bridge before making his call in order to get maximum range.

“Ghost Leader to Host, come in please!”

The answer came in quickly and clearly.

“Host listening!”

"From Ghost Leader: nutshell now empty. Proceed as planned."

"Understood, Ghost Leader. Am now moving."

Less than two minutes later, a non-descript civilian truck appeared on the quay to which the JOHN F. DICKSON was tied to, coming out of a street sandwiched between two rows of warehouses. The truck soon stopped at the foot of the access ladder of the bulk carrier, with eight men jumping out of the back of the vehicle. Those eight men, wearing civilian clothes, then proceeded in unloading from the back of the truck numerous boxes and crates and started to carry them up the ladder and onto the ship. Margraff had his soldiers help the crewmen of the U-800 who would man the bulk carrier on its trip to Panama, so that the fresh foodstuff and dynamite could be stored away quickly. At the end of it, he shook hands firmly with Carlos Stein, who had driven the truck and would now take it out of the port area.

"I can't thank you enough for your help in Valparaiso, Herr Stein. Be assured that your diligence and competence will be reported to Admiral Canaris."

"It was a pleasure to help you and the U-800, Hauptmann Margraff. Good luck on your mission."

"Thanks! Oh, I nearly forgot: I have a gift for you from Admiral Canaris. He said that you could need it if you ever have to disappear to avoid British and American agents later on."

Watched by the now curious Stein, Hugo searched into a vest pocket of his combat uniform and took out something rolled inside a handkerchief. That something turned out to be five small gold bars totaling more than a kilo in weight, which he then gave to Stein.

"Gold is still the most universal currency around, Herr Stein. Make good use of them if you are ever forced into hiding."

Carlos, genuinely happy, smiled to Hugo while taking the gold bars.

"They certainly will be useful in the future, Hauptmann. Please thank Admiral Canaris on your return to Germany."

"I will! Goodbye, Herr Stein."

"And good luck again to you and your men, Hauptmann."

Carlos then pocketed the precious gold bars and went back down the ladder, climbing behind the wheel of his truck and driving away into the night. Hugo Margraff watched him leave, envious: the last five weeks at sea had been long ones, despite the good living conditions aboard the U-800, and he missed firm land, like his soldiers did.

However, their mission would call for more time at sea, a lot more time in fact. Shaking off those thoughts, he went to a deck hatch giving access to one of the cargo holds of the bulk carrier. Going down only one level while using the steep ladder that led all the way to the bottom of the hold, Hugo looked for a moment at the huge pile of large, 50 pound bags of ammonium nitrate filling the hold. If detonated, that much nitrate would produce a titanic explosion of the same power range as that from the ammunition ship that blew up in Boston and had devastated much of the city. In fact, this would probably result into an even more powerful explosion: less than half of the tonnage that had exploded in the ammunition ship in Boston Harbor had been explosives, the rest being the mass of steel of the various bomb bodies. Here, the cargo was pure explosives. Hugo shivered at the thought of the carnage such an explosion could cause. Thankfully, the intelligence about the Panama Canal indicated that residential areas around the canal were situated on average a few kilometers from the canal locks. Any large explosion at the locks would thus kill only a minimum of people, something that suited Hugo just fine: he may have been ruthless when on a mission, but he was no blood-thirsty psychopath.

Climbing out of the hold, Hugo went back to the bridge of the ship, finding Oberleutnant zur See Ulrich von Wittgenstein there, busy reading through the cargo manifest list and various documents concerning this commercial trip. Wittgenstein, along with nine sailors from the U-800, were going to crew the bulk carrier during what could very well be its last voyage. All of those sailors had been chosen for that job because they spoke English and thus could pass off as Americans, if one didn't pay too much attention to their accents. On seeing Hugo enter the bridge, Wittgenstein raised his nose from the pad of commercial and customs forms.

"Aaah, Hauptmann Margraff. First off, your men did a good job of getting rid of the crew. Second, I believe that you and your soldiers should go down to the crew quarters now to find civilian clothes that would fit you, so that you could pass muster in case of a visit by customs or port officers prior to departure."

"Have you been able to open the Captain's safe yet?"

The question seemed to amuse Wittgenstein, who smiled.

"That wasn't too hard actually: he kept the combination of his safe in his wallet. Apparently, he did not have too much confidence in his memory. I have now access to

the American cash money that was meant to pay the passage fees of the Panama Canal. We are thus all set to go and will leave port at the scheduled hour, at Sunrise.”

“And the U-800?”

“It is now fully fuelled and resupplied in fresh food, thanks to the good Herr Stein, and will follow us discreetly at schnorchel depth. The wake of this ship will help hide the wake caused by the schnorchel mast sticking out of the water. So, Panama, here we come!”

CHAPTER 16 – RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

11:12 (Panama Time)

Tuesday, June 23, 1942

Balboa Harbor, Gulf of Panama

Pacific Ocean

“Okay, what’s next, Ronaldo?”

The Panamean official consulted the list on his clipboard before answering in his accented English the master of the small U.S. Coast Guard armed tugboat.

“We have the JOHN F. DICKSON, an American bulk carrier transporting a load of ammonium nitrate destined for Texas City. It arrived in the harbor about one hour ago, coming from Valparaiso.”

“Ammonium nitrate? That’s quite dangerous as cargo goes, no?”

“Indeed! It is used to produce fertilizers and explosives. You don’t want your men to smoke while inspecting that ship, Chief Petty Officer Camden.”

“Right! I will pass the word.”

The American Coast Guard then used his binoculars to locate the bulk carrier among the dozen or so ships waiting in the harbor to transit the canal locks today. The JOHN F. DICKSON was fairly easy to spot, being nearly the biggest ship present in the harbor. Giving orders to his helmsman, Camden made him approach and then go side-by-side with the big cargo ship, with one of his sailors then tying up a line between the tugboat and the side access ladder, which had been lowered already. Armed with his customary Colt 1911 pistol and followed by three of his sailors armed with either Colt pistols or Springfield 1903 bolt-action rifles, he then climbed the steel ladder just behind the Panamean official. They were met on the open deck of the bulk carrier by a merchant navy officer wearing a captain’s cap and a set of cotton shirt and trousers. Two men in civilian clothes, presumably crewmembers of the ship, were leaning against the side railings near the access ladder, apparently taking in the fresh air and Sun. The captain then surprised the Panamean official by speaking to him in fairly good Spanish.

"Welcome aboard the JOHN F. DICKSON, sir! I am Captain Rolph Anderson. You are here to verify my cargo manifest and to collect the toll for passing the locks, I presume?"

"I am! Ronaldo Campeon, of the Panama Canal Administration. Your Spanish is quite good, I must say, Captain."

Ulrich von Wittgenstein smiled at the compliment.

"I have been plying the seas between Spain, the Caribbean Sea and South America for a few years already. You won't get nice women in ports if you can't speak with them, right?"

Both men then laughed briefly at that joke before 'Captain Anderson' handed a clipboard to Campeon.

"Here is my cargo manifest, along with the ship's ownership papers, customs declaration form and sailing permit, Mister Campeon."

Ronaldo studied quickly the papers attached on the clipboard, finding them apparently in order.

"You have 3,210 tons of ammonium nitrate aboard? That would be enough for a nice bang if you ever caught fire."

"True! But those nitrates will make nice bangs once turned into explosives and then thrown at the Japanese or the Germans. By the way, we heard on the radio that our navy has won a great victory near Midway Island at the start of this month. Do you know more about this?"

"Uh, let me ask CPO Camden here."

Campeon then turned to face Camden, switching to English.

"Do you know much about the naval battle recently won at Midway, Mister Camden? Captain Anderson heard a radio report about it and wishes to know more about it."

Camden nodded his head, understanding the ship's captain's curiosity: the official radio news about the Battle of Midway, while claiming a great naval victory for the USA, had been rather short on specifics and many in the United States undoubtedly wanted to learn more. He then spoke to 'Anderson' in English.

"It was indeed a great victory for us, Captain. Four Japanese aircraft carriers were sunk off Midway, against the loss of the carrier YORKTOWN. The Japanese fleet trying to capture Midway was then forced to withdraw and we are now in control of the whole Central Pacific area."

"But, that's fantastic!" Exclaimed Wittgenstein, a false grin on his face. "Did they say how the battle was won?"

"Uh, they didn't give the details, except that all four Japanese carriers were sunk by airstrikes. By the way, you have a noticeable accent, Captain."

"I am a first generation Danish immigrant." Explained Wittgenstein, who actually could speak a good Danish. "And what about on the Atlantic side? Are those damn German submarines still active along our East Coast?"

Camden sighed at that question: he had lost a few good friends to German submarines during the last months.

"Unfortunately, yes! Thankfully, German submarine activity in the Caribbean Sea is presently nearly non-existent, so you should be able to safely arrive in Texas City without trouble."

"A good thing to know, with all that ammonium nitrate aboard." Said 'Anderson'. "Well, let's move to the bridge, where I will be able to pay the locks' toll to Mister Campeon."

"If you don't mind, Captain Anderson, me and my men will do a quick inspection tour of your ship: just routine stuff, you know."

"Go right ahead, CPO Camden. My two men here will be happy to guide you around the ship. Gunnar, James, please help these gentlemen around the ship!" The two 'crewmen' leaning against the railings straightened up and came to the group near the top of the access ladder.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Those gentlemen wish to inspect our ship. Just accompany them and direct them to whatever part of the ship they want to see."

"Sir!" Replied simply the tallest of the sailors, giving a lax salute to 'Anderson' before looking at Camden.

"Where to?"

"We will start by the cargo holds. I will split my team in two."

"Understood!" Replied 'Gunnar'. "Follow me!"

Followed by one of his sailors armed with a rifle, Camden let Gunnar, a big young man with blond hair and Nordic features, show him the way to one of the large cargo holds occupying most of the volume in the ship's hull. There was little inspecting to be done there, as the hold was positively filled with big bags bearing inscriptions, with

'AMMONIUM NITRATE' and 'PRODUCT OF CHILE' painted in big letters on the bags. The paper bags were in turn tied down on wooden pallets piled on top of each other, with at least forty big bags per pallets. Since finding anything hidden among those bags would have needed the unloading of the whole cargo, Camden only looked perfunctorily at the top of the piles before speaking to Gunnar.

"That will do for this hold, mister. Lead us now to the crew quarters."

Gunnar seemed to hesitate very slightly then before he nodded his head and gave a short reply.

"No problem! This way!"

With Gunnar in the lead, the group climbed out of the cargo hold and walked down the weather deck, to then enter the superstructure block situated two-thirds of the way aft. Going down one level via a steep ladder, the group finally entered a large compartment filled with double bunk beds, personal effects lockers and a few tables and chairs. Six men were present in the compartment, four of them apparently asleep in their bunks and two others reading books while sitting on chairs near open portholes that gave some extra light and fresh air. The place had the looks typical of other crew quarters Camden had visited countless times and nothing raised his suspicions at first.

"United States Coast Guard inspection! Could you please get out of your bunks for a moment?"

The sleeping men did so slowly and reluctantly at first, which was quite normal when considering that a typical merchant seaman worked long hours and had too little time to rest or relax, except when in port. Directing his armed sailor to look inside the personal lockers, Camden first inspected the bunks, finding nothing hidden under the mattresses. He next went to one of the bulging duffel bags stored under the bunks and, finding it curiously heavy, started opening it. Camden stiffened at once when his eyes fell on the muzzle of some kind of rifle packed in the duffel bag he had just opened. Next to the rifle was a steel helmet with the unmistakable shape of a German Army Stahlhelm. Twisting his head around in a flash while his right hand went for his holstered pistol, the Coast Guard man had only time to see the muzzle of a silencer-equipped pistol pointed at his head before that muzzle erupted in a flash. Eternal darkness then fell on him. The armed American sailor had no more chances to defend himself than his superior, being shot in the head a mere half second after Camden. Franz Stein looked coldly at the two dead Americans now sprawled on the deck of the compartment, a bit pissed at that unwelcome but unavoidable outcome: if the Americans had been less diligent in

their search, they would have walked off the ship alive. Now, the team from the U-800 had no choice but to go for Plan 'B' before the American forts defending the canal entrances could be alerted or became suspicious about the JOHN F. DICKSON. Stein looked next at Herman Weiss, the other Brandenburg soldier present in the compartment with him and 'Gunnar', aka Michel Drücker.

"We now have to eliminate every other American presently on board before they could alert the canal defenses. Come with us! Maschinen Obergefreiter Brock, go to the bridge and alert our officers about this...discreetly!"

As the German mechanic hurried on his way to the bridge, Stein, Weiss and Drücker, hiding back their silenced pistols under their vests, left the crew quarters and went up to the open deck. Looking around and seeing no Americans, save for the handful of men left aboard the tugboat, Stein went back inside, this time heading for the engine room, aft and below of the bridge superstructure block. As they were negotiating the last rung of ladders leading down to the engine room, the trio nearly collided with two armed American sailors who were just exiting the engine room with Gefreiter Otto Lang. Politely stepping out of the way first and letting them pass, the three soldiers then drew out their guns and shot dead both Americans from point-blank range. Stein made a forced smile as the poor Lang, shaken by those sudden executions, looked at the now dead Americans.

"We had no choice: another pair of Americans had found our hidden weapons. We are now following Plan 'B'. Do you know how many Americans boarded the ship?"

"Only four of them did, Unteroffizier. I saw a minimum of three more Americans that stayed aboard the tugboat that accosted us."

"Then, all the Americans that were aboard are now dead. Excellent! Now, we will have to take out discreetly the rest of the crew of that tugboat."

"Uh, I may have an idea about this, Unteroffizier, especially if we have to go to Plan 'B'." Said Michel Drücker. Stein, who knew how intelligent and imaginative his young obergefreiter was, smiled to him in response.

"Go on, Drücker."

12:27 (Panama Time)

Fort Grant, Naos Island, Bay of Panama

U.S. Army Lieutenant Richard Prendergast was the senior officer present in the command center of Fort Grant, the installation that controlled the coastal artillery guns defending the approaches to the Panama Canal on the Pacific side: all the other officers were at the officers' mess for lunch. A lookout report was thus transmitted by telephone to Prendergast when it arrived via the telephone switchboard of the command center.

"Lieutenant Prendergast speaking! What do you have?"

"Sir, this is Corporal Greenglass, in the main fire control tower. One of the ships waiting to pass through the canal locks is now jumping ahead of the queue. It is led by a Coast Guard tugboat."

That left Prendergast nonplussed for a moment as he debated mentally if this was worth his time: while the Panama Canal coastal defenses were the responsibility of the U.S. Army, the Navy and Coast Guard were in charge of controlling the ships waiting to pass through the locks. As for the locks themselves, Panamean workers operated them. This three-tiered arrangement made for a disjointed and uncoordinated chain of command made worse by the fierce traditional rivalry between the Army and the Navy. In this case, if the Coast Guard had decided that this merchant ship could jump the queue of waiting ships, then the Army had no business disputing that decision. On the other hand, Prendergast remembered the warnings issued nearly two months ago about a possible attack against the Panama Canal by a German submarine. He thus decided to lean over the side of caution and spoke in a firm voice in his telephone receiver.

"Signal that tugboat by lamp and ask it the reason for making that ship jump the line. What ship is it anyway?"

"The JOHN F. DICKSON, sir. It is an American-flagged bulk carrier and the day's list of transits says that it has arrived from Valparaiso, Chile, with a load of ammonium nitrate destined for Texas City."

"Alright, send that message and ring me back at once when you will get an answer. Where exactly is that bulk carrier now?"

"It is now entering Balboa harbor, sir, with the Coast Guard tugboat in the lead. Some of the waiting ships are clearly displeased by this and are blowing their horns."

"Not our problem! I will be waiting for the tugboat's response, Corporal."

Prendergast then put down his receiver and went to the detailed map of the Panama Canal and of its approaches laid on top of a table and covered by a transparent plastic sheet. From the entrance of the Balboa harbor, there was a distance of over eight miles before a ship arrived at the Miraflores Locks, the first locks of the canal on the Pacific

side. There should thus be plenty of time to assess that bulk carrier before it arrived at the first lock gate.

Prendergast's telephone rang again some seven minutes later. The young lieutenant grabbed the receiver at once.

"Lieutenant Prendergast, Fort Grant's command center!"

"This is Corporal Greenglass, sir: I finally got a response by lamp from the tugboat."

"Well, it sure took its sweet time to answer us. What did the tugboat say?"

"That the JOHN F. DICKSON is transporting a high priority cargo urgently needed in the States, sir."

Prendergast pondered that information for a short moment: that sounded like a legitimate enough reason to make that ship jump the line, especially in view of what that bulk carrier transported. The destruction of the main Navy ammunition depot in Boston last March had been a truly painful blow and had left the Navy scrambling to replace the thousands of tons of ordnance lost in the Boston blast. That in turn meant the need to produce lots of new explosives in a hurry and ammonium nitrate was one of the principal components for producing military grade explosives.

"Alright, we will let that ship jump the line, Corporal. Call me if some other ship tries to interfere with that bulk carrier. I will advise the Miraflores Locks' operators that the order of transits has changed."

Putting down his receiver for a moment, the young officer then called the control room of the Miraflores Locks and passed the information about the JOHN F. DICKSON to the Panamean engineer in charge of the locks. Prendergast then went to get himself a cup of coffee.

He was still sipping on his coffee when his telephone rang again some twelve minutes later, making him pick up the receiver.

"Lieutenant Prendergast, Fort Grant!"

"Sir, this is Corporal Greenglass again. I am sorry to bother you with this but something funny is happening."

"About what, Corporal?"

"About that Coast Guard tugboat, sir. The Harbor Master, where the Coast Guard has its command center, has tried repeatedly to signal the tugboat by lamp, but the crew of the tugboat has not responded yet."

"That sounds like a Coast Guard problem to me, Corporal, and not an Army problem. If these squids can't talk to each other properly, then that is up to them to deal with it. Where is that tugboat and the bulk carrier now?"

"They are now less than a mile from the first lock gate, sir. It is a bit too distant to see properly, even with binoculars, but a dozen armed men just transferred from the cargo ship to the tugboat, with the tugboat alongside the ship."

"That is probably an armed inspection party from the tugboat returning to their vessel after having inspected that bulk carrier. Up to now, this sounds quite kosher to me, Corporal. Forget about that bulk carrier and tugboat and resume your watch of the other ships approaching the harbor. Look especially for that damn German submarine that we were told to watch for over two months ago."

"Uh, could it really come this far from Germany, sir? As far as we know, no German submarine has the range to get to here and then return to Europe."

"Quite true, Corporal, but the Navy was talking about that submarine as if it was some magical sea monster. Just keep your eyes open, Corporal."

"Will do, sir!"

Prendergast then put down his receiver, satisfied that this bulk carrier business was apparently resolved.

12:42 (Panama Time)

Bulk carrier JOHN F. DICKSON

Miraflores Locks, Panama Canal

Ulrich von Wittgenstein felt both excitement and anxiety as he piloted the big bulk carrier, making it enter slowly the first set of locks. Right now, there was only himself, Hugo Margraff and Wolfgang Brock left aboard the JOHN F. DICKSON. All the other German sailors and soldiers had transferred to the captured American tugboat, which was now coming alongside the quay situated just outside of the first lock, its stern turned towards the locks in order to be able to leave as quickly as possible when the time came. The trick now would be to manage to immobilize the bulk carrier inside the first lock, then to evacuate it in time to take enough distance from it before its deadly cargo

exploded. Then, they would still have to deal with the response from the American forts protecting the canal. All in all, he would consider himself damn lucky if he managed to stay alive and free through this day. As for Hugo Margraff, he was presently inside the central hold, ready to set the fuse to the charge hidden among the bags of ammonium nitrate, while Wolfgang Brock was in the engine room, ready to shut down the engines on Wittgenstein's command.

Another four minutes and the bulk carrier was fully inside the first lock, with the thick steel entrance gates closing up. Once they would be closed, the lock operators would start pumping water inside the lock, to raise the ship by some eight meters before it could enter the next lock, to be raised again in order to be able to sail out onto the Miraflores Lake. Now was the time to act! Grabbing the bridge's ship telephone, Ulrich called the engine room, getting an answer from Brock within seconds.

"Engine room!"

"This is Wittgenstein. Shut down the engines, then sabotage them before climbing to the open deck to evacuate the ship. You have three minutes."

"Understood, Herr Leutnant!"

Ulrich then spoke into the handheld radio he had kept nearby.

"Hugo, this is Ulrich. We are now inside the first lock and Brock is going to take out our engines. Set the fuse to your charge and then come out on the open deck to evacuate the ship."

"Will do!" Was the terse answer on the radio. Now knowing that their mission had attained its critical moment, Ulrich grabbed his handheld radio and his silenced pistol before exiting the bridge and climbing down the steel ladder leading to the open deck.

Down in the engine room, Wolfgang Brock shut down both of the big diesel engines of the bulk carrier, then went to the sea cock valve of the compartment, turning it quickly to the full open position. Sea water then started gushing out of the valve and onto the deck. Next, Brock went to the two small explosive charges that had been placed on the two big diesel engines by one of the Brandenburg soldiers before he had evacuated the ship. Lighting their short fuses, Brock then ran to the exit ladder, climbing towards the open deck in a hurry: those short fuses would burn out and initiate their respective two kilo charges of TNT in only two minutes. Their blasts would be more than

enough to severely damage the diesel engines and prevent anyone from using them to take the ship out of the locks.

In the central cargo hold, Hugo Margraff set the timer to his main explosive charge to fifteen minutes before covering the charge and timer, laid inside a pile of ammonium nitrate bags, with two heavy bags. He next ran to another part of the pile of bags and lit the slow fuse of a secondary charge meant to detonate the ammonium nitrate in case the timer of the main charge failed. With the minutes now counting down, Hugo climbed out of the hold in one mighty hurry. He found both Wolfgang Brock and Ulrich von Wittgenstein waiting for him on the open deck, both wearing their Kriegsmarine sea uniforms. Hugo himself was now in full Heer combat attire, complete with MKb 42 assault rifle and steel helmet. They had debated this for a long time aboard the U-800, with the final consensus that, if they were about to be captured or shot in the canal area, they would be dressed as German soldiers and sailors. Two muffled explosions suddenly shook the ship from the inside, making Brock grin devilishly.

"The engines are now out. Good luck to the Americans to move this ship out quickly now."

"Well, I believe that it is time to get the hell out of Dodge, gentlemen, as the Americans would say." Replied Hugo. "We now have less than thirteen minutes before this volcano erupts."

Brock and Wittgenstein didn't argue with him and ran to the starboard side access ladder, then climbed it down at a near run to get to the level of the edge of the lock basin. A number of Panamean workers watched them jump from the ladder and onto the concrete of the lock's side, utterly confused by that scene. As the three Germans ran for all their worth towards the quay outside the first lock, where the tugboat was waiting, two American soldiers on sentry duty in front of the entrance to the control building of the locks belatedly reacted, starting to take their rifles off their shoulders to aim them while one of them shouted an order.

"HALT, OR I SHOOT!"

Hugo Margraff's answer to that was to suddenly brake and turn around, his assault rifle pointed. A short burst from his MKb 42 toppled the American soldiers before they could fire their own rifles. With the Panamean workers now dispersing in panic, Hugo resumed his run, quickly reducing the gap between him and his two German comrades. The trio arrived at the quay three minutes later and literally jumped aboard the waiting

tugboat, with Ulrich then yelling an order to the sailor manning the wheel inside the small bridge.

“GET US OUT OF HERE AT MAXIMUM SPEED!”

The sailor didn't need to be told twice and pushed his engine throttles all the way forward. The tugboat soon attained its top speed of eleven knots while racing down the channel linking the locks and the open sea. As Ulrich von Wittgenstein ran to the radio set of the tugboat to send a coded message to the U-800, Hugo Margraff pointed the three inch gun mount on the forward deck and the 20mm cannon on the aft deck to the sailors and soldiers around him.

“MAN THOSE PIECES, BUT DON'T POINT OR FIRE THEM UNLESS I SAY SO!”

With the men scrambling to obey him, Hugo went to join Ulrich in the small superstructure of the tugboat. The latter looked up at him from the radio operator's station after maybe two minutes.

“The U-800 now knows that we positioned and set the bulk carrier inside a lock. I also told it that we are fleeing in a captured tugboat. It acknowledged my message and replied that it would try its best to meet us as close to the harbor as possible.”

“But, it could risk being sunk then by the American coastal guns.”

The second-in-command of the U-800 then gave him a resolute look.

“Hauptmann, Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer never abandons his crewmembers. We will either all survive today or we will all die together.”

In Fort Grant's command center, the telephone rang again, to the annoyance of Lieutenant Prendergast, who was trying to eat quickly a sandwich while at his post. Picking up the receiver and announcing himself, he heard an excited voice that spoke Spanish at an infernal rate.

“Woah, mister! Speak English and slow down, please! First, who are you?”

After a short delay, his interlocutor managed to speak at a reasonable speed and in a poor, strongly accented English.

“This is the gate locks control. My name is Fernando Martinez. Your soldiers here were shot.”

“Shot?” Said Prendergast, jumping out of his chair. “By whom? How?”

“A man shot them. He came from the ship now inside the locks.”

“That man came from the JOHN F. DICKSON? Was he American?”

"I don't think so, sir."

"And where is that shooter now?"

"He ran away with two other men."

Prendergast swore mentally at the obviously limited English of the Panamean man: at this rate, it was going to take many minutes before learning what the hell was going on.

"And where did these men run away?"

"Uh, I am not sure, sir. I went to help your soldiers. I can ask around."

"Please do, quickly! I will hold the line open."

As Prendergast sat back, with the receiver still against his right ear, he saw that the operators inside the command center were all looking at him questioningly, with the most senior NCO present finally asking him a question.

"Should we put our gun batteries on top alert, sir?"

"For one shooter on foot? Don't you think that this would be quite excessive, Master Sergeant Horowitz?"

"What if he tries to escape by boat, sir?"

Prendergast had to recognize that his master sergeant could be right and nodded his head.

"Alright, have our three inch gun battery go to action stations, but leave our bigger batteries at their present state."

"Yes sir!"

Four minutes later, and with Prendergast about to run out of patience, the Panamean lock operator finally came back on the line, his English as bad as before.

"This is Fernando Martinez again, sir. It was one soldier. He shot your soldiers, then ran away with two other men. They ra..."

The Panamean's voice was then buried by an ear-busting roar that was cut halfway through when the line with the locks went dead. Prendergast stiffened in his chair and started nearly shouting in his receiver.

"Hello! Hello! Mister Martinez, are you there? Hello!"

Eighteen seconds later, the whole concrete bunker containing the command center shook as the shockwave of a formidable explosion hit it, deafening temporarily its occupants. Now fearing the worst, Prendergast let drop his telephone receiver and ran to a nearby corkscrew steel stairwell leading up to an observation bunker. Going to an observation slit on the side where the Miraflores Locks were, the young officer was

about to raise his binoculars to his eyes to look at the locks but froze in shock instead: a titanic mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke and flames was rising over where the Miraflores Locks had been, while a tidal wave from the destroyed locks was coming down the entrance channel.

“My god! The JOHN F. DICKSON: it just blew up inside the Miraflores Locks!” He then raised his binoculars to see in what state the locks were after that huge explosion. The smoke and dust were however too thick to allow him to see the locks themselves. While he was trying to see the locks, he nearly missed the Coast Guard tugboat that was just then passing off Naos Island. Catching it by a corner of one eye, Prendergast then examined it with his binoculars, his suspicions about the tugboat now renewed. That was when the tidal wave from the explosion caught up with the tugboat, hitting its stern and nearly swamping it but also giving it as well a marked boost in speed towards the open sea. He was about to order his three inch guns to aim at the tugboat when the telephone in his bunker rang, to be picked up at once by a signaler.

“Fire Control Bunker One, Fort Grant, sir!... Yes, he is here! One moment, sir.” The signaler then turned his head towards Prendergast while raising the telephone receiver.

“Sir, the Coast Guard command center is asking to speak to the officer in charge.”

Containing his frustration at this interruption, Prendergast went to the telephone and took the receiver from the signaler.

“Lieutenant Prendergast, Duty Watch Officer in Fort Grant.”

“Lieutenant, this is Lieutenant-commander Blaine, from the Coast Guard command center. What the hell happened at the Miraflores Locks?”

“We don’t have much details yet, sir, but apparently the JOHN F. DICKSON, an American-flagged bulk carrier heading towards Texas City with a load of ammonium nitrate, blew up while inside the first lock at Miraflores. We also spotted one of your tugboats that led the JOHN F. DICKSON up to the locks, making it jump the queue. It is acting quite suspiciously in my opinion, sir, and is now speeding towards the open sea.”

“And how would you know if a tugboat’s actions are truly suspicious, instead of being routine navy maneuvers, Lieutenant?” Spat back Blaine, angering Prendergast: this was truly a stupid moment to fuel the old Army-Navy feud.

“Sir, with all due respect, it was YOUR tugboat which led that cargo ship up to the locks and that ship has now exploded inside the locks and probably destroyed them.

Now, can you confirm to me that you still have control of this tugboat, or should I consider it an hostile craft and order my guns to fire at it, sir?"

The Coast Guard senior officer was silent for a moment, probably thinking about the blame game and buck passing that would follow this disaster. However, his old antagonism towards the Army apparently won over and he replied in a harsh voice.

"I will be damned if I let Army gunners shoot at one of my boats, Lieutenant! I will instead have one of our fast patrol craft intercept and inspect this tugboat. In the meantime, hold your fire! Am I clear, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, I will hold my fire at this time, but my commander will be the one to call you back. Goodbye, sir!"

Prendergast nearly broke the telephone receiver when he slammed it down.

On the fleeing tugboat, which had made quite a lot of progress towards the open sea, thanks to the tidal wave from the explosion that had pushed them, both Hugo Margraff and Ulrich von Wittgenstein were wondering why the Americans were not firing at them yet. They were in plain sight of the American coastal guns and any straight-thinking officer should have found their conduct suspicious, to say the least. They had actually started their plan of action while expecting less than a thirty percent chance of coming out of it alive and free. Now, it looked like they could possibly all get out of this intact.

"Are these Americans slow or simply dumb, Ulrich?"

"I don't know, Hugo: you spent more time with them than me. What do you think?"

"Maybe they can't gather the resolve to shoot at one of their own boats?"

"After the damage we just caused? A simple tugboat should be mere peanuts to them. Maybe their commanding officer doesn't want to take a decision until he finishes his lunch."

The Germans all laughed at that, something that helped relieve some of the stress of their situation. Scanning the waters in the direction of the open sea, Ulrich von Wittgenstein suddenly felt his heart jump in his chest: a mere two kilometers away, he could now see the tip of a periscope above the waves. There was also a message being flashed by lamp from the periscope's lens!

"Am going to partially emerge when you will be beside me. Hurry!" Read aloud Ulrich, who then grinned at Hugo Margraff. "The U-800 is waiting for us ahead. Two more kilometers and we will be out of this hot soup."

"Good old Kapitän Kretschmer: always there when we need him." Replied Hugo, feeling relief wash over him. The seventeen Germans aboard the captured tugboat then anxiously waited, wishing that their boat could go faster.

Four minutes later, with no guns having fired at them yet and with the Germans wondering what the Americans were doing, one sailor acting as a lookout shouted a warning while pointing aft.

"FAST BOAT APPROACHING AT FIVE O'CLOCK, DISTANCE: ONE KILOMETER!"

A quick glance with his binoculars told Wittgenstein that the incoming craft was armed and full of men.

"That's a boarding party if I ever saw one, men! Twenty millimeter cannon, fire at will on that approaching boat!"

The sailor manning the aft automatic cannon was actually a qualified anti-aircraft gunner with combat experience and proceeded to prove it, firing short, well aimed bursts at the speed boat. Bracketed with the first salvos, the American boat soon was hit by a number of 20mm shells that caused a carnage onboard and stopped it dead in the water. As the Germans cheered while watching the speed boat sink, a puff of smoke from the shores of Flamenco Island, the nearest of the islands fortified by the Americans, announced more trouble.

"INCOMING! KEEP YOUR HEADS DOWN! HELM, START ZIGZAG COURSE!"

That shell, a medium caliber one judging from the noise it made while passing overhead, missed the tugboat by a fairly wide margin. However, the shell that followed proved much closer.

"THEY ARE GOING TO FIND THE CORRECT RANGE SOON." Shouted Ulrich, making Hugo jump into action.

"THEN, LET'S RETURN THEM THE FAVOR! THREE INCH GUN, FIRE AT WILL AT THAT COASTAL GUN BATTERY!"

With the Germans fighting to stay alive long enough to be rescued by the U-800, the forward deck gun started pumping out 76mm shells at a rate of nearly twenty rounds per

minute. As his gunners were firing their piece, Hugo had an idea when he saw that their supply of ammunition included a few white phosphorous incendiary rounds.

“LOADERS, LOAD WHITE PHOSPHOROUS SHELLS! LET’S PUT A SMOKE SCREEN BETWEEN US AND THOSE GUNS!”

The two sailors acting as loaders obeyed him at once, with the characteristic white smoke clouds of white phosphorous shells soon bursting along the shoreline of Flamenco Island. That smoke soon had a telling effect, with the American gunfire losing both accuracy and rate of fire. By now, Ulrich von Wittgenstein could see the periscope of the U-800 barely fifty meters ahead.

“HELM, SLOW DOWN AND STEER TO PASS JUST TO PORT OF THE PERISCOPE, THEN COME TO A FULL STOP.”

“AYE, HERR LEUTNANT!”

With the tugboat coasting on idle, they soon came level with the periscope of the U-800. The water suddenly started to bubble up, with the periscope rising in the air. A few seconds later, the top of the conning tower of the U-800 broke through the surface and rose a few meters before stopping its ascension. The port access door of the submarine’s covered bridge was thrown open as an American shell passed uncomfortably close overhead. Ulrich grinned on seeing that no less than Otto Kretschmer was now standing in the door, a rope in his hands.

“I’M GOING TO THROW A LINE TO YOU! GRAB IT AND USE IT TO GET YOUR MEN TO THE SIDE ACCESS LADDER OF THE CONNING TOWER.”

“GO AHEAD, HERR KAPITÄN! HAUPTMANN MARGRAFF, KEEP UP THE COVERING FIRE WHILE OUR MEN TRANSFER TO THE U-800.”

“WILL DO!”

With Margraff and his team of gunners pumping out shells as if there was no tomorrow, the German sailors on the tugboat started getting on the U-800, using the loosely held rope to swing themselves against the steel rungs welded to the side of the conning tower, then climbing the ladder up to the covered bridge and disappearing inside the submarine. Soon, only Ulrich and Margraff’s gun crew were left on the tugboat. Ulrich was about to shout to Hugo to get his men on the submarine when a shell hit the tugboat at the level of the stern and exploded. Covering his head with his arms for a second or two, Ulrich then shouted as loudly as he could.

“MARGRAFF, GET YOUR MEN ON THE U-800, NOW!”

To his relief, Hugo did send his gunners towards the rope tied to the railings of the tugboat. However, the Brandenburg officer then stayed with his gun, alternatively loading, aiming and firing it. Exasperated, Ulrich ran down from the small bridge of the tugboat and patted Hugo's left shoulder.

"TIME TO GO, HUGO! COME ON!"

Hugo didn't reply at once, taking the time to fire a last shell before jumping out of the aimer's seat.

"Alright, I'm coming!"

Both men ran to the rope from the U-800 but were bowled over on the deck when another shell hit the tugboat, exploding amidships near the waterline. Hugo got up in a flash and vigorously grabbed Ulrich, helping him get up on his feet.

"Come on, you Kriegsmarine squid! Put a move on it!"

Ulrich was nearly thrown by Hugo towards the conning tower of the U-800 and banged his face against the steel plates of the submarine, but managed to climb quickly the ladder, to be finally grabbed and lifted onto the covered bridge by Otto Kretschmer, who patted his shoulder while smiling to him.

"Happy to see you back aboard, Ulrich. Get inside and prepare the submarine for an emergency dive."

"But, Margraff..."

"He is already climbing up the ladder. Now, get down to the control room!"

Ulrich didn't insist and went through the heavy hatch on one side of the forward observation dome that gave access to the inside of the submarine. Otto then looked back at Hugo Margraff, who was about to get to the level of the covered bridge. A third shell then hit the tugboat and exploded, its blast wave throwing Otto backward in the covered bridge. With his ears ringing hard, he got back up and went to the port side door. Looking down, he saw Hugo Margraff, hanging by one hand from a rung and with blood smearing his right shoulder. Not wasting time asking question, Otto grabbed the handle of the access door to secure himself, then bent down, reaching with his right hand and grabbing the shoulder straps of Hugo's web gear. Otto was quite a strong man and proved it then by pulling up the commando officer with a single arm, with Hugo helping him as best he could while grimacing with pain. Both men were finally inside the covered bridge, with Otto nearly shoving Hugo through the hatch of the observation dome while shouting to his sailors inside.

"I NEED HELP FOR ONE WOUNDED MAN COMING DOWN!"

He didn't wait for Hugo to start going down the internal ladder, instead running to the port access door and closing it. He then entered himself the observation dome and closed shut the heavy armored hatch before shouting downward.

"DIVE! DIVE! DIVE!"

He had to wait for Hugo Margraff getting down to the next level and being carried out of the way before he could slide down the ladder, landing on the level of the control room. He could already feel his submarine go down but he knew that this game was not over yet: the waters around the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal were quite shallow and he would need to make an underwater sprint before he could get to much deeper and safer waters. Running inside the control room, he saw that Ulrich von Wittgenstein was standing at the search periscope.

"MAKE DEPTH TWENTY METER! RETRACT PERISCOPE! ELECTRIC MOTORS FULL AHEAD! TAKE HEADING 170 DEGREES!"

As his sailors obeyed his orders, Otto sat down for a moment, the flow of adrenaline in his veins starting to subside. He then looked up and smiled to Ulrich.

"Well, that was one close call if I ever saw one. On the other hand, we sure felt the bang when the JOHN F. DICKSON blew up. Was it inside the locks when it blew up?"

"It was, Herr Kapitän. I am sure that both sides of the locks are now destroyed, in view of the power of the explosion."

Ulrich's expression then became grave and he lowered the volume of his voice.

"How is Hauptmann Margraff, Herr Kapitän?"

"I am not sure. He was bleeding but conscious when I pulled him in and I saw men carry him away towards the infirmary. As soon as we are safely out of here, we will go see how he is making out."

Both men then stayed silent, thinking about how much worse this could have ended up.

16:47 (Panama Time)

Miraflores Locks, Panama Canal

Major General Henry Rockwell, Commander of the Panama Canal Zone, stood silently on the edge of the huge, water-filled crater that now sat across what had been the first set of locks on the Pacific side of the canal. The first western-side lock was mostly gone, erased by the new crater. The thick concrete median wall that had

separated the parallel sets of locks had been partially blown away or cracked right open along a goodly length, rendering the eastern-side first lock impossible to use. The thick, huge steel lock gates of the western-side lock had been blown off their hinges by the force of the explosion, which had been fully transmitted by the water that had been inside the lock at the time. The adjacent control building and pump house had been obliterated by the titanic blast and didn't exist anymore, for all intents and purposes. A few large, distorted pieces of metal lying around the devastated area was all that was left of the JOHN F. DICKSON.

"It took over a decade of hard work to build this canal. Today, it took only a few minutes to turn it into a giant, useless drainage ditch!"

Turning around, he angrily faced the small group of senior officers waiting at attention behind him. Among them were the commanders of Fort Amador and Fort Grant, plus the Navy representative.

"Do you have any idea of the damage that your negligence has caused, gentlemen? DO YOU? Our ships carrying vital war supplies will now have to do the grand tour down and around Cape Horn, adding over 10,000 nautical miles and more than a month of sailing to their trip. Our warships will also have to go around Cape Horn now, making it impossible for us to quickly reinforce our Pacific Fleet with units from the Atlantic. WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK THE REACTION TO THIS WILL BE IN WASHINGTON? I WANT TO KNOW HOW THIS HAPPENED, AND I WANT TO KNOW IT FAST!"

What Rockwell didn't say or even realized then, as his mind was on the effects of this on his own career, was that this disaster had just dealt a deadly blow to the national economy of the Republic of Panama.

19:08 (Panama Time)

Infirmery of the U-800

Hugo Margraff woke up slowly in a bed, his mind fogged up by the residual morphine in his bloodstream and his eyes unfocused at first. His throat was also parched. A sharp pain in his back made him moan when he tried to raise his head. That moan attracted to him Doctor Konrad List, who gently held him down.

"Easy there, Hauptmann Margraff. You were hit by a piece of shrapnel in your right shoulder blade and your right arm will have to be immobilized for a couple of

weeks, at the least. I already operated on you and extracted that piece of shrapnel. Thankfully, it missed your vital organs and blood vessels and you should be up and running in a month or two. I will just ask you to stay in bed for the moment and move as little as you can.”

“My men...are they all alright?”

“They are, Hauptmann. You were the only one to be wounded. The U-800 is also safely out of the Gulf of Panama and is on its way to Japan. In a month or so, you will be able to have a few nice geisha girls take care of you.”

Those last words made Hugo smile as he imagined that scene. He however became serious again and looked at the naval surgeon.

“Can my men visit me now, Doctor? I would like to talk to them.”

“Hum, alright, but keep the talking to the minimum. You did lose quite a lot of blood. Let me examine you first.”

List took a few minutes to take his temperature and vital signs and to check the large bandage across his back, then went to his telephone, placing a couple of calls before working on cleaning his surgical instruments.

His first visit was by his six men, who had to press against each other to fit in the small space by the side of Hugo’s medical bunk. Having gotten a firm request from Doctor List not to tire Hugo too much or make him talk a lot, the Brandenburg soldiers didn’t say much themselves but gave him a chocolate bar, hiding it for him under his pillow.

“In case Doctor List puts you on some sort of diet.” Whispered Franz Stein in a conspiratorial tone, making Hugo grin.

“Thanks! I do love chocolate.”

“And I’m sure that you also love this, Herr Hauptmann.” Added Otto Lang, handing him a small, pocket-sized bottle. “Schnapps, the best one distilled in my village in Saxony.”

“Now you are talking!” Said Hugo, who quickly hid the precious bottle before looking with a serious expression at his second-in-command. “Does Kapitän Kretschmer have plans to attack the Americans while on his way to Japan, Franz?”

“We don’t know yet, Hauptmann. The Captain has called for a meeting of all the officers in one hour, to discuss that precise subject. He asked me to represent you at that meeting and I intend afterwards to report to you what was said there.”

“Good! Make sure that the Captain knows that we are ready to conduct more land raids or boarding operations if a good occasion shows itself.”

“I will pass the word, Hauptmann. Well, we better leave before Doctor List throws us out of the infirmary. Take it easy, Hauptmann.”

“I will! Thank you again for coming to visit me, men. You are the best soldiers an officer could hope to command.”

In unison, the six soldiers responded by coming to attention and giving him a military salute, to which Hugo replied by saluting slowly with his left arm. His men then walked out of the infirmary, leaving him alone with Doctor List. The latter soon left the infirmary as well to go get a cup of coffee at the galley. Hugo used that chance to grab his new bottle of schnapps and take a couple of good pulls from it. He grimaced as the strong alcohol burned its way down his throat.

“Aaah! That’s what I call real schnapps!”

15:06 (Hawaii Time) / 20:06 (Panama Time)

U.S. Pacific Fleet Headquarters

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

Admiral Chester Nimitz, out of a sudden fit of rage, nearly threw away the message he had just read. Despite all the huge expenditures made over decades to fortify and defend the Panama Canal, German saboteurs had still managed to infiltrate the Panama Zone and destroy a number of the locks. Now, much of his fleet’s supply lifeline would suffer serious delays and would cost a lot more in fuel and transport time. Forcing himself to calm down, Nimitz then thought about how those Germans had managed to get to the locks. As an ex-submariner himself, he had to concede a grudging admiration for the daring and resourcefulness of the men of the U-800. If only half of his submarine commanders could be as daring and devious as this Otto Kretschmer. On the other hand, while this was obviously impossible, he wished that he could inspect first hand that U-800. The little intelligence available about it painted it as a formidable machine of war and a true nautical marvel. Getting up from behind his work desk, Nimitz went to the big map of the Pacific pinned on one wall of his office and studied it, trying to analyze the effects the disaster in Panama would have on the whole Pacific campaign and on his fleet. One thing was pretty sure in his mind, considering the past exploits of the U-800: Otto Kretschmer was not going to be content with simply

sailing to Japan after striking Panama. The big question now was what the U-800 would do to his fleet, not what it could do. A fleet-wide warning message concerning the U-800 was definitely in order.

CHAPTER 17 – ANOTHER BLOW

02:06 (California Time)

Thursday, July 2, 1942

U-800, off San Diego, California

U.S.A.

An elongated dark shape slowly rose from the depth and broke the surface of the water, with barely any bubbles or wake being visible in the obscurity of the three quarter moon night. It rose out by barely four meters before it stopped its ascent, leaving the bulk of its mass under water and out of sight of potential coastal watchers. Inside the forward observation dome of the U-800, Otto Kretschmer, accompanied by Lieutenant-commander Takeshi Nagaoka, started examining at once with his binoculars San Diego and its port area. The three quarter moon helped him see better, but there was also the fact that San Diego was not enforcing a night light curfew. Even the North Island Naval Air Station, with its airfield and its docks, was not blacked out, making Otto shake his head.

“What will it take for these Americans to learn their lessons?”

He then twisted his head to look behind him at Oberbootsmann Fritz Lent, who was looking through the optics of the Zeilsaule C38 Night Director unit mounted in the center of the observation dome. The Zeilsaule C38 had three big, side-by-side 110 millimeter-diameter high quality lens specially coated to enhance night observation and was one of the finest optical instruments produced by the German optical industry, which was itself justly famous for the quality of its lens.

“Can you see details in the airfield area, Herr Lent?”

“Plenty to give us many good targets, Herr Kapitän. I can see clearly the main tarmac area, which is filled with two opposite rows of parked aircraft, going from fighter aircraft to large patrol aircraft and bombers.”

“That sounds perfect as targets for our guns. Let’s see now if our rangefinder unit can give us an approximate range to these parked aircraft.”

Picking up the intercom’s microphone of the dome, Otto called the aft observation dome, where Matrosenobergefreiter Walter Koenig was manning the Flak ZAG rangefinder unit,

normally used to give the range to approaching aircraft but which was perfectly capable as well of targeting sea and land targets at short and medium ranges.

"Kapitän to Flak ZAG rangefinder: we can see from the forward dome a double row of aircraft parked in the airfield situated on the coast, by the entrance to the harbor. Can you see and range those aircraft?"

"Affirmative, Herr Kapitän! The range to the nearest aircraft is approximately 5,400 meters, while the farthest one is 5,900 meters away."

"Excellent! We will thus start with a ranging shot set for 5,700 meters."

Otto then switched his intercom to ship-wide transmission.

"ATTENTION ALL HANDS! BE PREPARED TO MAN QUICKLY OUR TWIN MAIN GUN MOUNT AS PLANNED. HELM: SURFACE, SURFACE, SURFACE! BE READY TO DIVE BACK UNDER QUICKLY AT MY COMMAND."

The water around the submarine seemingly boiled as compressed air was injected in the main ballast tanks, chasing out the water in them and making the U-800 fully rise to the surface. Otto, who was closely watching the operation, gave another order on the intercom when he saw that the forward deck of his submarine was fully out of the water.

"DEPLOY THE MAIN GUN MOUNT! GUNNERS, MAN YOUR WEAPON!"

Activated from inside the submarine, the two deck panels covering the main gun well slid open sideways, creating at the same time a large platform on which the gunners would have plenty of room to walk on, while the big twin 12.7 centimeter SK C38 gun mount rose out of its well. At the same time, the forward access hatch on the forward face of the conning tower was thrown open and five men ran to the gun mount, while six more men followed more slowly while carrying one complete 12.7 cm round each. Inside the forward airlock, other sailors were readying more rounds, in order to pass them via a human chain to the twin guns and thus accelerate the rate of fire. With Fritz Lent providing precise bearings and with Koenig adding an estimated range to target, the big gun mount was soon slewed in the direction of North Island Naval Air Station, two 12.7 cm rounds with their 28 kilogram explosive shells being fed into the gun breaches.

"ON TARGET!"

"ONE RANGING SHOT, RANGE OF 5,700 METERS, AT PARKED AIRCRAFT, FIRE!"

A blinding flash illuminated the night for a second when the first round was fired, while the muzzle blast and roar made the whole submarine vibrate. Otto, like his men manning their fire control director and rangefinder, anxiously waited to see where their

first shell would land. Otto grinned when that shell burst in the middle of the tarmac, close to a four-engine bomber.

“GUNNER, CORRECTION! LEFT, FIFTY METERS! FIRE WHEN READY!”

The gun aimer effected the correction quickly, then fired his second round. The men waiting with ready rounds in their arms advanced forward at once to reload both guns. This time, the shell landed just beside a bomber, ripping off one wing and shredding its fuselage with shrapnels.

“GUNNER, FIRE FOR EFFECT! MAXIMUM RATE!”

Two new shells were fired the next second, with a pair of shells following each subsequent four seconds. Otto ordered a new adjustment in both range and azimuth after each series of eight rounds, sweeping his gunfire up and down each of the two rows of parked aircraft. For good measure, he had twelve more rounds fired at the big hangars lining one side of the main tarmac, then gave the order to stow back the gun mount in its well and to evacuate the open deck. The U-800 was already nearly fully submerged when the American anti-aircraft guns posted around the naval air station belatedly opened fire, a bit over two minutes after the firing of the first round by the submarine. Otto grinned to Takeshi Nagaoka as the first American shells passed well overhead, missing their target by over 700 meters in range.

“We will be gone well before these American gunners find the correct range. From my count, we must have destroyed or severely damaged at least twenty aircraft on North Island, many of them patrol bombers. That should render life easier for us during the coming days.”

“And may I ask what we will do next, Captain Kretschmer?” Asked the Japanese Navy officer.

“You certainly may. I intend to go up the coast to Los Angeles, then to San Francisco, and attack the shipping I find on the way, to render the Americans paranoid and possibly convince them to divert destroyers from their present Pacific missions and come to the defense of their West Coast. That way, we will both sink valuable merchant ships and their cargo and we also will weaken their naval posture in the Central Pacific. What? You seem to dislike that plan, Commander Nagaoka.”

Feeling bad at hiding something from a friendly naval officer who had earned his admiration during the last few weeks, Nagaoka spoke while lowering his voice, so that the sailors near him couldn't listen on.

"Pardon me if my reaction may have seemed insulting to you, Captain. To be candid and frank with you, submarine service in the Imperial Japanese Navy tends to be looked at with some contempt, as many of our officers consider underwater attacks to be cowardly, dishonorable acts. To attack merchant ships rather than warships is considered even more contemptible, which is why our submarine commanders generally don't attack enemy merchant ships and wait instead for enemy warships to be sighted to attack. I am not however part of those who think little of submarine warfare, especially after watching you and your men in action."

Otto was silent for a moment, digesting those words, before looking at the sailors present in the forward dome.

"Please leave the dome now, men."

"Yes, Herr Kapitän!"

Once the sailors were gone, Otto looked back at Nagaoka.

"No offense taken, Commander. I appreciate frankness and understand that your national culture may affect the views of your compatriots about submarine warfare. However, that attitude is a huge strategic mistake in my opinion and it may cost you the war in the long run. You saw what our submarine campaign has done to Great Britain and how close the British maritime lifeline is to collapse."

"I saw the reports on that in Berlin, Captain. Talking of reports, I must tell you something else. My ambassador reacted with some dismay on reading that you once retrieved a group of Americans that had been shipwrecked in the Caribbean Sea and sheltered them until you let them go safely."

"And why did he show dismay at that?" Asked Otto, his voice hardening by a notch. "I was simply following the laws of the sea. What would your ambassador have wanted me to do with those people? Kill them on the spot?"

Nagaoka lowered his head in embarrassment before answering in a barely audible voice.

"Yes! Our ancient code of honor in Japan, called 'Bushido', considers that to let yourself be taken prisoner is a most dishonorable and cowardly act that strips away any rights from that person and would make him unworthy of living. A Japanese will commit suicide rather than letting himself be taken prisoner. Those Japanese who fail to do that are then considered to have dishonored both themselves and their family name. However, I am the son of a career diplomat and renown international jurist and I was born in The Hague, in the Netherlands, then grew up in France, Germany and

Czechoslovakia. I actually lived very few years in Japan and, as a result, don't think like the average Japanese. I joined the Imperial Japanese Navy as a signals officer out of tradition, not because I have a warrior spirit, and this cruise on your submarine is the first time I have been near combat."

"So, you disapprove of your navy's outlook on prisoners. And what exactly could an American sailor or soldier expect if captured by the Japanese, if I may ask?"

"Nothing good, Captain. He will either be executed on the spot, interrogated brutally for information or turned into a slave worker."

Otto's face hardened at those words, but his expression softened after a few seconds and he bowed his head slightly at Nagaoka as he replied to him.

"Your humanity is a credit to you, Commander. So, what would you counsel me to do if I capture some Americans while on our way to Japan?"

"Simple: don't! My ambassador even counseled your government to machinegun enemy shipwreck survivors in the water, rather than saving them from the sea."

Otto shook his head in obvious disgust then.

"War is already a bad thing. It doesn't need to be made even worse by committing such atrocities."

"May I ask in turn what are your motivations in this war, Captain?"

"You may! I would have much preferred to see Europe at peace, but my country is now at war and my duty is to defend it and prevent its defeat, which would inevitably result in its collapse and possible dismantlement. I am proud of being a German and, while I have no political affiliations, I will die if necessary to defend my country, but I will not dirty its name by committing atrocities or war crimes."

Nagaoka bowed low at Otto while speaking softly.

"A most honorable attitude, Captain. Be assured of my complete loyalty and support during this trip."

05:51 (California Time)

North Island Naval Air Station

San Diego, California

Navy Captain William Murray was grim as he inspected the damage to his air station after sunrise, accompanied by a few of his senior staff officers. The losses in valuable aircraft was particularly stinging to him.

"Twenty-three aircraft destroyed and seventeen more seriously damaged, plus four hangars rendered nearly useless, and all that in about two minutes! How could a German submarine possess such a heavy firepower and also shoot so accurately?"

"Well, sir, the U-800 is said to be in a class of its own." Replied his intelligence officer, Lieutenant-commander Leslie Warrington. "Our own gunners and coastal lookouts say that it had a twin gun mount, something that would drastically raise its rate of fire. Also, our ordnance experts have had the chance to examine fragments from the shells fired by that submarine and can say with near certainty that they are of five inch caliber."

Murray stopped walking at once and pivoted to face Warrington.

"A twin five inch mount, on a submarine? That's unheard of!"

"Uh, not really, sir. That U-800 is actually reminiscent of our own NARWHAL cruiser submarine, which is armed with two single six inch guns."

"Hum, you're right! Make sure to pass that piece of intelligence about the U-800's guns in our report to the 12th Naval District."

Murray then saw a jeep approaching fast and turned to wait for it. A young signals officer jumped out of the jeep after it screeched to a halt in front of the base commander and saluted him while presenting him a message form.

"This was just received, sir: two merchant ships, one cargo and one tanker, were torpedoed and sunk forty nautical miles from here, off Oceanside. The naval district commander has ordered the whole Pacific coast to be on full anti-submarine and anti-raider alert."

"Damn! That U-800 is sailing up the coast towards Los Angeles and San Francisco. This could become very bloody indeed."

19:23 (California Time)

Control room of the U-800

Off San Francisco

"Herr Kapitän, our high definition sonar is detecting a dense underwater minefield ahead. It seems to be describing a half circle around the entrance to the Golden Gate."

"Very well! Helm, reduce speed to three knots! Steer to Heading 005 and keep our present depth!"

Otto next went to the station of their high definition bow sonar, situated near the helmsman's station, to look at the display screen.

"Okay, Herr Bock, let's map this minefield in detail. Maybe we will be lucky and find a gap in it."

"At first sight, I would say that we would be lucky to find such a gap, Herr Kapitän. This minefield is quite dense. I will be able to give you a better picture in a few minutes."

"Take your time and be thorough, Bock. Coordinate with the helm to follow closely the boundaries of this minefield and report immediately if you find a gap."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!"

Otto then went aft to join Ulrich von Wittgenstein and Takeshi Nagaoka at the tactical plot table.

"Commander Nagaoka, what does your navy know about the defenses of San Francisco Harbor?"

"Not as much as we wished, unfortunately, but enough to say that it is supposed to be the second most heavily defended American port after New York. It has numerous coastal gun batteries, anti-aircraft gun batteries, anti-submarine minefields and anti-submarine nets. Breaking through those defenses to enter San Francisco Bay would be an exploit by itself. As for the Golden Gate Strait itself, it is very deep but has strong currents and tides, while strong winds and thick fog, especially in the morning, can render traffic difficult."

Otto raised an eyebrow in interest at the mention of 'thick fog'.

"How frequent is fog in the area?"

"In the Summer, nearly daily. Why?"

"Because it may just allow us to repeat an infiltration tactic we used in Portland a few months ago, when we sailed through a mined entrance channel, using fog to hide us while we were partially submerged."

"Interesting! But, that would bring you only part way: an anti-submarine net blocks the inner entrance to the Golden Gate, about one kilometer from the Golden Gate Bridge. What would you do to pass that net?"

Ulrich von Wittgenstein, who was listening carefully to the exchange, suddenly had an idea and cut into the conversation.

"Maybe we won't even need to pass through that net. That Golden Gate Bridge is a suspension-type bridge, if I remember well, no?"

"Correct!" Answered Nagaoka.

"And how many support towers are there, and where?"

"Uh, there are two very tall steel towers that support the suspension cables. One is built just at the northern extremity of the bridge, while the southern tower juts out of the coast."

"And the base of that southern tower, could it be vulnerable to damage by torpedo hits?"

Both Otto and Takeshi looked at Ulrich with wide eyes, suddenly catching on to what he had in mind.

"I believe that the southern support tower's foundation are indeed exposed to torpedo hits, but the base is made of concrete and massive. One torpedo may cause some damage, but not enough to endanger the bridge."

"And eight, or even twelve torpedoes, would that be enough to make that bridge tower topple over?" Asked Otto, getting excited.

"Hell, I am no civil engineer, but it certainly would create enough damage to cause a lot of worries to the Americans about the bridge's structural integrity, especially if strong gusts of winds come in."

The reaction of Otto to those words then surprised both Takeshi and Ulrich. Turning around, Otto shouted an order towards the helmsman.

"GO UP TO PERISCOPE DEPTH! STEADY ON THE HEADING AND SPEED!"

He then went to the watch periscope and raised it as soon as the ballasts operator announced that they were at periscope depth. Ulrich saw a savage grin form on his captain's face after just two seconds of observation. His next series of orders then froze the blood of everyone in the control room.

"SURFACE, SURFACE, SURFACE! HELM, STEER HARD TO STARBOARD, HEADING 095! ENGINES TO FULL! TORPEDO ROOMS, PREPARE AND FLOOD ALL TUBES! MAN THE TORPEDO FIRE CONTROL SYSTEM!"

As all the Germans in the control room suddenly got busy, passing or executing Otto's orders, Takeshi Nagaoka was left speechless by the audacity and quickness of decision of Otto Kretschmer. A typical Japanese submarine captain would have weighed in his options for long moments and would then probably go for the safest one, in this case withdrawal. The big question now was what the Americans would do about such a decision.

20:02 (California Time)

Searchlight position, Battery Gate, Fort Point, northern tip of Presidio District San Francisco

"Hey, Rick, do you think that this damn German submarine will really try to attack San Francisco?"

"Well, it did attack the Panama Canal and succeeded in blowing up the locks, no?" Replied one of the three soldiers manning the big defense searchlight, situated nearly under the southern extremity of the Golden Gate Bridge. The third soldier snickered at that.

"Yeah, and the Army censorship tried for a full week to hide that fact to the public. Now, the bigwigs are nearly hysterical about how dangerous that U-800 is and are insisting on keeping us on indefinite alert. Of course, they're not the ones who will stand awake all night. And with that 'soup' cutting visibility to about zero, what do they expect us to do? You can't see dick!"

That 'soup' was a thick fog from the ocean side that had rolled up the Golden Gate Strait, something that was very frequent for San Francisco, especially in the Summer months. The one named 'Rick' then replied dismissively.

"Forget the fog and about seeing through it, Jack. We have radar, don't we? Radars don't care about fog."

Jack grunted to acknowledge that fact. The problem was that Rick knew and understood little about radar technology in general and about U.S. Army radar sets in particular, including the fact that all radars had a minimum range within which they could not detect objects on the ground or on water. The radars in use to protect San Francisco were first generation, metric-band sets optimized for medium and long range, with blind minimum zones of one kilometer or more against ground targets. They were

thus next to useless against a ground or sea target below their own level that would be passing literally under their nose.

The three searchlight operators were deciding on whether to send one of their own to get mugs of hot coffee when a tremendous explosion from nearby shook the coastline, making the soldiers jerk nervously.

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?" Shouted Jack, twisting his head in the direction of the strait, from which the explosion had been heard.

"I don't know, but it was a big explosion." Replied Rick. "It came from the approximate direction of the southern tower of the bridge. I..."

A second, equally powerful explosion then shook the shoreline again.

"Holy shit! There must be saboteurs at work around the bridge's tower foundations."

A third, then a fourth explosion, all from the same direction and at a regular interval of five seconds, finally made Rick understand what was happening.

"IT MUST BE THAT FUCKING GERMAN SUBMARINE! IT IS FIRING TORPEDOES AT THE BASE OF THE BRIDGE'S SOUTH TOWER!"

"WHAT CAN WE DO?" Lamented Jack. "WE CAN'T SEE IT IN THAT FOG!"

"WE CAN CALL IT IN!" Replied the first soldier, named Daniel. "LET THOSE BIGWIGS FIGURE IT OUT!"

While Daniel jumped on the field telephone provided to their position and cranked it to call their battery's command post, more explosions flashed through the fog. As the soldier finally got their command post on the line, the explosions stopped, making Rick raise an eyebrow.

"I counted a total of eight explosions. I wonder if that submarine ran out of torpedoes. Hopefully, the base foundations of the bridge will have been solid enough to withstand those hits. Someone should..."

A distant explosion directly to the North cut him off, followed at five second intervals by three more explosions. Then, silence fell.

"It sounded like that submarine also targeted the base of the bridge's northern tower. God, I hope that the bridge will hold steady! However, it seems that this submarine truly ran out of torpedoes by now."

Daniel soon put down his field telephone receiver and looked at his two comrades.

"The Captain asks that one of us go check the state of the bridge's tower base."

“Does he think that we are civil engineers or what? And how the hell are we to get to the tower’s base? It is nearly 400 yards from the shoreline. What a jackass!” Despite that protest, Rick did go down to the nearby shoreline, but could not see the southern tower’s base through the fog, as he had expected. Grumbling, he climbed back to the searchlight position and arrived there as their battery commander, Captain Virgil Oakley was jumping out of his jeep. Oakley was a graying man with nearly thirty years in the army, none of them spent in combat, who could at best be described as a very average officer who treated his soldiers like second class people.

“So, what happened here?” Oakley asked to nobody in particular. Rick took on himself to answer him.

“What must be a submarine fired a total of twelve torpedoes against the bases of the bridge’s towers, eight against the southern tower base and four against the northern tower base, sir. I went to the shoreline to look from closer but still couldn’t see through the fog, sir.”

“And where is that presumed submarine now, soldier?”

Rick stiffened with anger at the tone of that question, but managed to stay polite.

“We actually never saw it, because of the fog, sir.”

“So, those explosions could have been anything, including explosive charges placed by saboteurs.”

“No sir!” Replied at once Rick, surprising himself. “Each explosion was very powerful and had to come from a bomb or a torpedo, sir.”

“We will see about that, soldier. I will go get a divers team, so that it could go inspect the bases of the towers. In the meantime, resume your duties and keep an eye open for any suspicious person around the shoreline.”

“Yes sir!” Said Rick, saluting. Oakley then left in his jeep, with the three soldiers watching him drive away.

“What a dickhead!” Pronounced Rick. “Charges placed by saboteurs my ass! Hey, Dan, you were about to go get some hot coffee. How about going now?”

“A good idea: this mist can really chill you out.”

Dan didn’t have the time to make three steps before a new explosion, as powerful as the previous ones and coming from the same direction, shook the shoreline. As another explosion followed five seconds later, Rick understood what was happening.

“THAT DAMN SUBMARINE: IT TOOK THE TIME TO RELOAD ITS TORPEDO TUBES AND IS NOW FIRING A SECOND SALVO!”

"MY GOD, WHAT CAN WE DO? THE BRIDGE WILL NEVER SURVIVE SUCH A REPEATED POUNDING!"

Out of desperation, the three soldiers lit up their giant searchlight, but managed only to illuminate large patches of nearby fog. Silence fell again after a total of twelve new explosions, making Rick slam angrily his fist against the concrete parapet of his position.

"What the hell are our radar operators doing? Our guns should have fired on that submarine by now."

To his fury, none of the dozens of coastal defense guns protecting the approaches to San Francisco Bay fired once, nor did any of the underwater mines placed specifically to prevent submarines from entering the strait while submerged detonate. The night then fell around the three frustrated soldiers, with the fog slowly dissipating around them. The wind, which had already been fairly strong during the day, picked up after Sunset and became gradually stronger, eventually reaching gusts of sixty kilometers per hour. As it was designed to do, the bridge absorbed that wind by flexing and swinging a bit around. However, this time growing noises of tortured steel overhead made the searchlight operators increasingly nervous.

"God, let's hope that the bridge will stand." Wished Dan aloud. "If it falls, it will be nothing short of a disaster for San Francisco."

"I hope that someone used his head and closed the bridge temporarily to vehicle traffic until it could be fully inspected." Said Jack, who was contradicted at once by Rick, who pointed upward at the headlights of cars and trucks rolling on the bridge.

"I'm afraid not, Jack. Traffic seems to be still as dense as usual."

"Damn it! Will anyone in Fort Scott finally start thinking with his brains rather than with his ass?"

As if his swearing had inflicted a final blow to the bridge, the noise of tortured steel suddenly turned into a horrible ripping noise. The three soldiers could only watch with horror as the mighty Golden Gate Bridge, which stood 230 meters above the water at the top of its support towers, started slowly toppling sideways towards the West.

"NOOO! GOD, NO!"

Dozens of cars and trucks, their headlights still on, fell off the bridge's roadway and down into the cold waters of the Golden Gate Strait as the bridge's inclination increased. A last gust of wind gave the fatal blow to the massive structure, with the reinforced concrete bases of the two support towers nearly exploding under the stress, snapping

clean. The overwhelmed searchlight operators heard the terrified last screams of hundreds of people as their vehicles and the bridge fell in the water of the strait. Even then, the remaining patches of fog prevented the soldiers from being able to watch fully that drama. Dan was left nearly catatonic, while Rick couldn't take his eyes from what was still visible of the remains of the bridge.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! There must have been thousands of people on the bridge when it collapsed. And the whole navigation channel is now hopelessly blocked: the port of San Francisco is completely bottled up!"

Within an hour of the disaster, thousands of soldiers, sailors and policemen were called up to form rescue parties, in order to save those who had been on the bridge and were still alive. Unfortunately, the survivors proved to be few indeed. The last patches of fog finally cleared up during the night, allowing engineers and experts to examine the remains of the bridge and the waters of the Golden Gate Strait. What they saw completely disheartened them: the twisted mass of steel of the bridge and its long roadway completely blocked the strait, with parts sunk as deep as forty meters down, still precariously held from falling to the bottom by the partly cut massive steel support cables. Keeping such a disaster from hitting the front pages of newspapers or from the news rooms of radio stations was simply impossible and the news of the collapse of the Golden Gate Bridge and of the closing of San Francisco Harbor for an undetermined period of time soon reached the whole nation. The U-800 didn't even have to wait to hear the radio news about it, which it eventually did anyway, to confirm the destruction of the bridge: Otto Kretschmer was able to snap a few pictures of the collapsed structure from a distance, through the lens of his watch periscope. He then exchanged a series of sober handshakes with his officers and men, realizing too well that this spectacular strategic coup must have cost many innocent civilian lives. However, the thoughts of the thousands of German civilians routinely killed by British night air bombings against German cities somehow assuaged his regrets then. After his crew had settled down from celebrating, Otto looked firmly around him at the men in the control room of his submarine.

"We just delivered a second hammer blow to the enemy, men, but our work is far from finished yet. We will next strike at the center of American naval power in the Pacific. Helm, head for Hawaii!"

13:35 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, July 7, 1942

Cabinet conference room, The White House

Washington, D.C.

There were a lot of long faces this afternoon in the President's cabinet conference room, including Admiral Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations. He entered the conference room with his two main fleet commanders, Admiral Chester Nimitz and Admiral Royal Ingersoll, to find seven other men already sitting around the big table. He recognized at once General Marshall, the head of the Army, his chief of staff, Major General Dwight Eisenhower, Lieutenant General Henry Arnold, the commander of the Army Air Forces, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and, finally, Harry Hopkins, the powerful and influential presidential advisor. They were all undoubtedly here as a consequence of the double disasters in Panama and San Francisco, which were now causing King endless headaches. A presidential aide then led King and his two fleet commanders to their assigned seats at the long table.

There were precious few greetings and pleasantries exchanged around the table as they all waited for the President, nobody being in a light mood today. After another three minutes the President entered the room, sitting in his wheelchair and followed closely by an elderly admiral that King knew very well. While Roosevelt took place at the head of the table, Admiral William Leahy took place immediately to his right, marking him as a top participant. Roosevelt scanned quickly the faces of the men around the table before speaking to them.

"Thank you all for coming, gentlemen. For those who would be wondering why Admiral Leahy is not in France as my envoy to the Vichy government, know that I intend soon to formally name him my personal chief of staff for military affairs."

Most around the table nodded their heads at that, the 67 year-old admiral being widely respected. Roosevelt then spoke again, wasting no time in coming to the subject of the meeting.

"As you all may have guessed already, this meeting is meant to discuss the impact of the double disasters in Panama and in San Francisco on our present war

strategy. First, I would like Admiral King to describe to the rest of us the impact on Navy operations.”

King, who had placed a thick file in front of him on the table, didn't open it before starting to speak, having much more to say than just what was in the file.

“Mister President, while the destruction wrought in Panama and San Francisco is very painful to us, those incidents are only the latest ones to strike us along our coasts during the last seven months. I believe that the total damage we suffered from these incidents must be considered if we are to judge properly the impact on our naval operations.”

To his intense displeasure, President Roosevelt cut him off nearly at once in an impatient tone.

“Yes, yes, I remember well enough the attacks against Portland and Boston, Admiral. What I want to know right now is the consequences from the attacks on the Panama Canal and San Francisco on Navy operations.”

King nearly barked back at Roosevelt but managed to keep his temper...just.

“Very well, Mister President. First, about the attack on the Panama Canal. We now know that rebuilding the locks there will take well over a year and will involve some very heavy construction and civil engineering work, on top of costing a fortune. In the meantime, we have no choice but to reroute our ships traveling between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans down the coasts of South America and around Cape Horn. This adds over 12,000 nautical miles and six to eight weeks of travel, compared to the route through the Panama Canal. Most of our ships don't even have enough range to do such a detour without one or even two refueling stops along the way. We were thus obliged to set up in a hurry secure port refueling points, one in the Falklands, the other in Peru. We could have set that last point in Chile but, as you know, the Chilean government's sympathies towards Germany made a Chilean port a less than ideal spot to refuel our ships. The American bulk carrier ship that blew up in the Panama Canal locks was in fact hijacked by Germans from the submarine U-800 while in the Chilean port of Valparaiso.”

Roosevelt made a face at those words.

“Yes, I know! I in fact had a few choice words for the Chilean President about his so-called neutrality in this war when I last spoke to him on the phone. But go on, Admiral!”

"Thank you, Mister President! One of the direct impacts of having to reroute our ships around Cape Horn, on top of the time wasted, is the tremendous extra expenditure in fuel involved. Essentially, the fuel cost of transporting war supplies from our East Coast to our forces in the Pacific has doubled or even tripled, depending on what the destination in the Pacific is. This in turn has put huge pressures on our refineries to produce all that extra fuel and will also mean less fuel available to be shipped to Great Britain or Australia. Now, for the attack on San Francisco. It couldn't have happened at a much worse time, as we were preparing to push against the Japanese in the Central and Southwest Pacific. San Francisco was by far our main supply and maritime hub for our resupply routes in the Pacific, especially towards Australia. San Francisco also housed a number of important shipyards and naval installations. Now, it is completely closed to shipping, something that will not change for months at the least. We could reroute some of the supplies for the Pacific Front through other ports, like Los Angeles, San Diego and Seattle, but those ports don't have the capacity San Francisco had. This means a supply line to the Pacific with a much smaller capacity. Allied to our need to send any supplies from our East Coast around the Cape Horn, the total effect is a near stranglehold on our major operations in the Pacific. Particularly hard hit are our preparations for our incoming campaign in the Solomon Islands. We will now be forced to either delay that campaign by months, to take the time to accumulate the needed supplies and fuel, or to go at half cock and pray that what we have now will be enough. Personally, I think that the last option would be irresponsible and would risk the lives of our men needlessly."

Dwight Eisenhower then jumped in the conversation, earning himself an angry glare from King.

"Then, if sustaining an offensive in the Pacific has become so costly and difficult, why not simply curtail that offensive, switch to a temporary defensive stance in the Pacific and concentrate our resources on the European Front?"

King nearly went ballistic on hearing that and rose his voice to a near shout.

"We were first attacked in the Pacific, with thousands of our men either killed or wounded, and you are now proposing to let down our fighting men in the Pacific, so that you could send more help to the British? A truly fine suggestion, coming from a glorified staff officer who never saw combat in his whole career!"

Roosevelt hurried at once to calm the spirits around the table, as Chester Nimitz was ready to add his opinion on Eisenhower's suggestion to that of King.

"Please, gentlemen! Let's stay civil! I have no intentions to abandon our men in the Pacific and certainly haven't forgotten the painful losses the Japanese caused us."

"May I ask how much exactly this fuel crisis will cut out of the supply of aviation gasoline destined for my bomber force in Great Britain?" Asked General Arnold as King and Nimitz still glared at Eisenhower. The Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, took on him to answer Arnold, listened to carefully by Secretary of War Henry Stimson.

"My logistics specialists are still calculating the exact amounts of fuel the rerouting of our ships around Cape Horn will involve, but I am afraid that everyone will soon feel the pinch from this, General Arnold. We cannot cut further the amounts of fuel used by our civilian industries and transport system, on pain of badly hurting our war production efforts, so that option is not a viable one. Using our railroad system to transport supply from the East Coast to the West Coast, instead of using ships, is not an option either, as our rail network is already heavily used and has very little extra capacity left in it. Our nation is fully engaged in the war effort and is pretty much working at maximum capacity right now. As incredible as this may sound, that lone German submarine has done way more damage to date to our nation than the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor."

Those last words infuriated Roosevelt, who slapped his left hand on the table.

"And can you tell me why the Navy is seemingly incapable of finding and sinking that damn U-800, Secretary Knox?"

Knox didn't reply, instead looking at King for his help. The CNO in turn spoke to Roosevelt.

"Mister President, the truth is that this U-800 is no ordinary German submarine. From what we know of it at this time, it is the lone prototype of a new class of German attack submarine and its design can only be described as 'revolutionary'. It is faster underwater than any other submarine in the World, can stay submerged much longer, is very heavily armed and has a very long range. That last point was in fact probably the reason why the German leadership selected it for its present mission, which ultimately is to carry some strategic supplies and technical data to Japan. To top it all, it is commanded by Captain Otto Kretschmer, who is acknowledged to be the best German submarine commander afloat right now."

"My God! You make it sound as if that U-800 is the Devil's boat, Admiral King." King made a wry smile at that.

"It certainly would deserve that title in my opinion, Mister President."

17:40 (Western Pacific Time)

Wednesday, July 8, 1942

Cuban cargo ship M.V. ESMERALDA

Halfway between San Francisco and Hawaii

Captain Emilio Morales, master of the M.V. ESMERALDA, was at a loss about what he would do after reaching port in Honolulu and unloading his present cargo there. The destruction of the Panama Canal locks, announced on radio news since a week ago, had cut his planned return route back to his home port of Mariel, in Cuba. Worse, it left him with not enough money to pay for all the extra fuel he would need to buy to be able to return to Cuba via the Cape Horn, unless he found some very valuable cargo in Hawaii that would help him pay for that fuel. However, finding such cargo in Honolulu was far from being an assured thing. The alternative would be to stay in the Pacific for the months to come and carry whatever cargo he could find that would sustain his ship and crew. The maritime company that owned the M.V. ESMERALDA was not exactly rich, so getting much help from Mariel was not really an option for him.

Looking down at the deck of his cargo ship through the windows of the bridge, Morales couldn't help smile on seeing that most of his female passengers were taking advantage of the good weather to enjoy some Sun and fresh air. 'Madame' Maria Ventura was headed for Honolulu with nineteen of her 'girls', in order to 'go help serve the needs of the U.S. Navy there', in her own words. All of Madame Ventura's girls were young and most pretty, with a few of them truly worthy of the word 'beautiful'. In a way, they represented some of the best that Cuba could offer and his small crew of fifteen men had been busy spending most of their cash money to buy some time with the prostitutes during the trip to Hawaii. The funniest part was that American authorities in Cuba had made no problems for Madame Ventura and her troupe, quickly giving them visas for Hawaii and validating the contract that she had obtained from an American businessman (in reality a member of the American Mafia) to go augment the ranks of the local Honolulu prostitutes, who were being run ragged trying to satisfy the needs of the tens of thousands of sailors, soldiers and aviators posted around Honolulu or passing by Pearl Harbor.

A surprised shout from one of his sailors, who was acting as bridge lookout, suddenly made him twist his head to port.

“CAPTAIN, SOMEBODY IS SENDING US A MESSAGE BY LAMP, BUT I CAN'T SEE ANY SHIP.”

Seeing at once the blinking light that seemingly came from just above the waves to the port side of his ship, Morales raised his binoculars to his eyes. His blood froze when he understood where the light came from.

“THAT'S A SUBMARINE, SIGNALING US THROUGH ITS PERISCOPE. IT IS ORDERING US TO STOP AT ONCE AND TO REFRAIN FROM USING OUR RADIO, ON PAIN OF BEING SUNK. HELM, FULL STOP! ENGINES ON IDLE!”

Morales then hurried to the port open bridge wing, where he used a signal lamp to reply to the submarine.

“Am stopping now. Please do not shoot. I have passengers.”

He then anxiously waited to see what the submarine would do. Was it an American submarine intent on inspecting his ship? The American navy had proved very jumpy and nervous in the last days and weeks, for understandable reasons. On the other hand, the order not to use his radio didn't match with that hypothesis. To the excitement of his female passengers lined up against the guard rails on the weather deck, a dark blue-green shape then started to emerge from the waves, creating a wide wake of white foam and bubbles. Morales gulped down hard as he saw that it looked like no American submarine he had seen before in the various American ports he had stopped into during the last months. The newcomer soon proved to look truly formidable, on top of being about as big as his cargo ship. At first, he could see no deck guns on the submarine, but that changed soon enough, as three separate gun mounts popped in the open, coming from under its weather deck through sliding hatches. Sailors then ran out via hatches on the forward and aft faces of the tall, well-profiled conning tower, going to the gun mounts and preparing them for possible action as the submarine maneuvered to get closer to the M.V. ESMERALDA. A new message by lamp, this time sent from the top of the submarine's conning tower, made Morales order a crewman to go lower in place the port side access ladder of his ship. At that point, Morales decided to go down to the weather deck, in order to meet the eventual boarding party from the submarine. There, he was approached at once by Madame Ventura.

“Captain Morales, is this an American submarine?”

“Uh, I don't think so, Madam Ventura.”

The Madame's eyes opened wide at those words, while she covered her opened mouth with her hands, fearful.

"Don't tell me that this is a Japanese submarine! Those barbarians would show no pity to my girls."

"I don't think that it is a Japanese submarine either. I believe that it is probably German."

"A German submarine, here in the Pacific? But, that's unheard of!"

"That was true enough...until one of them blew up the Panama Canal locks and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco."

The Madame took a deep breath, then looked at the approaching submarine, now maneuvering to come side by side with the cargo ship.

"That would be them? By God! Their reputation would make old Blackbeard²³ proud."

"Well, for the little I heard about that U-800, its crew is said to have been correct with the few prisoners they took, so I think that your girls will be safe from any unwanted attention."

Maria Ventura was no idiot and knew the male psyche quite well, so she immediately understood the double meaning of Morales' last words and nodded her head once.

"Then, I will make sure that those Germans will treat my girls right."

"Wait! You better tell them that those Germans will most probably stink of diesel fumes: all submariners smell the same after a week or two at sea."

Maria Ventura thought that over for a second before smiling to him.

"And you think that all the sailors and soldiers who came to visit my girls in Mariel washed before coming?"

Morales laughed at that, then looked back towards the submarine as Madame Ventura went to join back with her girls.

Matrosengefreiter Emil Kinzel was standing on the forward deck of the U-800, ready with other sailors to tie mooring cables between the submarine and the cargo ship, when female shouts made him look up at the guard rails of the cargo ship. His eyes popped open and a grin came to his face when he saw about twenty young and pretty

²³ Blackbeard: Nickname given to a famous pirate that roamed the Caribbean Basin in the 18th Century.

women, lined up along the guard rails and exposing their breasts while waving at the sailors on the deck of the U-800.

“Mein Gott! I think that we just found a treasure ship, guys!”

On the covered open bridge of the U-800, the sight of those topless women was the last one Otto Kretschmer had expected and it left him stunned for a moment, while Ulrich von Wittgenstein, standing beside him, grinned widely.

“Well, that’s what I would call a nice welcoming party, Herr Kapitän.”

Otto, who was of a serious nature and prized good order and discipline as much as duty and loyalty, proved less enthusiastic about that than Ulrich.

“Maybe, but we have things to do and we can’t afford to turn our submarine into a bordello, Ulrich.”

It was the turn of Ulrich to look at his captain with a serious expression.

“Herr Kapitän, if I may. Our men have now been at sea for about nine weeks now and will be away from home for at least another ten weeks. They fought well while under heavy stress and I believe that they deserve a bit of a break. If you want me to, I can supervise visits by rotation to that cargo ship during the time it will take us to refuel, to ensure that our men respect discipline.”

“Well, those women are obviously prostitutes, Ulrich, and our men don’t have American dollars with them to pay for their services. Do you propose that our men simply gang-rape those women?”

“We may not have dollars, Herr Kapitän, but we have better: gold! We still have a sizeable stash of small gold ingots, meant to pay for fuel and supplies obtained from friendly suppliers during our trip to Japan. We could always be a bit overgenerous with our fuel payments.”

Otto smiled, amused by Ulrich’s proposed solution, and pointed at the port of call of the M.V. ESMERALDA, painted in black letters on its stern.

“This is a Cuban-registered ship, Ulrich. Cuba is officially an enemy of Germany in this war.”

“Well, we could always fudge the ship’s log and write it down as a, say, Ecuadorian ship.”

Despite his own serious personality, Otto knew that Ulrich was right about the need of his crewmen to blow off some steam during this long mission. He thus nodded his head after a moment of reflection.

“Very well, Ulrich. Arrange for tours by shift rotation on that cargo ship, but make sure that we first take care of refueling our boat and of replenishing our fresh foodstuff stores from the holds of that ship as much as possible. I will put you in charge of leading the initial boarding party with Hauptmann Margraff, so that you can liaise with the captain of that ship. Use the gold needed as you see fit, but don’t blow the bank! We may need some of that gold later on.”

Ulrich came to attention and saluted Otto crisply, happy at his decision.

“Thank you, Herr Kapitän! I will take care of everything on that ship.”

Ulrich then went to the starboard side access door of the open bridge and went down the steel ladder leading to the starboard walkway, which went around the base of the conning tower and linked the forward and aft open decks of the submarine. He went next to the starboard forward deck access ladder and joined Hugo Margraff and his fully armed soldiers there. Margraff smiled to him while pointing up at the women on the deck of the cargo ship.

“Now, that is the kind of boarding I really like, Ulrich! Will the Captain let our men time to enjoy themselves while we will be aboard?”

“He agreed to that and put me in charge of keeping the thing orderly and disciplined. He however wants the essential tasks of refueling and resupplying to be completed first. While I will liaise with the captain of that cargo ship, have your men search the ship for weapons and for any cargo of a military nature. Don’t hurt or brutalize the crew and passengers, unless of course they become violent or openly hostile. One last thing: the Captain wants us to officially describe this ship in our mission logs as an Ecuadorian ship, and not a Cuban one. That is meant to help the, uh, financial arrangements we will make with the ship’s captain and the person in charge of these girls.”

“Understood! My men will be mum!”

Satisfied, Ulrich then twisted his head to shout orders at Oberbootsmann Fritz Lent, who was the most senior non-commissioned man on the submarine.

“OBERBOOTSMANN LENT, HAVE A TEAM OF LOOKOUTS READY TO CLIMB TO THE BRIDGE OF THAT SHIP, TO ASSUME AN ANTI-AIRCRAFT WATCH FROM UP THERE. HAVE ALSO A REFUELLING TEAM AND RESUPPLY TEAM READY.”

“YES, OBERLEUTNANT!”

The submarine soon gently bumped against the side of the cargo ship, with its starboard deck access ladder slowly coming level with the cargo's own access ladder. With ropes then quickly passed and tied between the two vessels, Ulrich jumped on the cargo's access ladder and started climbing its steel steps, followed closely by Hugo Margraff and his six soldiers in full German Army combat regalia, complete with MKb 42 assault rifles. The merchant navy captain waiting for them on the deck of the cargo ship stiffened on seeing the heavily armed Brandenburg men, but managed to speak in an even voice, using his fair English while saluting Ulrich.

"Captain Emilio Morales, Captain of the M.V. ESMERALDA."

Ulrich also saluted, standing at attention and speaking back in a polite tone.

"Oberleutnant Ulrich von Wittgenstein, second-in-command of the Kriegsmarine submarine U-800. We are sorry for this inconvenience caused to you and to your passengers, but we wish to be able to replenish ourselves in fuel and fresh food from your ship. Could we go discuss the modalities of our visit up on your bridge, while my soldiers search your ship for weapons?"

Morales nearly blew out air in relief on seeing that things would be handled in a decent and correct manner by those Germans.

"I would be happy to. I already told my crew to surrender any personal knife or other weapon in their possession. This way, please!"

As the two naval officers walked together towards the ladder leading up to the bridge, Morales couldn't help make a remark to Ulrich.

"I must say that your men are quite intimidating, Lieutenant."

"They are and you would be right to be careful with them: they are elite commando soldiers from the German Army, not simple armed sailors."

"Oh!" Said simply Morales. Both were soon inside the bridge of the cargo ship, with four lookout men from the U-800 joining them a minute later, taking positions on the open bridge wings. Ulrich went to the ship's chart room with Morales, where he faced the Cuban ship master.

"First, Captain Morales, let me reassure you: we do not intend to sink your ship or hurt your crew and passengers, unless someone acts really stupidly. With this said, we are ready to financially compensate you within reasonable limits for the fuel and food we will take. How much diesel fuel do you have left aboard and how much of it would you need to safely arrive in Hawaii?"

Impressed by this obvious goodwill, Morales answered at once while going to grab the clipboard hanging on a wall, on which his cargo manifest and export permits were attached.

"I have enough fuel left for my diesel engines to get to Hawaii and then return to the American West Coast with a good safety margin. If I could refuel in Hawaii, then I would have up to 380 tons of diesel fuel available for you. Would that be enough to top off your submarine?"

Ulrich smiled at that, satisfied.

"That would be more than enough, actually. My men will thus start transferring fuel at once after we are finished here. Next, could you show me your cargo manifest?"

"Here it is, Lieutenant." Said Morales while handing over his clipboard to Ulrich. "All of my cargo was destined to be offloaded in Honolulu. As for the women you saw on the deck, they are passengers on this ship. Their Madame has a contract to bring them to Honolulu, where the street girls are said to be badly overworked."

Ulrich laughed briefly at that.

"I can understand that, with the thousands of extra American sailors and soldiers now going through Hawaii in the last months. We actually intend to make a deal with that Madame later on, so that my own sailors could enjoy some richly-earned entertainment time. About your cargo, do you have any military-related supplies or equipment as part of it? If you do, then it would become liable to be destroyed or seized by us, according to the laws of war."

"I understand your point of view, Lieutenant. While I don't have military weapons or equipment per say aboard my ship, I do have some cargo destined to a couple of units based in Pearl Harbor."

"Oh?! Could you show me these items on your list, please?" Said Ulrich, suddenly most interested.

"Certainly, Lieutenant!" Replied Morales, who then underlined a few select lines on his manifest with a pencil before passing the clipboard to Ulrich, who avidly looked at the manifest. What he saw made a big grin appear on his face and he then looked up from the clipboard to smile to Morales.

"This is quite an interesting manifest you have, Captain Morales. We will be most happy to relieve you of those items destined to American military units, but we will in exchange compensate you for them and for the fuel and food we will take. Just don't

reveal to the Americans that we paid you for them: maybe they will also compensate you if they believe that we simply confiscated those supplies.”

“And how are you planning to pay me, Lieutenant? German money is not exactly accepted around American territories these days.”

“Oh, but we have much better than Reichmarks with us, Captain Morales: we have gold!”

Morales’ eyes popped open and he grinned when Ulrich took out of a cargo pocket of his leather vest a number of small gold bars.

“I have more of these aboard my submarine, plenty enough in fact to reimburse you, even after paying up your Madame and her girls. So, do we have a deal, Captain Morales?”

“Between that and earning myself a torpedo, I would be stupid not to accept, Lieutenant!” Replied fervently the Cuban ship master.

“I thought so too, Captain Morales.” Said Ulrich, who then took a folded sheet of paper out of a vest pocket, making Morales look at it with curiosity.

“And what is that, Lieutenant?”

“But, an official Kriegsmarine requisition form, of course! You don’t want to show up in Honolulu and not have all the proper papers ready for the American customs officials, do you? We Germans believe in efficiency and accountability.”

Otto Kretschmer was present on the forward deck of the U-800, supervising the transfer of fuel from the cargo ship, when Ulrich returned to the submarine, closely followed by six sailors carrying the first of many crates and boxes taken from the cargo holds of the M.V. ESMERALDA.

“So, Ulrich, did you find any foodstuff item of interest aboard that cargo ship, apart from nineteen willing prostitutes?”

“I certainly did, Herr Kapitän! On top of the 215 tons of diesel fuel we are going to transfer over to our submarine, I confiscated part of the cargo, which was destined to American military units in Pearl Harbor. Here is the list of items of interest that we found aboard.”

Otto had a quick look at the list, only to make a double take out of surprise.

“Forty tons of Cuban cigars? FIVE HUNDRED TONS OF CUBAN RUM?”

The rest of the list, while still of high interest, proved a bit less dramatic, with 290 tons of fresh or canned fruits and fruit juices, 230 tons of Cuban coffee and 1,100 tons of refined

sugar and molasses. Ulrich made one of the sailors following him come forward and put down two wooden boxes on the deck. Opening the boxes, he took out of them one hard cardboard box and one bottle inside a closed protective cardboard tube. He took out first the bottle from its tube and opened the cardboard box before presenting them to Otto.

"Part of the cargo was a special shipment addressed to the U.S. Navy's officers' mess in Pearl Harbor. I could not in all conscience let those items reach their destinations without confiscating them, Herr Kapitän. We will thus be transferring to the U-800 4,000 boxes of Cuban luxury cigars, plus 2,400 bottles of Ron Caney Extra Añejo old rum and fifty kegs of Ron Caney Especial rum."

Otto first took one long cigar from the opened box and reverently sniffed it like the connoisseur of cigars he was.

"We certainly could not let enemy officers enjoy such cigars, Ulrich. I will do my best not to consider this as an attempt to bribe me, although you certainly hit on the right tactic if that is what you wanted to do."

"Me, trying to bribe you, Herr Kapitän? Never!"

Both of them chuckled before Otto took the bottle of rum offered by Ulrich and examined it with glee, then opened it to sniff the liquor inside.

"Ahhh, a true nectar indeed! Just make sure to have that rum kept under key and that its distribution be carefully monitored: the last thing I need as we will approach Pearl Harbor is a drunken crew."

"Our men are professionals, Herr Kapitän. I am certain that they will understand the need for restraint. However, even small periodic rations of that rum will do wonders for the morale aboard our submarine."

"Agreed! If our good assistant-cook and baker Gustav Bouhler wishes to try his luck at doing some rum cakes, then he has my benediction for doing so, especially now that we will have plenty of refined sugar and molasses in our stores after this."

Ulrich then approached Otto further and lowered his voice to a near whisper.

"Should I book an, uh, appointment for you with one of the passengers of the cargo, Herr Kapitän? I was planning to start sending up our men in rotation after supper."

Otto thought his answer over for a moment before shaking his head.

"No need for that, Ulrich: I want the men to believe that I am married to this boat."

"Are you saying that you aren't yet, Herr Kapitän?" Replied Ulrich in jest, a smile on his lips.

The U-800 ended up detaching itself from the M.V. ESMERALDA seven hours later, in the obscurity of a quarter moon night. With Madame Ventura and her girls waving goodbye from the weather deck of the cargo ship, the submarine then quickly sank out of sight under the waves, with many men aboard the U-800 letting out broken-hearted sighs.

CHAPTER 18 – HAWAIIAN SURFING

15:19 (Hawaii Time)

Sunday, July 12, 1942

Control room of the U-800

On silent cruising off Pearl Harbor, Oahu

Hawaii

Lieutenant-commander Takeshi Nagaoka quietly and unobtrusively went around the control room of the U-800, watching the crewmen on duty do their work. A quick look at the depth gauge demonstrated again to Takeshi that the U-800 was no ordinary submarine: it was actually cruising at three knots at a depth of 230 meters, deeper than any Japanese or American submarine could dive and deep enough to basically render it invulnerable to American depth charges, which could not be set to explode past 200 meters. Yet, the U-800 was doing a lot more than just sailing around quietly: it was also listening for potential preys with its towed passive hydrophone array, which was presently trailing 200 meters behind and ninety meters above the U-800, traveling above the local water thermal layer. While the U-800's towed array could easily listen for ships and submarines located above the thermal layer, any ship using its sonar set would see its acoustic signal reflected or deformed as it hit the thermal layer, making the U-800 nearly undetectable at its present depth. Otto Kretschmer had fully used that advantage on his trip to Hawaii, on top of demonstrating another superior feature of his U-800 by routinely spending over twenty hours per day deeply submerged while speeding along at twelve knots, then going up briefly for a few hours at the most in the dead of the night, letting only his schnorchel mast and electronic warfare mast emerge while he recharged his batteries via his three big diesel engines. Even when recharging with his noisy diesels, Kretschmer was able to keep a careful acoustic vigil thanks to his towed hydrophone array, trailing far behind and away from the machinery noise of the U-800. As a result of all this, not one American warship or patrol aircraft had been able to detect the U-800 during its approach to Hawaii, while the German submarine had more than one occasion when it could have easily taken an American warship by surprise and sunk it. Kretschmer had however wisely decided, in Takeshi's opinion, to ignore those

potential preys, in order to preserve the moment of surprise until a truly worthy prize showed up in his sights. By 'worthy prize', he meant an aircraft carrier or, at the least, a battleship or a heavy cruiser. On his part, Takeshi fervently wished that Otto would encounter an American aircraft carrier. After the disastrous battle of Midway, where the Imperial Japanese Navy had lost no less than four of its fleet carriers against only one American carrier sunk, the sinking of even one American aircraft carrier by the U-800 would do a lot to give back some advantage to Japan in the Pacific. Having been exposed now for weeks to Otto Kretschmer's tactical and strategic way of thinking and observing the successes brought by that thinking, Takeshi now understood that the Imperial Japanese Navy's submarine arm was making a grave mistake by not making attacks on the American and British merchant fleet. Worse, the Japanese Navy was underestimating in turn the danger that American submarines represented to its own maritime lines of communications. The Japanese Navy could indeed learn a lot about submarine warfare from its ally, the Kriegsmarine.

The rest of the day and the night went quietly aboard the U-800, with only cargo ships, fishing vessels and warships no bigger than destroyers detected going in and out of Pearl Harbor and of the port of Honolulu. The American destroyers that went around however proved quite active, using their sonar sets nearly constantly, while patrol boats and even a couple of submarines crisscrossed Mamala Bay, into which the entrance channel of Pearl Harbor opened. It was quickly clear that the U.S. Navy was on the alert for the U-800 and exercised maximum caution around Hawaii. Otto was in turn cautious, not wanting to underestimate an alert enemy, and went up to periscope depth at night only to confirm his position and to recharge his batteries with his diesel engines. The next two days proved equally uneventful, something many in the crew, including Kretschmer, thankfully used to catch up on their sleep.

05:52 (Hawaii Time)

Wednesday, July 15, 1942

Sonar section, U-800

Mamala Bay, Oahu

Hans Bock, on duty at the time with Gerhard Hoepner in the sonar section, stiffened in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment as he concentrated to mentally

analyze the noises his hydrophones were now picking up. He then played with his controls to refine the direction and frequencies of those noises before calling the watch officer, Hermann Spielberger, via intercom.

"Leutnant, this is Bock, at the hydrophones. I am picking up the machinery and propeller noises of multiple ships preparing to leave Pearl Harbor. Some of those ships are heavy units."

"I'm coming!" Replied at once Spielberger from the control room. It took him less than ten second to come to the sonar section, situated aft of the control room.

"How many ships can you count, Bock?"

"At least a dozen, Herr Leutnant, including three big ones."

"That sounds like a task force about to go to sea. The Kapitän will want to hear about this."

Spielberger then went out of the sonar section and went down one deck, to go knock on the door of Kretschmer's cabin.

"Herr Kapitän! Herr Kapitän! Wake up! We have a possible enemy flotilla about to leave Pearl Harbor."

Less than ten seconds later, Otto Kretschmer opened his door, his eyes still sleepy, to face Spielberger.

"What do we have exactly, Spielberger?"

"Our hydrophones are picking up over a dozen ships about to leave Pearl Harbor, including three big ones, Herr Kapitän."

"Very well! Call the crew to battle stations...quietly. Reel in our towed array and head towards the entrance channel of Pearl Harbor at ten knots. I want us to be in ambush position before those ships can leave Pearl Harbor and form up properly."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!" Replied the junior officer before leaving at a run to go back to the control room. As for Otto, he closed his door and went to his closet to quickly dress. Shaving would have to wait. Two minutes later he was climbing the ladder leading to the control room, where he went immediately to the tactical plot table, beside which Spielberger stood.

"How far are we from the minefields protecting the entrance channel of Pearl Harbor? Have any of those ships left port yet?"

Spielberger put an index on a point of the chart laid out under a plastic transparent film on the tactical plot table.

"We are presently here, about eleven nautical miles from the outer limits of those minefields, Herr Kapitän. The first of the enemy warships is now about to slip down the entrance channel towards the open sea."

"Good! Raise our speed to fifteen knots for ten minutes, then slow down to two knots and place us into an ambush position here, one nautical mile to the west of the opening of the entrance channel. With some luck, we will be in position before any destroyer screen could form up once out of the channel."

"Yes, Herr Kapitän!"

Seeing Ulrich von Wittgenstein arriving at a run in the control room, Otto signaled him to come to him at once.

"Ulrich, I want you at the torpedo fire control station. Our first salvo will be with electric eels only: I want our first salvo to come as a complete surprise to the Americans. We will also use a time on target attack procedure. Have the torpedoes set to arm after a hundred meters, with running depth set for five meters, so that they could strike under the armored side belts of the heavier enemy ships. We will then reload with electric eels in the bow tubes and G7a eels in the stern tubes, set to a depth of three meters: we may be tangling with a few destroyers by then."

"Got it!"

With his officers and men now getting busy implementing his orders, Otto looked back at the chart of Mamala Bay, planning in advance his incoming moves and the enemy's possible counter-moves.

06:25 (Hawaii Time)

Command bridge of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. SARATOGA (CV-3)

Sailing down the entrance channel of Pearl Harbor

Rear-admiral Frank Jack Fletcher was feeling both morose and pessimistic this early morning as he watched his Task Force 61 leave Pearl Harbor just after Sunrise. For one thing, the amphibious operation that his task force was due to support in the Solomon Islands, down in the South Pacific, was in his mind not ready to go, due to the insufficient supplies and reserves in place. Also, his task force was originally supposed to be much more powerful but, thanks to painful losses during the last few months, most of them incurred in the Atlantic, it was now short by one carrier, one battleship, three heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and over half a dozen destroyers. He had strenuously

argued with Admiral Nimitz that more time was needed to gather enough ships and supplies for the operation but Nimitz had replied, somewhat correctly, that any more time taken would also be more time given to the Japanese to establish a solid foothold in Guadalcanal and the rest of the Solomon Islands, thus putting Australia within range of Japanese land-based planes. Fletcher had thus given up on his opposition and had done the best he could to prepare his limited force for combat. This morning, he had sent three of his nine destroyers out of the harbor in advance of the rest, so that they could start sweeping Mamala Bay at once for any possible trace of that damned U-800, which had seemingly managed to scare to death Washington. His six remaining destroyers were now coming out and forming two widely-separated parallel columns that would sandwich the heavy units of the task force, with the battleship SOUTH DAKOTA in the lead of the central column. Behind the battleship were the SARATOGA, followed by the carrier ENTERPRISE, the heavy cruiser MINNEAPOLIS and one fleet oiler. With the addition of numerous patrol planes that had swept over the bay at dawn, Fletcher was at least confident that his task force would safely sail away from Hawaii.

On the GRIDLEY-Class destroyer U.S.S. BAGLEY, Petty Officer First Class Samuel Porter was busy operating his ASDIC set, sweeping methodically a ninety degree arc ahead of his ship with his directional sonar head, firing an acoustic 'ping' every few seconds and then listening for possible echoes. His ASDIC set was a far cry from the panoramic sweep passive/active sonars that would enter service in the decades to come, being short-ranged and being subject to getting false echoes bouncing from a number of things, including sea bottom features, whales and thermal layers. The ASDIC also was next to useless against surfaced targets, which was why German submarines so often attacked on the surface at night. It took an experienced and efficient operator to be able to get the best from such primitive equipment, but Sam believed firmly that he was such an experienced man. However, he was now being handicapped by the stubbornness and technical ignorance of his captain, who refused to understand that rushing out of Pearl Harbor at twenty knots in order to stay in formation with the two other destroyers of the advance screen would render his ASDIC set next to useless.

'I might as well be sending love telegrams to whales right now.' Sam thought to himself. It was in fact far from being the first time that improper ship tactics had cut on the efficiency of their anti-submarine searches.

As Samuel was scanning at the starboard limit of his search arc, a weak return echo suddenly made him stiffen up. That echo, about 300 meters distant, was however much weaker than that he would have expected from a submarine. Unfortunately, the high speed of his ship now prevented him from sending a confirmation ping on that azimuth. Looking at the chart of the Mamala Bay displayed to one side of his station, he saw that the weak echo had been located near the known limits of the defensive minefields of Pearl Harbor. Maybe he had pinged an isolated mine that had been misplaced away from the rest of the minefield. That would certainly explain the weak return echo. Somewhat reassured, Samuel then continued with his laborious scanning.

On the U-800, Hans Bock blew air out in relief as he looked at Gerhard Hoepner.

“Wew! That American nearly nailed us with his ASDIC set. Fortunately, he is now past us.”

“Yeah, and the destroyers following it are also going too fast to be able to hear much themselves. Soon we will be able to bypass those destroyers by the rear and enter their formation undetected. Then, they will learn what it means to be rear-ended by Kapitän Kretschmer.”

Both sonar operators then chuckled briefly at the joke made by Hoepner.

On the U.S.S. SARATOGA, Rear-admiral Fletcher was standing on the starboard open wing of the command bridge, watching the ships of his force, when the whole 47,700 ton aircraft carrier shook violently, while a tall geyser of water rose along its starboard flank. Two more torpedoes, as they could only be torpedoes in Fletcher's mind, shook again the carrier in quick succession. Severely shaken and with his ears ringing, Fletcher picked himself up from the deck to look over the bulwark and down at the hull of his carrier. More explosions however made him snap his head aft, towards the U.S.S. ENTERPRISE, which was following about 400 meters behind. He banged his fist on top of the bulwark out of anger when he saw that his second carrier had also been torpedoed. Two more geysers erupted, this time against the starboard flank of the battleship U.S.S. SOUTH DAKOTA. The mission of Task Force 61 was now over even before it could get fully to sea! Looking out at the destroyers of his protective screen, Fletcher saw that they were now reacting with commendable speed, albeit belatedly, to that attack. Forming up in two successive lines abreast, the nine destroyers soon started throwing in the water dozens of depth charges in and around the spot presumed

to contain the enemy submarine. That was when the first damage reports started arriving on the bridge. Fletcher was listening to one such report when a series of powerful detonations in the distance made him snap his head around. What he saw made him swear to himself: one of the destroyers, passing over the edge of the submerged defensive minefields, had made the mistake of throwing depth charges amidst the mines moored to the bottom. Those depth charges had in turn triggered a chain reaction among the mines, making them exploded one after the other in quick succession. The unlucky destroyer was now being mangled and ripped apart by the series of powerful underwater explosions, sinking quickly in minutes. That in turn made more mines explode as the hull of the destroyer sank down to the level of the moored mines and made contact with them. Just as Fletcher thought that things couldn't possibly get worse, four more torpedoes slammed home, two against the SOUTH DAKOTA and two others against the heavy cruiser MINNEAPOLIS. Fletcher paled when he realized that the torpedoes had hit the port side of his ships this time: that damn submarine had already crossed over to the other side of his force, demonstrating an incredible submerged sprint capacity. The worst part was that the destroyers that were supposed to cover his port flank were presently on his starboard flank, busy killing fish by the thousands by dropping dozens of depth charges over a now empty spot.

"DAMN IT! RADIO TO OUR DESTROYERS THAT THE ENEMY SUBMARINE IS NOW ON OUR PORT FLANK!"

It apparently necessitated a few minutes to his destroyers to get that information, as they took a seemingly long time before starting to turn around to come back towards the wounded carriers. The crew of the SARATOGA was now fighting hard a serious fire in its aircraft hangar caused by broken aviation fuel lines that had then ignited. Fletcher could feel the intense heat even from up in the bridge superstructure of the carrier. As for the ENTERPRISE, while not on fire, it was starting to take an alarming list to starboard.

Things worsened yet again as the rushing destroyers were finally about to go around the limping heavy units of the force. Eight more torpedoes struck home, three each against the ENTERPRISE and the SARATOGA and two against the MINNEAPOLIS. Fletcher was wondering why the battleship SOUTH DAKOTA had not been targeted this time when four more torpedoes exploded against the port flank of the 44,000 ton warship. With a last shudder, the recently commissioned battleship rolled

over and capsized, dragging over 2,300 men to their death. There was a moment of stunned silence on the bridge of the SARATOGA, as all the men present stared with disbelief at the now overturned hulk. The heavy cruiser MINNEAPOLIS soon sank as well, its stern blown off. The rapidly increasing list of his carrier then reminded Fletcher that he himself was in real danger of dying, along with many of the 2,900 crewmembers of the SARATOGA. He was about to distribute a new set of orders when the hundreds of aircraft bombs and torpedoes crammed into its aviation ammunition magazines, filled to capacity, started exploding, set off by the burning aviation fuel. A gigantic explosion tore the big aircraft carrier in two and sent up a huge mushroom cloud of flames and black smoke, along with hundreds of tons of metallic debris. That mushroom was in turn seen by the whole population of Honolulu and by the men stationed in Pearl Harbor, including Admiral Nimitz.

The now positively enraged captains of the American destroyers didn't think about slowing down and thus giving a chance to their sonar operators to be able to work their sets properly. Instead, they rushed over the zone where the torpedoes had to have been launched and dropped more depth charges, rapidly emptying their anti-submarine magazines. Again, they arrived too late, as the U-800 had moved closer to the remaining aircraft carrier, the ENTERPRISE, while reloading its tubes. The captains of the remaining eight destroyers finally regained some tactical sense when the ENTERPRISE finally rolled slowly to one side and sank, victim of massive flooding from its six torpedo hits. Slowing down at last and performing proper ASDIC sweeps, they were unable to find any submarine, as if none had ever been present. However, those sweeps had been seriously hampered by the cacophony of underwater noises created by the breakup and sinking of the two carriers, one battleship and one heavy cruiser. Completely discouraged, the crews of the destroyers were about to initiate rescue operations to save the hundreds of men now swimming on the surface of the sea or sitting in rafts when all hell broke loose again. Carefully aimed torpedoes started picking up in quick succession the destroyers as they were going at slow speeds towards the sites of the wrecks. By the time that the captains ordered their ships to accelerate again, four of their numbers had been hit, each by a well-placed single torpedo. Those four destroyers were unable to raise appreciably their speed afterwards, having to fight flooding and, in one case, a complete machinery shutdown. After a six minute-long deadly ballet, all of the eight American destroyers had been hit at least once, with two of

them already sunk and three more slowly sinking, while the rest were in no state to fight. The belated arrival overhead of a dozen bomber aircraft finally gave some respite to the survivors, but the collection of fleet tugboats, minesweepers and harbor launches that then tried to come to help the rescue effort at sea was stopped cold when the two first boats to come out of the harbor channel blew up on powerful sea mines that were not supposed to be there. More time was wasted as minesweepers had to start hunting and clearing mines from the mouth of the entrance channel.

Aboard the U-800, now withdrawing towards deep waters at quiet speed, Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka fervently shook hands with Otto Kretschmer.

"Captain, this was a virtuoso display of submarine handling as I never saw before. With those two carriers sunk, you just helped the Imperial Japanese Navy restore most of its initial advantage in the Pacific."

"Well, it will also force the Americans to switch more warships from their Atlantic Fleet in order to replenish their Pacific Fleet, which means in turn less pressure on Germany in the Atlantic. Both of our countries are winners as a result of this battle."

"Quite true indeed, Captain. What do you intend to do now? Sink more ships around Hawaii?"

"No! I have expended 64 torpedoes up to now during this mission, leaving me with only eight torpedoes. I intend to reserve those torpedoes for my self-defense during the rest of our mission."

Otto's serious expression then changed to a devilish grin.

"However, I do have lots of 12.7 centimeter deck gun ammunition left."

22:12 (Hawaii Time)

Office of Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet

Pearl Harbor

Chester Nimitz felt like a broken man as he sat, nearly prostrate, behind his work desk. Most of his morning had been busy organizing the rescue effort to save the men from Task Force 61 who could be saved. After sending a preliminary report on the disaster to Washington, he then had to deal with the avalanche of anxious and fearful telephone calls from grieving navy wives that had started to inundate the telephone switchboard of his headquarters. One rather heartless staff officer had proposed to simply cut off those

calls. Nimitz' response to that had been to relieve that staff officer on the spot and send him packing to somewhere in Alaska.

The noise of a powerful explosion not too far from his building, along with the shaking of his windows, made Nimitz jerk out of his chair and go to his windows to look outside into the night. The whole base, along with the civilian agglomerations around it, including Honolulu, was now under imposed night blackout curfew on his express orders. His eyes thus had no problems catching the flashes of light and flames that were visible in the direction of Pearl Harbor's Navy fuel depot. He swore violently when he saw that twin explosions every six or seven seconds were sweeping the fuel depot, piercing the huge fuel tanks with hot shrapnel or ripping them open, with the fuel then gushing out by the thousands of gallons and catching fire. The fuel depot had been the one important target that the Japanese had neglected to hit during their faithful attack on December 7 of 1941. Now, someone was bombarding it with accurate and intense shellfire. The identity of that someone was also not very hard to guess.

"DAMN YOU, KRETSCHMER!"

CHAPTER 19 – WELCOME TO JAPAN

06:50 (Tokyo Time)

Monday, July 27, 1942

Officers' mess of the U-800

Approaching the Japanese home islands

Before taking place at the dining table of the officers' wardroom, Takeshi Nagaoka bowed to Otto Kretschmer, who was already seated at the table and eating his breakfast.

"Good morning, Captain! May I sit?"

"Of course, Commander!" Replied Otto, who appeared to be in a good mood. The Japanese officer then sat to his left and proceeded to fill a bowl with hot oatmeal from a boat-shaped vessel suspended above the table by a hook. Sprinkling first some granulated Cuban sugar on his oatmeal, Takeshi ate a spoonful before looking at Otto, who was munching on a toast.

"May I ask you a question about our return trip, Captain?"

"Go ahead, Commander!"

"Thank you! First, how long do you intend to stay in Japan before starting your return trip?"

"I don't know yet, frankly. While Admiral Dönitz would certainly want to see me back in the Atlantic as soon as possible, there are political factors at play here and I won't be the only one involved in deciding our return date. Even my precise return route isn't fixed yet. Your government may want to celebrate me and my crew for a few days, while your military will certainly want to debrief us in depth about our attacks against the Panama Canal, San Francisco and Pearl Harbor."

"Which would be quite understandable in view of the huge impact of your attacks, Captain. As for wanting to celebrate you, I believe that you would amply deserve such an honor."

Somehow, Otto didn't show enthusiasm about that and made a sober face as he looked at Takeshi.

“Commander, what I did, I did to help my country win this war, so that we could put an end to it as quickly as possible and cut the losses...on both sides. Getting honored may be nice, but it is not a factor in my actions. My true hope would be to see the United States decide that the cost of this war is becoming too great to continue, then sue for a negotiated peace. With the Panama Canal out of service and with the ports of Boston and San Francisco hit hard, maybe that will be enough to make the American government reconsider its participation in this war.”

“Well, your sinking of the carriers ENTERPRISE and SARATOGA, along with the destruction of the fuel reserves in Pearl Harbor, should at the least paralyze most of the American naval operations in the Pacific, something that can only be called a great strategic achievement, Captain.”

“True again, Commander. However, I will have to wait until I am back in Lorient before I can continue hammering at the Americans: with only eight torpedoes left aboard, I won’t be able to do much damage during my return trip to Europe.”

“Maybe, maybe not, Captain.” Replied Takeshi, attracting a stare from Otto. “I checked the technical data on your torpedoes, your launch tubes and your reloading systems and I believe that my navy could help you in that matter.”

“Are you proposing that I use Japanese torpedoes, Commander? Would they be compatible with my systems, or even fit in my launch tubes?”

“I believe that my navy has at least one torpedo model that would be usable in your submarine, Captain: the Type 92 Mod 1, 533 millimeter torpedo. It was actually developed using your own G7e torpedo as its base design and has approximately the same dimensions and mass as your G7e. It has a top speed of thirty knots and a range of 7,000 meters, with a warhead packing 300 kilos of explosives. I know that your torpedoes initially suffered from grave defects in their contact and magnetic exploders, but our Type 92 torpedo uses a Japanese-designed contact pistol that has proved very reliable in service. We also have the Type 96, 533 millimeter torpedo that could possibly fit in your stern launch tubes. It is much longer than your G7e or our Type 92, but I noticed that your stern tubes are quite longer than your bow tubes, while the torpedo cradles in your stern handling room could possibly accommodate our Type 96 with a few slight modifications.”

“Go on!” Said Otto, now very interested.

“Our Type 96 uses a kerosene-oxygen engine and has a top speed of fifty knots, a range of 4,500 meters and packs a 550 kilo warhead. If it could be made to fit your

stern tubes, I believe that you would then possess a very potent weapon against enemy warships. From what I know, the Type 96 has proved to be a reliable weapon as well.”

“A speed of fifty knots and a 550 kilo warhead? Hell, I sure would love to have such a weapon at my disposal. I will certainly inquire about those torpedoes once in Japan. What about their control boxes and setting mechanisms? They must be radically different from my own control boxes, no?”

“They are, Captain, but we could always install Japanese control boxes aboard your submarine, so that you could use either German or Japanese torpedoes with a simple flick of a switch. Once in Yokosuka, I will talk with the base commander and ask his assistance in that matter. With the huge blows that you dealt to the Americans, I am sure that all your wishes will be promptly fulfilled in Japan.”

Otto nodded his head at that: to be able to do his return trip to Europe with full torpedo carrousel would make him quite happy and would also increase significantly his chances of surviving the voyage. There was however one point that bothered him, a point that he decided Takeshi could be told about at this point.

“Please do that, Commander. One last thing. I had you send four days ago a message to your navy, using your own naval code, to announce our approximate time of arrival and our approach corridor.”

“Yes, I remember that, Captain. In fact, I was wondering why you wanted me to send that message so early.”

“Because I wanted to check something that has been bothering me since early in our trip.” Replied Otto, his expression now most serious. “You remember the message we received from Admiral Dönitz and which said in covered words that your diplomatic code had been probably compromised?”

“Yes, I remember that, Captain. It came as quite a shock to me, in fact. What about it?”

“Well, if the British and Americans could break your diplomatic code, what about your naval code? Your navy had a crushing superiority in numbers at the Battle of Midway, yet the Americans were waiting for it and won that battle despite of their numerical inferiority.”

“But, that’s impossible! Our naval code is next to impossible to decipher.”

“We believed the same about our own ENIGMA encoding system, yet Admiral Dönitz’ message implied that it has been compromised and is no longer safe to use. So, I decided to run an acid test of your naval code, by making you send well in advance a

message to your navy about our impending arrival. I did that so that the Americans would have time to react to it if they really can decipher your naval code. If we encounter American ships or submarines near our announced arrival corridor, then we will know that your naval code has been compromised. Call it a variant of the Canary Trap technique.”

Takeshi was left speechless for a long moment before he could speak again.

“But, if you are right, then you just put your submarine at grave risk, Captain.”

“No! What I did is to run a calculated risk, in order to confirm or deny a vital piece of information for both my navy and yours, Commander. Know that I already gave orders to slow down and switch to silent hunting mode before we enter our announced approach corridor. If my fears turn out to be justified, then we will have another fight on our hands before we can dock in Japan. I hurt the Americans way too badly for them to let pass any chance to sink me. With a bit of luck, we will prevail...again.”

15:43 (Tokyo Time)

American submarine U.S.S. SILVERSIDES (SS-236)

At periscope depth, 24 kilometers off Cape Nojima

Southeastern coast of Honshu Island, Japan

“Do you think that the U-800 will really show up, Captain?”

Lieutenant-commander Creed C. Burlingame kept his eyes down at the chart spread on his tactical plot table as he answered his executive officer.

“Our intelligence says so, Bill. I do hope that our information was correct: cruising this close to the Japanese coast can be hard on the nerves. On the other hand, I do not relish the idea of having to fight such a dangerous enemy. Kretschmer is the best that the Germans have, while his boat is said to be a revolutionary design capable of incredible underwater performances. Having the DRUM with us is certainly no luxury in this case.”

“But did the U-800 really do all that it is said to have done, Captain? Most of it sounds like pure German propaganda to me.”

Burlingame raised his nose then to give a sober look to his subaltern.

“Even if only half of the tales about the U-800 are true, then it would make it a most dangerous adversary that would deserve our utter vigilance and caution. It should

have entered its announced approach corridor by now. Are all our tubes loaded and ready?"

"They are loaded, but not flooded yet, Captain."

"Then, flood them now! I want to be ready to fire at the U-800 the moment it shows up."

What Burlingame didn't say out loud was that he hoped that his damn torpedoes would work properly for a change. The American Mark 14 torpedo had proved utterly unreliable since the start of the war, either failing to explode on contact, detonating prematurely or failing to keep to its programmed depth. Over half of the torpedoes he had fired up to now during his previous patrols had in fact proved to be duds or had missed when a hit should have been a near sure thing. He and other submarine commanders had bitterly protested about the unreliability of the Mark 14 but the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance had refused to recognize the problem, adding insult to injury by accusing the submarine commanders of being at fault by being inaccurate in their torpedo attacks.

Burlingame was still secretly fuming about that torpedo problem when his sonar operator called on the intercom, his tone urgent.

"Captain, this is Brooks, at the sonar. Somebody just launched two torpedoes from somewhere to our aft port side."

"Are they coming at us?" Asked at once Burlingame, tensing up.

"Uh, I don't think so, Captain. The DRUM is now accelerating and turning...OW! At least one torpedo made a hit: I can now hear breakup noises from our port side."

"Is it the DRUM or is it that damn U-800 that just got hit, Brooks?"

"I really can't say for sure yet, Captain. Wait one!"

As he impatiently waited for a confirmation from his sonar operator, Burlingame started shouting orders.

"HELM, TURN HARD TO PORT! ACCELERATE TO FOUR KNOTS! FORWARD TORPEDO ROOM, BE READY TO FIRE TUBES ONE AND THREE!"

As his men got active around him, Burlingame got another call from his sonar operator. This time, there was shock in the man's voice.

"Captain, I believe that the DRUM was the one that was torpedoed. We have a hostile stalking us somewhere to our aft port side but I can't hear a damn thing."

"Well, do your best and give me a shout as soon as you locate that hostile."

"Yes Captain!"

Burlingame started having cold sweat then: the U-800 was apparently here as expected, but not as the prey. Now would definitely be a good time for his torpedoes to work properly. In the meantime, he could only hope that his sonar man would be able to locate the U-800 before the German submarine could attack again. His hopes were dashed four minutes later, when Brooks' voice came back on the intercom, sounding near panic.

"TORPEDOES LAUNCHED FROM OUR TEN O'CLOCK, FROM VERY CLOSE!
THE ENEMY MUST BE WITHIN 400 YARDS OF US!"

"HELM, TURN HARD TO STARBOARD! ACCELERATE TO MAXIMUM!
BALLAST CONTROL, OPEN THE VAL..."

A jarring explosion then made his submarine skid to one side, throwing Burlingame and his crew down on the deck or against metallic bulkheads. Before he could get up again, a wall of sea water rushed in from the aft section of his submarine, sweeping him up along with the other men in the control room of the U.S.S. SILVERSIDES.

On the U-800, Otto Kretschmer waited nervously for further reports from his hydrophone operators, wondering if the Americans would have sent more than two submarines to ambush him. Even though that would be quite improbable, he was not ready to take any unnecessary risks and stayed ready to face more enemies. If he would have come in unaware at medium speed, he could well have been the one now sinking to the bottom. At least, this confirmed his theory about the Japanese naval code being compromised. He thus gave a sober look at Takeshi Nagaoka, standing near him and looking quite shocked.

"Well, it seems that my theory was correct, Commander Nagaoka. Your naval code was indeed broken open by at least the Americans."

"I never thought that this would be possible, but I cannot deny it now, Captain. The Imperial Japanese Navy headquarters will be devastated by that piece of news."

"Well, now they will know how they lost the Battle of Midway. We will stay at battle stations for another half hour, time to make sure that there are no other American submarines around, then we will surface and continue towards Yokosuka. Leutnant Streib, get our biggest Kriegsmarine flag and stand ready to fly it off our conning tower as soon as we are on the surface. I don't want us to be sunk by mistake so close to our goal."

"Yes, Herr Kapitän!"

"Should I contact my navy and warn them that two American submarines were cruising off our coast, Captain?" Asked Nagaoka, who got an immediate and categorical reply from Otto.

"NO! That would alert the Americans to the fact that we know that they broke your code, Commander. You will be able to pass that information in person to the base commander in Yokosuka."

"Uh, understood, Captain." Said Nagaoka, his tone a bit contrite.

21: 19 (Tokyo Time)

Imperial Japanese Navy base of Yokosuka

Entrance of Tokyo Bay, Japan

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was on hand at quayside, along with other Japanese officers and a number of members of the German embassy in Tokyo, as the U-800 approached slowly the quay, using its lateral thrusters to maneuver deftly. Yamamoto nodded his head once, impressed by the highly streamlined shapes of the German submarine.

"A truly formidable-looking design, Vice-admiral Wenneker, and one manned by men of high valor."

"Thank you, Admiral Yamamoto." Replied the German Naval Attaché in Tokyo, using his fair Japanese. "We are indeed most proud of the U-800 and of its captain and crew."

"And they will be treated like the guests of honor that they are, Vice-admiral. However, we would like first to have a chance to debrief your captain about his inbound trip: his actions along the way are going to impact heavily on the war in the Pacific, in a way most beneficial to Japan."

"Do you mind if I watch that debrief, Admiral? The details of Kapitän Kretschmer's trip are as potentially significant to us than they are to Japan. After all, this is now a truly universal conflict."

"Indeed! I will make sure that you are invited to that debrief."

“Would you mind if I accompanied you to that debrief, Admiral Wenneker?” Asked a big and rather ugly man wearing the black uniform of a SS-Standartenführer²⁴. That attracted hostile looks from Wenneker as well as from most of the staff of the German embassy who were present on the quay, including Ambassador Eugen Ott. Joseph Meisinger was the resident Gestapo representative in Tokyo and was disliked and mistrusted by most of the other Germans at the embassy. Meisinger was in fact also disliked quite a bit by his own superiors in Berlin, who had shipped him to Japan to avoid embarrassment at home brought by Meisinger’s excesses and venality.

“That debrief will be concerned with naval military affairs, not with police matters, Standartenführer Meisinger. I will go alone to that debrief.”

Paul Wenneker then ignored the murderous look Meisinger threw at him, judging the Gestapo man to be well beneath his contempt. Concentrating back his attention on the approaching U-800, he was pleased to see that the crew of the submarine was lined up on the forward deck, clean-shaven and wearing well-pressed going-out uniforms. Kretschmer himself stood on his open bridge, his captain’s white-covered cap on his head, while a big Kriegsmarine flag floated from the top of the tall conning tower. A military band started playing the German national hymn, ‘Deutschland Über Alles’, as the U-800 gently bumped against the quay. The Germans and the Japanese officers present saluted as the hymn played, while four Japanese sailors hurried to put in place a gangway between the quay and the submarine’s forward deck. The German hymn was followed by the Japanese hymn, prompting more salutes before the group of V.I.P.s, led by Admiral Yamamoto, started crossing the gangplank to step on the deck of the U-800, where Otto Kretschmer and Takeshi Nagaoka met them at attention. Otto, who had been told by Takeshi that Yamamoto spoke a good English, still spoke in German at first, letting Takeshi translate for him: he didn’t want to offend his Japanese hosts by speaking to them in the language of their enemies.

“Welcome aboard the U-800, Admiral! I am Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, Captain of this submarine, and this is Lieutenant-commander Takeshi Nagaoka, Assistant Naval Attaché at the Japanese embassy in Berlin.”

“It is a true pleasure to greet you and your fine submarine in Japan, Captain Kretschmer. Your voyage was a long and epic one, I must say.”

“Thank you, Admiral! Would you like to inspect my crew?”

²⁴ SS-Standartenführer : SS rank equivalent to colonel.

"I would like that very much, Captain."

The inspection of the U-800's crew by Yamamoto was over fairly quickly, with the dozen or so dignitaries then invited by Kretschmer to do a quick tour of the submarine, to which they accepted with enthusiasm. As they filed inside the submarine via the forward access hatch of the conning tower, Takeshi Nagaoka took Yamamoto aside for a few seconds to whisper in his ears.

"Admiral, I will be able to brief you on this fully later on but know that we have proof that our present naval code has been broken by the Americans. Two American submarines were lying in ambush for us at the entrance of our announced approach corridor. We however sank both of them."

Yamamoto stared for a moment at Takeshi, shock on his face, before speaking, also whispering.

"By the Kamis²⁵! If this is true, then the ramifications will be most severe, Commander. Thinking of it, I will conduct the debrief of your voyage right here, after we will have toured the U-800: this matter can't wait an hour more!"

"Hay!" Replied Takeshi while bowing respectfully to Yamamoto. He then invited the chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet to follow him inside.

Otto's belief that the guided tour of his submarine would take less than one hour was proven wrong, as Admiral Yamamoto and the other Japanese naval officers quickly became awestruck by what they saw and asked tons of questions while examining everything. Vice-admiral Paul Wenneker was about as awed as his Japanese counterparts, as he compared what he remembered about previous German submarines he had seen to what he was seeing now. The tour went on for nearly two hours, at the end of which the German ambassador, Eugen Ott, announced to Otto Kretschmer that his embassy staff had reserved rooms at a local hotel for the crew of the submarine during their stay in Japan and had also arranged for a number of translators and guides to help the submariners better enjoy their stay. To that, the commander of the Yokosuka naval base added that the Japanese government would cover all the costs of the stay, making Otto most satisfied. With an aide to Ambassador Ott teaming up with Ulrich von Wittgenstein to arrange the transport of the crew to their assigned hotel, that left Otto

²⁵ Kamis : Name for Japanese gods.

free to isolate himself in the officers' wardroom of the U-800 with Takeshi Nagaoka, Admiral Yamamoto, the other Japanese senior officers and Vice-admiral Wenneker. There, Otto laid on the dining table a large map of the Pacific, along with the U-800's operational log and multiple piles of photographs contained inside marked envelopes. With his guests looking on with avid interest, he reviewed with them the story of his trip from France with the help of his log and of the photos he had taken of the targets he had hit along the way. Like Yamamoto about the breaking of the Japanese Navy's code, Wenneker was shocked to hear Otto's assertion that the German ENIGMA coding system had been broken in by the British and the Americans, but he accepted Otto's evidence readily enough and promised to deal with the consequences at the embassy in Tokyo. Then came the time for Otto to present the photographs of the various targets he had hit, taken through his periscope lens. The Japanese officers grinned widely on seeing the picture showing a giant mushroom cloud of smoke rising above the destroyed Miraflores Locks, but those grins widened even more when they saw the pictures of the sinking aircraft carriers ENTERPRISE and SARATOGA and of the battleship SOUTH DAKOTA and heavy cruiser MINNEAPOLIS, taken just outside Pearl Harbor.

"And you say that you also destroyed the American Navy's fuel tank park in Pearl Harbor with shellfire, Captain Kretschmer?" Asked Yamamoto at one point, not believing his luck.

"I did, Admiral. Our shelling was short but intense and I believe that only a handful at most of the tanks survived intact. The American Pacific Fleet is thus now severely short of fuel, on top of having lost two of their biggest aircraft carriers. This should help your own navy's operations around the Pacific quite a lot, Admiral."

"Indeed, Captain! This in fact leaves the Americans with only one fleet carrier in the Pacific, the U.S.S. HORNET. While our losses in Midway were most painful, I still have the SHOKAKU and the ZUIKAKU left as fleet carriers. You thus gave us back superiority in carriers in the Pacific, something that I will make certain to appraise my superiors of."

"Thank you, Admiral. While we are here together with Admiral Wenneker, could I ask when I will be departing Japan for my return trip to Lorient? My mission orders only specify that I am to load up some precious strategic cargo once in Japan, then return." Wenneker jumped in the exchange at that point with a question to Otto.

"How many torpedoes do you have left, Kapitän Kretschmer?"

"Only four, but Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka told me that I could possibly reload my tubes with certain types of Japanese torpedoes. Commander?"

Nagaoka then jumped in on the conversation and spoke for a minute, telling Wenneker and Yamamoto what he had told Otto about compatible Japanese torpedoes. At the end of it, Wenneker and Yamamoto exchanged looks, with Yamamoto won over by Takeshi's presentation.

"If those torpedoes prove to be indeed compatible with the launch tubes of your U-800, then I promise the full assistance of my technical experts and armorers to outfit Captain Kretschmer's boat with Type 92 and Type 96 torpedoes. I also can provide you with the services of a few of our best torpedo technicians for your return trip, so that they can help you maintain and launch your Japanese-made torpedoes during your long voyage."

"But, how will those technicians then return to Japan later on, Admiral?" Asked Otto, a bit surprised by that last offer. Yamamoto gave him a calm, sober look.

"Those men will simply continue to serve Japan, whether they are on a Japanese ship or on a German one. Duty is the sole important thing for them."

A bit put off by such ruthless thinking, Otto didn't insist on that matter, instead going back on the subject of his return trip.

"Very well. If I am truly able to use Japanese torpedoes, then what?" This time, it was Wenneker who answered him.

"The latest directives I got from Berlin concerning you said that, apart from loading aboard the U-800 a small cargo of strategic metals, you are to discuss with the Japanese Navy your return route, with the idea of inflicting the most damage possible to the British and American navies in the Pacific on your way back. In return, the Japanese will help you by resupplying you with fuel and food as long as you are within Japanese-controlled waters. In view of the huge distances involved in your return trip, I believe that this could help you tremendously."

"I certainly won't refuse such help, Admiral. I however know little to nothing about the present operational status and balance of forces in the Pacific. I will need to be briefed on the latest military intelligence information available in order to make the best decisions possible concerning my return route."

"That is a reasonable request, Captain." Said Yamamoto. "I will make sure that one of my staff officers comes to brief you on the situation in the Pacific. However, you just completed a very long voyage and your men and your boat need some rest and

maintenance. Rear-admiral Inouye, who commands this base, will be most happy to help you and your men enjoy a few days of rest around Yokosuka and the Tokyo region. He will also provide you with any technical and logistical support you may need.”

“Thank you, Admiral! This is most generous.”

Yamamoto smiled at Otto’s last words.

“Compared with the benefits brought to us by your exploits, that is the least I could do for you, Captain Kretschmer.”

14:06 (Tokyo Time)

Friday, July 31, 1942

Control room of the U-800

Imperial Japanese Navy torpedo range

Sagami Bay, adjacent to Tokyo Bay, Japan

“Fire Tube One!”

“Tube One fired! Torpedo on the way, Herr Kapitän. Running time to target: three minutes and twenty seconds.”

“Good! Let’s see if that baby fills its promises now.”

Otto looked at his watch, then looked back into the eyepiece of his attack periscope, pointed at the floating target anchored three kilometers downrange, near the shoreline of the bay. After three minutes and sixteen seconds, a red light lit up on top of the target, marking a direct underwater hit by the Type 92 Mod 1 torpedo fitted with a practice warhead.

“DIRECT HIT!”

Cheers around the control room greeted that announcement, with Takeshi Nagaoka being about the loudest to cheer. While happy with that result, Otto knew however that this day was not done yet.

“Helm, hard turn to port! Come to Heading 005!”

“Turning to port, Heading 005, aye Herr Kapitän!”

Waiting for his submarine to complete a half turn, Otto then lined up again the floating target in the center of his periscope’s lens.

“Target heading:185! Set!... Target heading: 188! Set!”

“Fire control solution calculated, Herr Kapitän.”

“Fire Tube Nine!”

"Tube Nine fired, torpedo on the way! Running time to target: one minute and 28 seconds."

The announcement on the running time of the Type 96 torpedo now rushing at the target made Otto smile with anticipation: if this one worked as well as the previous one, then he will have in his arsenal a torpedo capable of speeds of fifty knots, faster than any German, British or American torpedoes and with a warhead nearly twice as heavy as that of the German G7 torpedo, something that would give him a tremendous punch against enemy warships. Then, right on the clock, the red light atop the floating target lit up again, indicating a second direct hit.

"DIRECT HIT AGAIN!"

Waiting first for the cheers to subside, Otto then shook hands with Takeshi.

"Commander, your suggestion to adapt Japanese torpedoes to our launch tubes was a stroke of genius. Please congratulate on my behalf your four torpedo technicians for a job very well done."

"I certainly will, Herr Kapitän. What next, now?"

"Now, we go back to Yokosuka and we fill our torpedo carrousel and racks to the hilt with Type 92 and Type 96 torpedoes."

On a quay along the shoreline, Vice-admiral Wenneker smiled and held up one hand towards Rear-admiral Inouye.

"Two direct hits, as I predicted, Admiral Inouye. I believe that you lost your bet."

"I certainly did so, Admiral Wenneker. Your Captain Kretschmer is a true top shooter when it comes to torpedoes."

"That is part of why he is so successful, Admiral Inouye."

08:45 (Southwest Pacific Time)

Saturday, August 1, 1942

Supply tender U.S.S. ARGONNE

Docked in the port of Noumea, French New Caledonia

"Gentlemen, let me start by informing you that Admiral King has agreed to a one week delay to the start of Operation WATCHTOWER."

Major General Alexander Vandegrift, Commander of the First Marine Division, showed little satisfaction on hearing that from the commander of the South Pacific Area, Vice-admiral Robert Ghormley.

"Well, that will give my men a few more days to sort out the mess in my division's embarked supplies, but that is doing little to correct the major deficiency in this operation: the lack of an adequate air cover. Is Admiral Nimitz going to send us more carriers or planes?"

Another participant at the command conference, Rear-admiral George Murray, looked at Vandegrift with a pinched expression.

"General, you should realize that my HORNET is now the sole surviving aircraft carrier in the Navy, either in the Pacific or in the Atlantic. We can't expect new carriers to show up for at least a few more months, time for them to be built and commissioned." Vandegrift in turn looked at Murray with shock and surprise on his face.

"The HORNET, our last carrier? But, how could that be? We should have at least two or three carriers left in the Atlantic, no?"

Murray shook his head as Rear-admiral Richmond Turner, Rear-admiral John McCain and Vice-admiral Ghormley listened on grimly to what they knew too well already.

"None are left in the Atlantic Fleet, thanks to the same German submarine which sank the ENTERPRISE and the SARATOGA just outside Pearl Harbor, General Vandegrift. The U-800 sank the RANGER off Halifax last November and the WASP off Boston in March. It also sank three battleships and three heavy cruisers that should have been part of our forces here, plus more destroyers than I could remember. The news of those losses were heavily censored, in order to preserve the morale of our citizens."

"If we can't expect more carriers, then how about land-based planes? Can't General MacArthur provide us with more aircraft from Australia?"

The graying and nearly ascetic Rear-admiral John McCain, Commander South Pacific Aircraft, took on him to answer that.

"General MacArthur says that he can't spare more than what he already sent us. In all fairness to him, he does have quite a lot on his plate presently in Papua-New Guinea, while he is as starved of supplies and units by Washington as we are, thanks to that damn 'Germany First' policy. Right now, I have a total of 249 aircraft dispersed in airfields around the sector, but my biggest problem is the distances involved: most of those planes don't have enough range to cover adequately our planned landing in

Guadalcanal. Only carrier-based aircraft can get close enough to provide extended cover and advance warning against any incoming enemy force.”

While Vandegrift had to recognize that McCain was right, that didn't assuage his concerns.

“So, I am expected to land my division in Guadalcanal with minimal air cover and with the enemy possessing as well naval superiority in the area. What if the Japanese push back in strength after I land? Will the Navy be able to stand its ground and cover the landing sites?”

The way the admirals around him looked hesitantly at each other after his question made him harden his voice next.

“Well, gentlemen? Is it too problematic right now to land on Guadalcanal in your opinion? Should we wait for more reinforcements before proceeding with the operation?”

Vice-admiral Ghormley, a man who had been from the start pessimistic about the situation in the South Pacific, nodded his head at Vandegrift's questions.

“I believe so, General. In the meantime, we could use the forces assembled for Operation WATCHTOWER to take and secure Ndeni, in the Santa Cruz Islands. Ndeni is much closer to our base in Espiritu Santo and both Admiral Nimitz and Admiral King have been pushing me lately to take Ndeni, in order to better protect our supply route between the United States and Australia. Our limited air cover will then be less of a factor than around Guadalcanal and our sole remaining carrier will be safer from enemy air attacks.”

“True,” replied Rear-admiral Murray, the commander of the HORNET carrier group, “but we still have to count on Japanese submarines, which are quite active in that area.”

Rear-admiral Richmond Turner, the commander of the amphibious Task Force 62 meant to capture Guadalcanal, listened to all this with growing unease and alarm.

“Wait a minute, Admiral! If we delay our landings on Guadalcanal, that will only give more time to the Japanese to finish their airfield there and to fortify the island. If they are allowed to do that, then taking Guadalcanal will become that much more difficult, potentially costing us thousands of extra casualties compared to a landing made in a week. Also, if the Japanese are given the time to finish that airfield and to fly in substantial numbers of aircraft there, then they will be within easy range of both the Australian coast and of our maritime supply lines.”

Turner's objection only increased Ghormley's indecision. The latter's aversion to risks then won over after a moment of internal debate.

"We don't know for sure that the Japanese even consider Guadalcanal to be a significant piece of estate, Admiral Turner. The slow rate of Japanese construction work at their airfield there may well indicate that they consider Guadalcanal to be of only secondary strategic importance. Why risk our sole carrier left and one full division of Marines to take it? My strong feeling is that we should delay Operation WATCHTOWER for a few weeks, time to receive more land-based long range aircraft and, hopefully, a new carrier. In its place, we will prepare to take Ndeni. I will thus send a message stating this to Admiral Nimitz and Admiral King, informing them that the landings in Guadalcanal will have to be delayed."

Richmond Turner nearly grumbled at that, dissatisfied and certain that they would come to regret that decision.

"This is wrong, Admiral. I strongly believe that this decision will eventually cost us dearly."

"I'm sorry, Admiral Turner, but I have to play with the cards that I have, not with the cards I wished I had. Due to our insufficient air cover, a landing on Guadalcanal in a week would nearly certainly result in heavy losses, both on the ground and at sea. We will go to Ndeni instead."

13:35 (Tokyo Time)

Tuesday, August 4, 1942

Grand headquarters of the Imperial Japanese Navy

Tokyo, Japan

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto rose from behind his work desk to greet his two German visitors, returning their crisp salutes and speaking in Japanese at the more senior visitor.

"Aah, Vice-admiral Wenneker and Captain Kretschmer! To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"We came to make you review and approve the return route selected by Kapitän Kretschmer for his trip back to Europe, Admiral. Do you mind if we switch to English, so that we could all understand each other?"

"Not at all!" Replied at once Yamamoto in English. "You may show me your selected return route now, Captain Kretschmer."

"Thank you, Admiral." Said Otto before stepping forward to unroll a naval chart on top of Yamamoto's desk and immobilizing its corners with a few objects. He then spent about three minutes to describe his chosen itinerary, explaining as he went his reasons for his choices of waypoints and what he was hoping to achieve during his trip. Yamamoto listen to him religiously and was obviously pleased with what he heard by the time Otto finished his presentation.

"This sounds like a most productive itinerary to me, Captain. I accept it without reservations. Be assured that you will find support and help at all of my bases in the Pacific and from all my ships. How is the loading of special cargo and food supplies going aboard your submarine, Captain Kretschmer?"

"It will be completed this afternoon, Admiral. I could sail out as soon as tomorrow morning, with your permission."

"You have it, Captain." Replied Yamamoto, who then took a step forward to shake hands with Otto. "I wish you the best of luck on your return trip."

"Thank you, Admiral." Said Otto, who then rerolled his chart and grabbed it before saluting Yamamoto. He and Weneker then walked out of the admiral's office, heading for the entrance of the headquarters building while speaking in German.

"Your itinerary, while certainly having a lot of potential to hurt the enemy, is quite a risky one, my dear Kretschmer. One serious battle damage or mechanical breakdown and you will find yourself stranded in enemy waters or in the middle of nowhere, near the Antarctic, with no possibility of getting help."

"That was always a possibility during my past war patrols, Admiral. The risks are well worth taking but I assure you that I do not intend to actually take any unnecessary risks on this trip: Germany badly needs the strategic metals I will be carrying home. Besides, I want my crew to be able to return to their families and loved ones in Germany."

"And you, Otto? Do you have a loved one waiting for you?"

"Only my parents at this time, Admiral. I decided at the start of the war that I would not start a romantic liaison until this war is over. That way, I can concentrate better on my duties and responsibilities to Germany."

Weneker nodded in approval at those words: Kretschmer had amply proven by now that these words were not empty ones.

08:04 (Tokyo Time)

Wednesday, August 5, 1942

Forward deck of the U-800

Leaving Yokosuka Naval Base

Petty Officer First Class Toru Genda, standing at attention on the forward deck of the U-800 as it slowly sailed away from the quay, could not repress his tears as he looked at his young wife Yoko and his small daughter Kimi, who were waving at him from among the crowd of spectators watching the departure of the German submarine. His three Japanese comrades and most of the German crewmembers of the U-800 also stood on the top deck, wearing their best uniforms. At best, Toru would not see his wife and daughter before many more months. At the worst, they would never see each other again. A big lump was stuck in Toru's throat when a German sailor next to him gently patted his left shoulder and said something in German to him. While Toru didn't understand the words, he understood their meaning: the German meant to comfort him with words of encouragement. Toru thus gave him a grateful smile and a short bow of the head before looking back at his wife and child. When they were far enough from the quay, Captain Kretschmer gave an order in German from the top of the conning tower, using a loudspeaker. Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka spoke next, translating in Japanese Otto's order. Toru Genda, along with Chief Petty Officer Hiro Nakamura, Petty Officer Second Class Isamu Hondo and Petty Officer Second Class Minoru Tokugara, then ran inside the submarine, along with the German sailors on the top deck. Nagaoka had already started to teach them some German, starting with key command words, so that they could eventually function by themselves aboard the U-800. As torpedo technicians and specialists, the four Japanese NCOs had been selected among volunteers to help maintain and operate the Type 92 Mod 1 and Type 96 torpedoes that now filled the torpedo carrousel and racks of the U-800. Captain Kretschmer had already decreed that the familiarization process would be a two-sided one, with German sailors also told to learn key words in Japanese and familiarize themselves with the Japanese torpedoes and corresponding control boxes now installed in the U-800, while Toru and his three Japanese comrades learned about German systems and followed language courses under Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka. Hopefully, they would soon

be able to put to good use the Japanese torpedoes filling the racks of the U-800, in which case Toru would deem his personal sacrifice well worth it.

CHAPTER 20 – SOUTH PACIFIC SHOWDOWN

12:07 (Southwest Pacific Time)

Tuesday, August 18, 1942

Open bridge of the U-800, area of New Hebrides Islands

South Pacific

Otto Kretschmer had just finished calculating his present position, after taking a sextant reading from the open bridge atop the conning tower of his U-800, when he got an intercom call from the sonar section.

“Kapitän, our towed array is picking up a large group of fast ships at some distance to the North-northeast of our position.”

“In the direction of the Santa Cruz Islands?”

“Yes, Herr Kapitän!”

“Very well! Take as accurate a sound heading of that group of ship as you can now. We will keep on our present course for half an hour, then will take another hydrophone heading in order to obtain a rough triangulation on the position of those ships.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän!”

As the intercom link closed, Otto thought for a moment about that new contact. The Japanese Navy had sent a few days ago a general warning notice that the Americans had landed in force on the island of Ndeni, in the Santa Cruz Islands. Normally, a major amphibious operation called for close air support, which in this area meant using an aircraft carrier, unless the Americans had decided against all logic to fly only land-based aircraft from Espiritu Santo, their most advanced base in this area. Whatever it was, that group of fast ships held a lot of promises as potential targets.

Half an hour later, with Otto now in the control room, a second hydrophone heading was obtained, allowing him to locate the unknown group of ship about eighty nautical miles to the North-northeast of his position. Furthermore, his electronic warfare section was able to confirm via an HF directional finding that the group of ship was American. Now knowing that he wouldn't be running after Japanese ships by mistake,

Otto turned his boat towards the North-northeast and sailed at a speed of thirteen knots on the surface, his three big diesels working in order to fully recharge his batteries before what he anticipated to be a hot engagement. Once within thirty miles of his objective, or if an enemy plane showed up on the horizon, he would then submerge down to periscope depth, using his schnorchel as long as he could without risking detection. After that, all depended on what he would find.

The Sun was still up at seven in the evening, when Otto finally arrived within periscope sight of his potential target. With Takeshi Nagaoka and Ulrich von Wittgenstein waiting nervously near him as he looked through his search periscope, Otto played the cold fish on them and spoke calmly, as if he was watching a bunch of fishing boats.

"Well, gentlemen, I believe that we will have something to feed ourselves on today. I see a nice group of American warships presently conducting refueling at sea operations and going at an approximate speed of ten knots. What appears to be two fleet oilers sailing in parallel are refueling one aircraft carrier and one heavy cruiser, while three more cruisers and six destroyers are forming a protective screen around the oilers."

"The HORNET! We found it!" Exclaimed Takeshi Nagaoka, ecstatic, making Otto smile.

"Wait until I have been able to confirm the identification of those ships before making a victory dance, Commander. Herr Straube, bring the ship identification book near me, please!"

The sailor quickly approached him, the large book in his hands and opened to the chapter on American aircraft carriers. Otto consulted the book for a couple of minutes, looking at intervals through his periscope's eyepiece, before announcing his findings.

"Gentlemen, we now have in our sights the carrier U.S.S. HORNET, the heavy cruisers NORTHAMPTON and PENSACOLA, two ATLANTA-Class light cruisers, six destroyers, two fleet oilers and what could be three ammunition ships. I intend to concentrate my first attack on the HORNET, then hit the cruisers. Herr von Wittgenstein, call the crew to battle stations...quietly. Prepare and flood all tubes, with torpedoes set to run at a depth of four meters. Shut down the diesels and go to electric propulsion, then retract the schnorchel."

As his second-in-command passed his orders on, Otto gave a sober look to Takeshi Nagaoka.

“Commander, I will ask you to go now to the forward torpedo room, to help your torpedo specialists and ensure that nothing is lost in translation.”

“Right away, Herr Kapitän!”

Nagaoka then nearly ran out of the control room, heading down and towards the bow. Once in the forward torpedo room, on the Lower Deck, he saw that his four specialists, helped by the German torpedo men, had already connected the Type 92 torpedoes loaded in the eight forward launch tubes to the Japanese-supplied fire control boxes that had been fixed to steel frames near the tubes’ hatches.

“SET THE RUNNING DEPTH AT FOUR METERS, MEN! WE HAVE AN AMERICAN CARRIER TO SINK!”

His words brought big smiles on the faces of his four torpedo specialists, who then double-checked their torpedo settings with Takeshi. They soon felt their submarine going down while increasing speed and turning a few degrees to starboard. One of the German torpedo men smiled and commented to his comrades around him.

“My bet is that the Kapitän will get under the destroyer screen and then approach that carrier from the rear, where the screw noises of that carrier will prevent the destroyers’ sonar sets from picking him up. Then, he will ram that carrier in the ass.”

The Germans present laughed at that crude description, imitated by the four Japanese specialists once Takeshi had translated those words for their benefit.

Sixteen anxious minutes then passed as the U-800 maneuvered underwater, making its stealthy approach towards the HORNET. Then came via intercom the order they had been waiting for.

“FIRE TUBES ONE TO FIVE!”

Torpedo-Obermechanikermaat Kurt Vormann and Chief Petty Officer Hiro Nakamura pulled down in quick succession the five ejection handles, with Nakamura taking care of the even-numbered tubes, sending five Type 92 Mod 1 torpedoes on their way. Less than twenty seconds later, after a slight change in heading by the U-800, came a second order via intercom.

“FIRE TUBES SIX TO EIGHT! RELOAD AFTER FIRING!”

Again, Vormann and Nakamura shared the job of ejecting the three remaining torpedoes still in the forward tubes. Immediately afterwards, the torpedo men started frantically

closing and emptying of water all eight tubes prior to reloading them. They were still at it when the muffled sound of four explosions from afar echoed inside the submarine, making the men scream in triumph. They however fell quiet nearly at once and concentrated on their reloading work but three more muffled explosions fifteen seconds later made the men howl again, followed closely by another order via intercom.

“COMMANDER NAGAOKA’S TEAM IS TO GET AT THE DOUBLE TO THE STERN TORPEDO ROOM!”

“THE CAPTAIN IS GOING TO FIRE A SALVO FROM HIS STERN TUBES, MEN. FOLLOW ME!”

With his four Japanese NCOs close behind him, Takeshi went to the ladder leading up to the Median Deck, climbing it quickly, going up to the Upper Deck, then passed in quick succession through the forward torpedo carrousel compartment, the upper crew accommodations compartment and the crew mess before using the narrow passageway linking the crew mess to the diesel engines compartment. There, he used the walkway between the top of the center and starboard side diesels and entered the engine control room, adjacent to the stern torpedo room. There, he found that the German torpedo men present had already loaded and connected to their control boxes four Type 96. With his NCOs taking place near the control boxes, Takeshi communicated with the control room via intercom, then shouted orders to his specialists.

“SET RUNNING DEPTH TO THREE METERS AND SPEED TO FIFTY KNOTS.”

“READY!” Shouted CPO1 Nakamura after twelve seconds.

“FIRE TUBES NINE AND TEN!”

“FIRING TUBES NINE AND TEN!”

Less than ten seconds later, another order came from the control room.

“FIRE TUBES ELEVEN AND TWELVE!”

“FIRING TUBES ELEVEN AND TWELVE!”

“RELOAD ALL TUBES! KEEP THE SAME DEPTH AND SPEED SETTINGS ON!”

“HAY!”

They didn’t even have time to even close and empty of seawater all four tubes before two muffled explosions were heard through the hull, making the men cheer. The cheers redoubled when another pair of explosions were heard, making Takeshi grin.

"Eleven hits out of twelve torpedoes fired: Captain Kretschmer must be the best torpedo shot I ever heard of."

The sudden diving of the U-800, at the same time that a sharp turn to port forced him to grab hold of a pipe in order to stay on his feet then reminded him that the Americans were not going to let themselves be sunk without doing anything. PO2 Minoru Tokugara paled when the U-800's steep dive persisted, while the electric motors of the submarine went to near maximum power.

"We are going to get crushed by the water pressure if we keep diving like this!" In contrast, the German torpedo men, while understandably nervous, seemed to take the steep dive in stride, with Siegfried Detmers looking at Takeshi.

"Standard evasive tactic, Commander. The Kapitän probably released a pair of Bold canisters to fool the American sonars and is now going down to a depth of 300 meters in order to escape any depth charges thrown by the Americans. Then, he will trail the American ships from deep down until his torpedo tubes are all reloaded before attacking again."

"Then, we better hurry up and reload those tubes, I believe. Let's get back to work, men!"

The ten men present in the stern torpedo room reloaded the four stern launch tubes as quickly as they could, completing the job in near record time. All the while, dozens of muffled, distant underwater explosions from American depth charges dropped in the water kept being heard inside the submarine. However, those explosions were obviously too far to cause any damage, as the U-800 barely shook with each explosion, something that made Detmers smile.

"Come on, Yanks, waste your depth charges as much as you want: you won't catch us this deep."

"Uh, how deep can this submarine go, sir?" Asked Minoru Tokugara to Takeshi.

"It went once down to 360 meters during our trip to Japan, with no signs of the hull straining much. Captain Kretschmer told me that he believes that he could go as deep as 450 meters if need be before risking damages."

"Believes, sir?"

"Don't worry, Petty Officer Tokugara: American depth charges can't be set to explode deeper than 200 meters. We won't need to dive down past 400 meters...unless Captain Kretschmer decides to play cat and mouse with the Americans."

The face that Tokugara did then made Takeshi and the two other Japanese laugh briefly. A strong acoustic pulse then reverberated through the whole submarine.

BONG

"What was that?" Asked PO2 Isamu Hondo, nearly jumping back.

"That is the U-800 using its low frequency active sonar set to paint a tactical picture of the American fleet. Now that the effect of surprise is past, he is now free to use all the means at his disposal to continue his attack. I saw him at work off Pearl Harbor: he is far from finished with the Americans."

As if to lend extra weight to his words, an order arrived via the intercom.

"COMMANDER NAGAOKA'S TEAM IS REQUESTED IN THE FORWARD TORPEDO ROOM."

Taking a quick decision, Takeshi pointed at Genda and Hondo.

"You two will stay here in order to set the control boxes here for the next salvo. I will give you the settings in Japanese via intercom. Chief Nakamura, PO2 Tokugara, you come with me. My bet is that Captain Kretschmer is about to launch a second assault on the American fleet."

Takeshi then ran out of the stern torpedo room, followed by Nakamura and Tokugara.

In the intense forty minutes that followed, the U-800 conducted seven more attacks, reloading another two times and expending another fifteen torpedoes. All the while, it kept twisting around, accelerating, decelerating and diving while engaged literally in a dogfight with the escorting American destroyers. The latter however quickly found out that their adversary was out-turning them, evading with apparent ease their patterns of depth charges and proving very hard to pick up on sonar unless being at very close range, by which time torpedoes were on the way to their targets.

On the surface of the water, in their life raft bobbing up and down on the waves, a group of fourteen survivors from the heavy cruiser U.S.S. NORTHAMPTON watched the battle around them, their hopes diminishing every time an American ship was torpedoed. One young sailor, who had grown more and more agitated, shouted angrily when he saw that the three remaining destroyers, the last warships left intact in Task Force 17, stopped dropping depth charges in the water.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, GUYS? WHY ARE YOU GIVING UP?"

"Calm down, Seaman Roundtree!" Replied Chief Petty Officer Bernie Stockwell, one of the other survivors in the life raft. "They probably ran out of depth charges, considering the rhythm at which they had been dropping them."

As the young seaman accepted that with difficulty, another seaman paled visibly and pointed out at something nearby, his voice shaking.

"A PERISCOPE! I SEE A PERISCOPE RIGHT BEHIND US!"

All eyes turned in that direction, with the Americans seeing at once that their comrade had seen correctly, something that sent chills down their backs.

"The fucking bastard! Is he trying to mock us?" Exclaimed a petty officer. As if it had heard him, the lens of the periscope turned towards the life raft and stayed on it, as if the captain of the enemy submarine wanted to look at the American sailors. Then, something happened that none of the Americans could have predicted: the periscope started flashing a light signal in Morse code, which CPO Stockwell read out loud.

"Mister John Kaiser, is that you? Uh?! What the hell?"

A tall navy lieutenant sitting near him made a grimace and patted Stockwell's shoulder.

"That's me, Chief!"

The officer, who was in his mid twenties, then waved with both hands at the periscope and even stood up to be better seen, stunning his companions.

"What are you doing, sir?" Asked Stockwell, shocked. "How could that bastard know you?"

"That bastard, Chief, is Captain Otto Kretschmer, commander of the U-800. Last January, while I was on my way with my family from Puerto Rico to the United States in order to be reactivated as a reservist officer, our ship sank in a storm. Only me, my wife and two kids and one Puerto Rican sailor survived the sinking in a raft. The day after, the U-800 surfaced near us and saved us, eventually dropping us off on a beach of the Dutch island of Curacao. Captain Kretschmer, along with his crew, proved most correct with us while we were aboard his submarine."

"Well, I'll be!" Could only say Stockwell. Another Morse message then flashed from the periscope.

"Send my regards to your wife Jennifer and your kids, Helen and Robert. Good luck!"

Another light message, this time sent towards the nearest destroyer, was flashed by the submarine.

"To U.S. destroyers, from U-800. Will let you pick up survivors if you refrain from attacking me further."

The American seamen could only look at each other in disbelief at that point, with only John Kaiser taking it in stride.

On the destroyer U.S.S. ANDERSON, Lieutenant-commander Richard Guthrie could hardly believe his eyes as he read the flashing message from the enemy submarine's periscope.

"Damn! I don't believe this! First, this bastard sinks most of our ships and kills thousands of our men, then he calls for a mercy truce."

"Uh, what do we do, Captain?" Asked the young bridge duty officer near him. "We can shoot at that periscope with our forward five inch guns."

"Yes, but we would probably kill many of our surviving men floating over there at the same time, Lieutenant. I hate to say this, but that bastard could have chosen to sink all the rest of us while denying us a chance to retrieve survivors, especially now that we are out of depth charges. Signal back to that sub and say that we accept his truce offer. I will get on the TBS²⁶ in the meantime."

Going to the VHF radio set sitting in one corner of his bridge, Guthrie called the two other remaining destroyers of their decimated task force, getting quickly responses from their captains.

"To the HUGHES and RUSSELL, this is the ANDERSON. I just accepted an offer of a truce sent by signal lamp from the enemy submarine. He will let us pick up our survivors if we don't attack him further."

"How could we know that he won't torpedo us once we are stopped in the water and defenseless, Rick?" Asked a disbelieving Donald Ramsey, on the HUGHES.

"From what we know about the captain of that U-800, he is supposedly a man of honor. We either accept his offer or we flee at top speed to evade his torpedoes, leaving behind our men in the water. I believe that our choice is clear."

"I agree!" Said Glenn Hartwig, on the RUSSELL. "We lost enough men already as it is. I will flash back my agreement by lamp."

²⁶ TBS : Transmissions Between Ships. Naval tactical radio system using the VHF band and used by the U.S. Navy during WW2.

"How about you, Donald? I need a consensus here before we can start fishing out our men."

"Alright!" Replied Ramsey, clearly reluctant. "I will also flash my agreement for a truce."

"Good! In the meantime, I will send a top priority message to South Pacific Command, to pass the bad news."

Guthrie felt bile in his throat as he put down the radio microphone: what was now left of the naval forces of the South Pacific Area Command had little hope of being able to oppose any sizeable Japanese naval offensive around the Solomons, while the Marines landed on Ndeni were now in a precarious situation indeed.

22:11 (South Pacific Time)

Troopship U.S.S. McCawley (AP-10)

Anchored off Ndeni Island, Santa Cruz Islands

Rear-admiral Richmond Turner's signals officer had a somber look on his face when he came on the bridge of the troopship, a message in his hands.

"A 'Critic' message from the destroyer ANDERSON, Admiral."

Having already received a number of distress messages from Task Force 17, the old and irascible officer took the message without a word, then read it slowly while sitting in his command chair. The men around him didn't miss the mix of dejection and anger that the reading brought to his face. Still, Turner didn't speak then, instead thinking over the operational and strategic implications of the loss of Task Force 17 and of his sole supporting aircraft carrier. If an eventual landing on Guadalcanal had appeared to be difficult and risky a mere three weeks ago, now it could be considered downright unthinkable. Even the present operation in Ndeni was now at serious risk if ever a strong Japanese force showed up. Turner's stomach soured even more when he thought about the possible reactions of Vice-admiral Ghormley to this piece of news. The already skittish commander of the South Pacific Area was liable to crawl back inside his shell like a turtle and completely abandon offensive operations in his area of responsibility. If he did that, then Turner could predict serious long term consequences for Australia and the rest of the Allied forces in the South Pacific. Unfortunately, Ghormley outranked him and only Admiral Nimitz and Admiral King could either force Ghormley to act or replace him as area commander. Another concern Turner had was

of more immediate importance to him: after having butchered Task Force 17, what would that damn U-800 do next? Where would it go?

03:56 (South Pacific Time)

Wednesday, August 19, 1942

U.S.S. McCAWLEY (AP-10)

Off Ndeni Island, Santa Cruz Islands

Rear-admiral Richmond Turner, who wasn't able to go to sleep, had decided to go instead on the open bridge wing of his command ship to watch the bombardment of enemy positions on Ndeni by the ships of his fire support group. His heavy units were easy enough to spot in the night, being brightly illuminated every time that they fired their big guns towards Ndeni. The battleship U.S.S. NORTH CAROLINA was particularly easy to spot, thanks to the monstrous muzzle blasts from its sixteen inch guns. Three heavy cruisers and two light cruisers were also firing their guns at Ndeni, covered by six destroyers.

Turner was looking at the coast of Ndeni, watching the heavy shells land and explode, when one of the sailors acting as lookout let out a surprised expression that made him twist his head towards the open sea.

"Hey, that didn't look like a departure shot!"

Three of the cruisers fired a salvo at that moment, making it hard to Turner to spot what had attracted the sailor's attention, so he approached the young man on the dark open bridge wing and touched his left arm.

"What did you just see, young man?"

The Seaman Second Class stiffened on seeing that his admiral was speaking to him and nearly stuttered his answer.

"Uh, I saw a flash of light coming from one of the escort destroyers at our ten o'clock, sir, but it didn't look like a gun firing."

Just then, another flash of light came from a destroyer in the distance. Turner stiffened at once on seeing it: the sailor had been right about it not being a gun flash. He then turned around and shouted towards the bridge officer of the U.S.S. McCAWLEY.

"WE ARE UNDER TORPEDO ATTACK! SOUND THE ALERT!"

Turner then ran inside the bridge, swearing to himself. This could be a night attack by Japanese warships, which favored such types of engagement, or it could be torpedo boats or a submarine. Before he could do anything inside the bridge, the NORTH CAROLINA was briefly lit up by four explosions along its open ocean side. The heavy cruisers ASTORIA and PORTLAND were next to be hit less than two minutes later, each of them receiving four torpedoes. Frustrated, Turner shouted at the poor bridge duty officer, a young lieutenant.

“WHY AM I NOT RECEIVING REPORTS YET? AND WHERE IS CAPTAIN McFEATHERS?”

The captain of the troopship actually arrived on the bridge a minute later, just as the light cruiser SAN JUAN was shaken by two torpedo hits.

“What is going on, Admiral?”

“We are chewing on torpedoes, that’s what, Captain! Raise the anchor and get ready to dash to sea!”

Turner’s chief of signals was next to show up and was set upon at once by his admiral.

“Commander Fielding, get reports from our ships about what is exactly going on and about their operational status. Nobody has reported to me yet!”

“I’m on it, Admiral.” Said the signals officer before running out of the bridge. Turner then went to one of the large windows of the bridge and looked outside, fuming.

“What the hell were our sonar operators doing? Sleeping on the job?”

The first battle reports belatedly arrived two minutes later and quickly set Turner on a grim, angry mood. The destroyer DALE had broken in half, while the MacDONOUGH had capsized. The battleship NORTH CAROLINA was battling extensive floodings and was down to six knots of speed, while the cruisers ASTORIA, PORTLAND and SAN JUAN were dead in the water and were all in imminent danger of sinking or were on fire. Thankfully, the rain of torpedoes seemed to have stopped for the moment. Turner swore to himself when he understood why.

“Shit! It must be that U-800 bastard: he withdrew in order to reload his torpedo tubes.”

In that, he was partly right and also partly wrong. It was indeed the U-800 at work and it was in the process of reloading its torpedo tubes, but it had not withdrawn, far from it. In fact, Otto Kretschmer was using the utter confusion he had spread along the American battle lines to silently slip to a position between the outer destroyer screen and heavy

units and the transport ships of Task Force 62. Seventeen minutes later, with its twelve tubes reloaded, a second salvo hit the heavy cruiser NEW ORLEANS, the light cruiser ATLANTA and three of the transport ships, which were thankfully empty of troops at the time, having landed them a few days ago. The NEW ORLEANS fared badly, hit hard by four Type 96 torpedoes, each with a 550 kilo warhead, and capsized within minutes. By now near panic was sweeping the transport fleet, with captains frantically raising anchor and firing up their boilers in order to be able to sail away from Ndeni, even though it meant leaving the Marines on the island without support. By the time that the first transport ships were pulling away from the island, a third torpedo salvo hit the American fleet. The troopship BARNETT and the destroyer HULL received two torpedoes each that crippled them seriously and left them with increasing lists, while the heavy units that had already been hit but seemed to have had a chance to survive received yet more torpedo hits that sealed their fate. Everything calmed down however before the Sun would come up over the horizon. Richmond Turner then guessed, correctly, that the U-800 had run out of torpedoes and was now withdrawing. To where was the million dollar question. As for the intended invasion of Guadalcanal, it was now for all intents and purposes dead in the water, at least for many months.

09:05 (South Pacific Time)

Rabaul, Island of New Britain

Bismarck Archipelago, east of Papua-New Guinea

The Japanese commander in Rabaul, Vice-admiral Nishizo Tsukahara, nearly ran across the gangway that had been put in place between the quay and the top deck of the U-800, so anxious he was to learn why the U-800 had returned to his base. He was greeted on the deck by Otto Kretschmer and Takeshi Nagaoka, the latter serving as translator for Otto. The three of them exchanged salutes before Tsukahara addressed Otto.

“I understood that, after a last refueling here on your way south, you would be on your way to Germany by now, Captain Kretschmer. Why did you come back?”

“Because I about ran out of torpedoes, Admiral, and need to rearm and refuel.”

Tsukahara’s eyes popped wide open on hearing his answer.

“You already expended nearly seventy torpedoes, Captain?”

"I fired 63 torpedoes to be exact, Admiral. Here is the list of the American ships I sank, along with their location at the time."

Tsukahara took the list, which Nagaoka had translated into Japanese, and read it quickly. Instead of becoming instantly ecstatic, he looked back up at Otto with some misgivings showing on his face.

"That is quite a list of victory claims, Captain. Do you have something to back it up?"

"I do have a few photographs, taken through my attack periscope, Admiral. I used infra-red films for the night photos." Replied Otto, handing him a large, thick envelope he had held in his left hand. He understood perfectly well the skepticism shown by Tsukahara and wasn't offended one bit by it. Opening the envelope, the Japanese admiral went slowly through the photos inside, stopping when he looked down at the photo of the sinking, half submerged U.S.S. HORNET. That photo finally convinced Tsukahara, who smiled at Otto.

"I will be most happy to refill your torpedo racks and your fuel tanks, Captain Kretschmer. Just make a detailed list of your needs and I will make sure that they will be satisfied."

"You are too kind, Admiral. I believe that there are some strategic and operational conclusions and decisions that need to be made after those sinkings, as the American fleet is now very weak in the South Pacific, particularly around the Solomons, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia."

"Indeed!" Agreed Tsukahara, who already saw many opportunities pop up inside his mind. "We will of course have to discuss all this in front of a good meal tonight at my quarters."

"Of course, Admiral! I will be most happy to come." Replied a smiling Otto. If he could entice the Japanese High Command into what he believed to be the needed set of actions, then maybe his goal of shortening this war to Germany's advantage could become reality.

CHAPTER 21 – THE LONG WAY HOME

01:14 (South Pacific Time)

Wednesday, August 26, 1942

Turtle Bay Airfield, Espiritu Santo Island

New Hebrides, South Pacific

Private Joshua Hearst felt bored to death and not a little sleepy as he readjusted the sling of his rifle on his right shoulder. Right now, his guard duty in front of one of the aircraft hardstands of the only operational airfield on Espiritu Santo felt rather pointless to him. Apart from enemy air raids or shelling from submarines, what could happen on an island full of American soldiers, Marines and sailors? It was not as if someone would try to steal the PBY-5 amphibian patrol aircraft he was guarding tonight. Lost in his thoughts and made less vigilant by his fatigue, Joshua didn't hear or see the dark silhouette that stealthily came out of the jungle behind the amphibian aircraft and then cautiously walked to it at a crouch. The intruder then silently entered the plane by one of its side doors, spending less than four minutes inside before coming out and returning inside the jungle, all with Joshua remaining blissfully unaware of the visit.

Just inside the jungle tree line, Obergefreiter Michel Drücker stopped and crouched beside Hugo Margraff, speaking to him in a whisper.

"Another charge set, Hauptmann."

"Good! We will wait for the others to return here, then we will move to another group of aircraft. Those six B-17 heavy bombers to our left sure look like juicy targets to me."

"They certainly are, Hauptmann. It is nice to be able to do some ground work again."

"I concur! With the good food and lack of opportunity to exercise on the U-800, we were in serious danger of becoming fat."

Both men had to wait only a few more minutes before their five other comrades came back to them through the jungle. Hugo grinned on getting their short reports: all ten PBY-5 amphibian patrol aircraft parked on the airfield, which were the most dangerous

planes for the U-800, had now explosive charges with timers hidden inside them. Once the six B-17 heavy bombers would be prepared for demolition, his men would be free to go pour some refined sugar in the fuel tanks of the 26 F4F WILDCAT fighters parked on the main apron.

It was not yet three o'clock when the seven commandos were back aboard the U-800 and were pulling their inflatable rubber boat out of the water. As they deflated their boat in order to store it inside the submarine, a large group of sailors, including two of the Japanese torpedo specialists, came on deck as the big twin 12.7 centimeter gun mount rose from its under deck well, with the well cover plates sliding open to let it out while also providing a larger platform to stand on for the gunners who would operate the twin guns. At the same time, the electric motors of the U-800 came to life, quietly powering the big ducted propeller. With sailors manning the optical rangefinder and night fire director inside the two underwater observation domes atop the conning tower, the submarine slowly sailed down the eastern coast of Espiritu Santo, passing outward of the small Mafia Island and Aessi Island in order to stay as long as possible out of sight of coastal observers. On the open bridge of his boat, Otto Kretschmer shook his head at the lack of vigilance shown again by the Americans. Either they were still shell-shocked from their devastating losses at sea a week ago, or they were indeed slow learners. Well, maybe this time they would get the lesson. His bet was that the Americans had stationed their picket destroyers further away from the island, relying on their defensive minefields to protect their main anchorage areas. The problem was that Otto already knew where those minefields and their entrance gaps were situated, having both watched American ships negotiating them to enter or exit the harbor areas and also having used his high definition sonar earlier in the night to accurately pinpoint their locations. From radio intercepts and direction-finding triangulations made by Japanese stations in and around Rabaul, Otto knew that most of the surviving ships that had been off Ndeni had withdrawn afterwards to either Espiritu Santo or Noumea, the two most important American outposts in this corner of the South Pacific save for the bases in Australia. He thus counted on having plenty of choices as targets for his guns tonight. The trick would be to shoot both accurately and at a rapid rate, in order to do the maximum damage in the least amount of time, so that he could then submerge and disappear before the Americans could react. His gunners and pointers already had

been told by him what were their priority targets. Now, he only needed to wait and observe.

“LOAD STAR SHELLS!”

At Fritz Lent’s command, two sailors stepped forward and rammed the 12.7 cm shells they were carrying into the breaches of the twin guns, then stepped back to get more shells, this time of the explosive-fragmentation type. The U-800 was now sailing past the Pallikulo Peninsula, at the southeastern tip of Espiritu Santo, with the entrance to the main anchorage area now visible in the light of the full Moon. The submarine was apparently still undetected by the time it came in full view of the main anchorage area used by the American fleet. To Otto’s satisfaction, that anchorage area proved to be full of ships of various types, from heavy cruisers to transport ships. Wanting to keep the benefit of surprise for as long as possible, he pointed the bow of his U-800 towards the bigger ships visible inside the anchorage.

“Gunners, standby! We will start firing after launching our bow torpedoes. Torpedo fire control, prepare our eight bow torpedoes for a tight spread, center of aim at Heading 272, running depth of three meters.”

“Bow torpedoes set and ready, Herr Kapitän!” Replied via intercom von Wittgenstein after a few seconds.

“Fire all eight bow tubes in quick sequence!”

“Firing bow tubes now!”

The muffled noise of compressed air coming out of the bow torpedo tubes was heard in the next second, with eight separate discharges marking the launch of the deadly ‘eels’. Otto waited a few minutes, time for his torpedoes to cover most of the distance to their targets, then gave a brief order to his gunners.

“Main deck gun, open fire!”

Barely two seconds later, the twin 12.7cm guns spit out their first two shells, fired high towards the night sky. A few more seconds later, two intense points of light lit up in the sky, descending slowly under their parachutes and illuminating the dozens of American ships in the anchorage area with a dancing, ghostly light. With explosive-fragmentation shells already loaded, the chief gunner of the U-800 aimed his twin guns at one of the tanker ships now plainly visible. Since they wanted to do the most damage possible in the least time possible, the decision had been taken in advance not to waste shells on warships that would take dozens of hits to be taken out. Instead, tanker ships, being

highly flammable and having no armor, would constitute the best targets for Lent's gunners. The U.S.S. SABINE was hit by two 12.7cm shells nearly at the same time as the eight torpedoes fired by the U-800 started striking ships around the harbor. The heavy cruiser U.S.S. SAN FRANCISCO shook under the impact and explosion of three torpedoes, while the seaplane tenders U.S.S. CURTISS and U.S.S. MACKINAC received two torpedoes each. Hit in one of its fuel holds, which were full of oil fuel, the U.S.S. SABINE erupted into flames, soon turning into a floating bonfire. The fleet oiler U.S.S. KASKASKIA was hit next and also caught fire. Helped by a human chain waiting with shells already in their arms, the gunners of the 12.7cm mount delivered a withering fire on the remaining tanker ships inside the anchorage, shooting shells at a combined rate of 26 rounds per minute. Once the last shell carried by the human chain was fired off, Otto gave a command by loudspeaker.

"CLEAR THE DECK! PREPARE TO DIVE!"

As his gunners and the shell carriers ran back inside the conning tower while the main gun mount lowered back in its well, Otto looked with satisfaction at the anchorage area: over six tanker ships and fleet oilers were now burning merrily and would soon sink, while two seaplane tenders and one heavy cruiser were listing severely and were in danger of sinking. As well, a number of PBY amphibian patrol planes and of torpedo patrol boats docked to wooden quays along the shore near the town of Lungaville had been either destroyed or seriously damaged in the last salvos. The shocked and surprised Americans were slow to react and the U-800 had time to dive out of sight before anything but hurriedly aimed gunfire could be directed at it, with all American shells missing by a wide margin. The brief battle concluded with a series of explosions coming from Turtle Bay Airfield, as the charges placed by the Brandenburg commandos started exploding. Ten minutes later, the heavy cruiser SAN FRANCISCO capsized, victim of massive and rapid flooding caused by the fact that its watertight doors had not been closed at the time it was torpedoed. The two seaplane tenders that had also been torpedoed soon followed the cruiser to the bottom of the harbor, the aviation gasoline they carried having turned them into blazing wrecks.

In the control room of the U-800, as it sped away from Espiritu Santo underwater, Otto went to see Takeshi Nagaoka, who was waiting near the radio room.

"You may now send out the coded message 'Shoho One and Two executed', Commander."

"Hay!" Replied Takeshi with a most Japanese bow before going inside the radio room. Going to his navigation plot table, Otto briefly looked at the chart spread on it before shouting an order to his helmsman, Peter Schültz.

"HELM, STEER TO HEADING 175! MAKE YOUR DEPTH 300 METERS!"

"AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!"

Otto then went to his elevated command chair, situated a few paces behind the helmsman position, and sat in it, relaxing and letting out the tension of the last fight. However, the Americans in the South Pacific were not finished with him yet.

11:07 (South Pacific Time)

Thursday, August 27, 1942

Tontouta Airfield, five kilometers north of Noumea

New Caledonia

"Nearly sixty planes destroyed on the ground by shelling! This is inexcusable! Even the radar station is destroyed."

Rear-admiral John McCain, who commanded the American land-based air forces in the South Pacific, gave a less than friendly look at Vice-admiral Ghormley on hearing his indignant exclamation.

"Admiral, what was inexcusable was the lack of coastal defenses against such a sea bombardment by a submarine. You were the one who insisted on concentrating our few guns to cover the approaches to the Great Road anchorage, in positions where the Ducos Peninsula was blocking their northward view."

McCain then looked critically at the fuel tank farm on the said Ducos Peninsula: it was still burning merrily after being hit by a dozen shells in the early morning.

"I now have only a handful of operational aircraft still available and little fuel for them. With the aircraft we lost yesterday on the ground in Espiritu Santo, I have only a pair of patrol planes left, not enough by far to cover the sea approaches to New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. If the Japanese battle fleet chose to show up today, we would know it only when its ships would open fire on us."

"Please don't remind me of that, John." Grumbled Ghormley, who was looking at the burned-out or twisted remains of the fighters, bombers, transport aircraft and patrol amphibians that had been destroyed by heavy shells. The growing noise of

aircraft approaching made him look up with curiosity, hoping that they would be reinforcement aircraft sent at last from Australia. What he saw instead froze his blood.

“ENEMY AIRCRAFT OVERHEAD!”

John McCain snapped his head upward at once but had to quickly agree with Ghormley’s identification: he could see dozens of VAL dive bombers, KATE horizontal bombers and ZERO fighters, all planes that normally operated from carriers.

“TAKE COVER, EVERYBODY!”

The two admirals, along with their small retinue of staff officers, sprinted towards the nearest cover available, a shallow drainage ditch some forty meters away, where they hurriedly lay down on their stomach. However, to the surprise of McCain, the Japanese aircraft, save for four ZERO fighters, continued on towards Noumea and its anchorage a few kilometers south of the airfield. The four ZEROs that dove down however shot up and destroyed on the ground three P-39 fighters, the only planes not destroyed in the previous shelling, that were attempting to take off in a hurry. As for the close to forty other Japanese planes, they started bombing and strafing the various ships anchored around Noumea and the shore installations. Ghormley banged his fist in the dirt of the ditch, furious. He was now liable to lose much of what was left of his fleet, something that would truly spell catastrophe for the Allied cause in the South Pacific. A strafing pass by one of the four ZERO fighters then forced him to lower his head and sink deeper into the ditch. What he couldn’t know yet was that another major Japanese air raid was also hitting Espiritu Santo, targeting the ships still anchored there.

11:21 (South Pacific Time)

Royal Australian Navy heavy cruiser AUSTRALIA

Cruising off Ndeni Island, Santa Cruz Islands

Rear-admiral Victor Crutchley, who now commanded what was left of the warships covering the troopships and various cargo ships supporting the American Marines landed on Ndeni, hurriedly moved to the port open bridge wing of his flagship when a lookout reported smoke trails on the northwestern horizon. Unfortunately, none of his aging cruisers were equipped with radar and his air cover had evaporated with the sinking of the U.S.S. HORNET and the destruction on the ground of the planes based in Espiritu Santo and in Noumea. The poor weather had also limited the use of the seaplanes based on his heavy cruisers. His force was thus down to the old eyeball

technique. What he saw through his binoculars alarmed him at once: a numerous fleet was coming at him from the Northwest, meaning that it could only be an enemy fleet. From the panicked radio reports from Espiritu Santo and Noumea, it was evident that this enemy fleet probably comprised a number of aircraft carriers. Whatever else composed the enemy fleet, one thing was instantly evident to Crutchley: the transport ships that had carried the Marines and their equipment and supplies to Ndeni had to go away at once if they didn't want to be utterly swept away. He thus called to a bridge officer.

"Advise at once Admiral Turner that a numerous enemy fleet is approaching from the Northwest and that I counsel that his transports leave at once."

"Right away, sir!"

As the bridge officer ran away, Crutchley started wondering how badly outnumbered and outgunned his four cruisers and twelve destroyers would soon be.

11:23 (South Pacific Time)

Bridge of the Imperial Japanese Navy battleship YAMATO

Main Japanese Battle Force, on approach to Ndeni

"Admiral, the scout seaplane from the cruiser TONE signals that the enemy covering force is composed of four cruisers and six destroyers, with six more destroyers staying behind with a fleet of transport ships anchored off Ndeni."

"Good! Tell Admiral Kondo to send his cruisers and destroyers around the enemy's left flank and to go for the enemy transports. In the meantime, our destroyer screen is to deploy in extended line ahead of the battleships and prepare to deliver a torpedo attack at long range. Once they will have fired off their torpedoes, they will then block the enemy destroyers from approaching our heavy units."

"Understood, Admiral!"

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, sitting in the command chair of his flagship, the mighty, 70,000 ton battleship YAMATO, contemplated in his mind the naval battle to come. He could have stayed in his Central Pacific base of Truk and commanded this battle from afar, as he had done before in other battles. However, two main reasons had pushed him to lead this battle from the front. First was the need to put a new shine on his name, which had been severely tarnished by the costly defeat suffered at Midway, nearly three months ago. As a consequence of that defeat, his prestige had decreased considerably

and his authority was now questioned by many in Tokyo, even though he now knew thanks to the U-800 that the Americans had been able to ambush him because they had been able to decipher his coded messages. However, Yamamoto had learned from that: apart from ordering that a new variant of code be used, he now refrained from sending extensive orders via radio, instead using couriers as much as possible. He had also learned the hard way at Midway that dividing his forces into widely separated groups only made each group unable to support each other and also complicated greatly ship deployments. His second main reason to lead from the front this time was that he had lost most of the confidence he had previously in Vice-admiral Chuichi Nagumo, his carrier commander. Nagumo had proved too cautious on a number of occasions, notably during the attack on Pearl Harbor and at Midway, and Yamamoto was resolved to closely watch his performance today and to be ready to take over from him if need be. As a result of his ruminations, he was now coming at the enemy with a concentrated, powerful force arranged so that its elements could provide immediate mutual support to each other. If he succeeded in destroying the enemy fleet off Ndeni and in either chasing away the American Marines from the island or in cutting them off and starving them into submission, then he would be in a strong position to cut off the maritime supply link to Australia that came from the United States. With that done, there would then be a real prospect of being able to force Australia to abandon the fight in this war and to chase the United States Navy from the South Pacific, leaving Hawaii isolated in the Central Pacific. All in all, the strategic consequences of the battle to come would be profound indeed.

On the HMAS AUSTRALIA, Rear-admiral Crutchley paled when lookouts were able to give him the approximate composition of the enemy force coming at him.

“Six battleships and eight heavy cruisers, plus destroyers? May God help us! BRIDGE OFFICER, RADIO TO ADMIRAL TURNER: OVERWHELMING ENEMY FORCE OF BATTLESHIPS AND HEAVY CRUISERS APPROACHING. YOU MUST LEAVE NOW!”

“Uh, yes sir!” Replied the young officer, paling visibly. Next, Crutchley gave by radio an order to his six covering destroyers to leap forward and deliver a torpedo attack on the enemy battleships, with the hope of disrupting the enemy battle line and throw its aim off. He was however not very confident about the chances for success of such an attack: the general performance of the torpedoes used by the American destroyers and

submarines in this war was still abysmal and was marked by low reliability and frequent failures to detonate on impact. In contrast, Japanese torpedoes didn't seem to suffer such problems at all.

After fifteen more minutes, it became evident to Crutchley that the enemy commander had also sent his destroyers forward for a torpedo attack. The six American destroyers of his screen were now on a collision course with seven Japanese destroyers and one light cruiser. What he didn't know was that the Japanese destroyers were armed with heavy, 61 centimeter-diameter Type 93 LONG LANCE torpedoes, whose performances were still mostly unknown to the Allied navies. The LONG LANCE had tremendous range and speed compared to the current American torpedoes and could reach out to 40,000 meters at 38 knots, or 20,000 meters at 48 knots, plus had a 490 kilo warhead that was nearly double that of the ones in American and British torpedoes. As a consequence, the seven Japanese destroyers started launching their torpedoes well before their American counterparts and were thus free afterwards to maneuver at will and engage them with gunfire before the American destroyers could launch their own torpedoes. That duel didn't go well for the American destroyers, who were each armed with four or five five inch guns, compared to the six five inch guns per Japanese destroyer. With the various ships maneuvering wildly to avoid enemy fire, most of the shells missed at first but, as the range decreased rapidly, hits started to register, splitting open the thin steel hulls and superstructures of the destroyers, destroying pieces of machinery, starting fires and inflicting atrocious wounds to the sailors on the destroyers that were hit. The U.S.S. BLUE was the first to sink, shells touching off a fire that reached its forward magazine and made it blow up. The U.S.S. RALPH TALBOT was next to sink, cut in two by a LONG LANCE torpedo delivered from short range. The AKIGUMO, on fire from end to end after an epic gun duel with two of the American destroyers, then went dead in the water, its engine room shot to pieces. Both the U.S.S. ELLET and the YUGUMO were forced to abandon combat as well, riddled with shells and on fire, but not before the YUGUMO launched a second, ultimate torpedo salvo towards the American heavy cruisers in the distance. None of the American destroyers got close enough to launch their torpedoes at the Japanese heavy units before they were either sunk or disabled and forced to withdraw. In contrast, a total of 82 LONG LANCE torpedoes sped towards their targets as the opposing destroyer squadrons fought their gun duels. Due to the long distance at which they had been fired and to the

fact that the Allied cruisers had started zigzagging, precisely to avoid torpedoes, most of the LONG LANCEs missed but continued on towards the American transport ships, anchored well behind the line of cruisers. One unlucky transport ended up being hit by a stray LONG LANCE and was cut in two and sank, but that would prove to be only a beginning. As for the four Allied cruisers, they mostly managed to avoid the incoming torpedoes, save for the Australian light cruiser HOBART, which was unlucky enough to be hit by two torpedoes that sank it in minutes.

On the YAMATO, Admiral Yamamoto watched with apparent calm the destroyer duels ahead of his battle force, studying the enemy cruisers in the distance and watching their moves and how they deployed. He had much bigger guns than those of the enemy cruisers and could have started firing while still outside of the enemy's reach. However, he knew from experience that such long range gunfire wasted a lot of ammunition and ended causing comparatively few hits. He still had numerous targets for his fleet apart from that amphibious force and its covering cruisers, thus decided to close the range further before opening fire.

"SIGNAL THE FOLLOWING: BATTLESHIPS ARE TO SPLIT IN THREE PARALLEL DIVISION COLUMNS. EXECUTE NOW!"

The six Japanese battleships took about twelve minutes to split and adopt the new formation. By then, the three surviving Allied heavy cruisers had turned to their starboard in order to form a single line across the path of advance of the Japanese, thus forming the classic 'T' tactic that allowed all the main guns to fire on the enemy. Yamamoto was however no beginner at that game and promptly gave another set of orders.

"SIGNAL OUR BATTLESHIPS TO TURN TO PORT BY 45 DEGREES IN COLUMN OF DIVISIONS! EACH COLUMN IS TO TARGET THE ENEMY CRUISER IN ITS ORDER OF SUCCESSION. START RANGING FIRE WHEN WITHIN 20,000 METERS. EXECUTE NOW!"

The three pairs of battleships soon turned to port by 45 degrees, enough to unmask all their main turrets while still advancing towards the enemy. Despite this obvious move that put a crushing number of heavy guns to bear on them, the Allied heavy cruisers gave no signs of retreating, making Yamamoto nod his head and speak quietly to the captain of the YAMATO, who was standing beside him.

“Those are brave men facing us. They know that they are going to their doom, but still will fight in order to give time to their transports to flee. Unfortunately for them, Kondo’s cruisers will be able to bypass them and get to the transports anyway.”

On the HMAS AUSTRALIA, Rear-admiral Crutchley did see the start of the flanking move by the Japanese cruisers but, unfortunately, there was nothing he could do about it: if he turned towards the Japanese cruisers to intercept them, then it would be the enemy battleships that would have a free path to the transport ships. His only hope was that Rear-admiral Turner could somehow pull a miracle and make his transports leave fast enough to escape. However, the chances of that happening were awfully low. He gulped hard on watching the six Japanese battleships bearing down on his three cruisers: his biggest guns were of eight inch caliber, while the main guns of the Japanese battleships had a caliber of fourteen inch at a minimum. He was going to face 49 battleship main guns with 25 cruiser main guns, and this with much thinner armor on his ships. This could not end well, unless he used the slightly higher speed of his cruisers to escape. Crutchley however dismissed that option at once. Going to the nearest ship intercom box, he switched it on and spoke in as calm and firm a voice as he could muster.

“MEN, WE ARE ABOUT TO BATTLE A MORE NUMEROUS AND MORE POWERFUL ENEMY, BUT OUR ACTIONS TO COME WILL GIVE TIME TO THOUSANDS OF OTHER SAILORS AND MARINES TO WITHDRAW. I KNOW THAT YOU WILL FIGHT WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH AND COURAGE AND WILL HOLD THE LINE. MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL!”

As he switched off the intercom, he had another look at the incoming enemy battleships and whispered to himself.

“A thin blue line indeed!”

The YAMATO, with its main fifteen meter baseline optical rangefinder situated higher than on the other battleships and thus having a better long range view, opened fire first, using only one of its three main turrets to fire a ranging salvo from approximately nineteen kilometers to the Allied heavy cruisers. The leading battleships in the two other division columns, the KONGO and the KIRISHIMA, also started firing ranging salvos a minute later. As for the Allied cruisers, they soon followed suit with their smaller guns. With the range closing constantly, it took about four minutes of slow

firing for the gunners of the YAMATO to find the range to their target, the HMAS AUSTRALIA. With one salvo of three guns finally bracketing closely the Australian heavy cruiser, the chief gunnery officer of the YAMATO made a final adjustment in range and bearing, then gave a terse order.

“ALL TURRETS, FIRE!”

Nine eighteen inch guns erupted in one massive volley, sending out nine giant shells towards the HMAS AUSTRALIA. All of them landed in the waters around the cruiser, missing it, but one exploded near enough underwater to violently shake the heavy cruiser and deform some of its hull plates, creating a leak that flooded a few secondary compartments. The gunners of the AUSTRALIA, who had rangefinders with a much smaller optical baseline than those of the Japanese battleship, were still trying to get the correct range on the YAMATO when another full salvo from the behemoth landed around it. This time, one shell clipped the top of the cruiser's main mast, while another shell exploded in the water close to its stern, jamming one of its two rudders and deforming one of its propeller shafts by enough to make it start to vibrate wildly. The engineering officer of the AUSTRALIA had no choice then but to stop that propeller shaft before it could rip off its bearings. Losing speed and also being difficult to steer with a jammed rudder, the AUSTRALIA became an easier target for the YAMATO and the NAGATO, the battleship following the flagship. Two 1,460 kilo armor piercing shells slammed into the Australian cruiser a minute later, arriving at a velocity of 550 meters per second, and easily penetrated its side armor before detonating. One of those shells exploded in the forward port side boiler room, instantly killing the men working there, wrecking the boilers and cutting the pressurized steam pipes. The other shell blew inside the forward crew quarters section and ripped open the upper part of the hull like a tin can. Thankfully, all the men were at their battle stations and that hit caused only a couple of casualties. As the eight inch shells from the Australian cruiser were finally scoring a couple of hits on the YAMATO, but without being able to penetrate its thick armor, four sixteen inch shells from the NAGATO slammed into the AUSTRALIA. Two of them exploded inside the turbine rooms, one hit the base of the forward funnel and collapsed it and the last one punched into the forward superstructures, exploding just below the command bridge. The blast from below propelled the bridge's steel deck upward, smashing the bridge occupants, including Rear-admiral Crutchley, between the deck and the ceiling. With the command staff and fire control systems gone, the gunners of the AUSTRALIA found themselves reduced to local control, aiming with their

turrets' secondary rangefinders. Still, as their ship slowed down to a stop, without steering and with minimal power available, the Australian gunners kept firing at the incoming Japanese battleships, even managing a few hits on the NAGATO and the YAMATO. However, their shells caused only minor damages and a few casualties, most of them exploding against the Japanese armor plates without penetrating. Five sixteen inch shells and three eighteen inch shells then slammed into the heavy cruiser, along its hull and superstructures. Two of the four main turrets were taken out of action, while the anti-aircraft gunners were decimated, with fires starting everywhere. With the AUSTRALIA now burning nearly from end to end, an ultimate eighteen inch shell struck it, penetrating the forward eight inch ammunition room. A huge explosion followed, cutting the heavy cruiser in two and blasting away a fourth of the ship. The two mangled parts then sank quickly in a couple of minutes, with only a handful of sailors able to jump into the water.

On the HMAS CANBERRA, the bridge crew had little time to ponder the fate of the AUSTRALIA, as their ship was also in a desperate situation. Seven hits by fourteen inch shells had already cut its speed by half and had taken out two of the four main turrets, on top of killing or wounding hundreds of men. The KONGO and HARUNA were keeping a steady and accurate fire on the CANBERRA, creating more damage and casualties with every salvo. As for the U.S.S. CHICAGO, it had fared badly against the HIEI and the KIRISHIMA, its flimsy three inch thick side armor belt proving to be little protection against fourteen inch shells. Riddled from bow to stern with heavy shells fired from the sixteen fourteen inch guns and 28 six inch guns of the two Japanese battleships opposing it, the CHICAGO was soon on fire, with all the main turrets taken out and with most of the bridge staff dead or wounded. The Japanese light cruiser NAGARA, the flagship of the destroyer squadron screening the battleships, then delivered a salvo of 61 centimeter LONG LANCE torpedoes from a distance of 9,000 meters. Three of the big torpedoes hit their mark, opening wide the hull of the American heavy cruiser. The CHICAGO then capsized and sank in minutes, with few of its crewmembers being able to jump into the sea. The CANBERRA was the last to sink after absorbing fifteen fourteen inch shells and over 28 six inch shells. On the Japanese side, the much thicker armor of the battleships had saved them from suffering any major damage, but dozens of hits from eight inch guns on their superstructures and more

lightly armored hull sections had caused quite a few casualties and had forced the Japanese damage control and firefighting teams into action.

On the U.S.S. McCAWLEY, Rear-admiral Turner could only watch the destruction of his covering force while frantically getting his fleet of transport ships to raise anchor and start withdrawing before the arrival of the Japanese cruiser force. He however had little hope for success, as the enemy cruisers were both much faster than his transport ships and much more heavily armed, on top of having at least some armor protection, contrary to Turner's transports. His only possible salvation lay in his screen of five destroyers: if they could hold the Japanese cruisers off for long enough, maybe some of his fastest transport ships, notably the APDs, which were old destroyers converted into fast troopships, could have a chance of escaping. That however left the Marines of the First Division landed on Ndeni high and dry and at the mercy of the Japanese Navy. Turner was twisting that bitter thought in his mind when he got word that a first group of four APDs were now on their way to Noumea, with one lonely destroyer as their escort. The sinister howl of heavy shells passing overhead, followed by three big geysers rising from the sea 200 meters past his ship, then reminded him that he was about out of time. Looking for his covering destroyers, he saw that they were already heavily engaged by the ten Japanese destroyers acting as screen for the eight approaching heavy cruisers. The American destroyers were obviously overwhelmed by such a numerous opponent and would probably last less than half a hour before the Japanese cruisers broke through. When that happened, then Turner could say goodbye to his transport ships, unless some kind of miracle happened.

The Japanese actually managed to punch through the American destroyer screen faster than Turner had feared, thanks to a liberal use of their heavy LONG LANCE torpedoes. Most of Turner's transport ships were moving now, but their top speed of eighteen knots at the most would make them easy to catch by the enemy cruisers, who all could attain top speeds well in excess of thirty knots. Either way he looked at it, Turner could expect to lose all of his transport ships today...plus his life. That last thought then planted an idea in his head, an idea that no sane man would normally consider. However, this was truly a do or die moment. Walking quickly to the bridge's TBS set, he grabbed the microphone and activated the radio.

“To all ships of the Transport Force, this is Admiral Turner speaking. The enemy cruisers are about to break through our destroyer screen and will soon be in our midst. The transport ships that still have Marines on board will effect an immediate withdrawal at top speed towards Noumea. The transport ships that have only equipment and supplies left aboard will form up now on the McCAWLEY. I will then lead a charge at the Japanese cruisers and destroyers, with the ultimate goal of ramming them. If we are to be sunk, then let’s go down fighting! Acknowledge by order of division!”

With the men present on the bridge now looking at him with shocked expressions, Turner noted down the responses from his transport divisions commanders as they stated which ships were empty of troops and would withdraw and which ships would come as part of the charge. He ended up with a total of seven transport ships ready to withdraw behind the four APDs already on their way, while ten troop transports would follow the McCAWLEY. There were a lot of whispered prayers around the empty transports as Turner gave his ultimate order on the TBS.

“This is Admiral Turner. We will now charge directly at the enemy heavy cruisers at top speed, following individual zigzag courses to make ourselves more difficult targets, and with all our guns manned for battle. If a Japanese destroyer gets in your way, then ram it! I count on all of you to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to save our comrades in the departing transports. NOW, FULL STEAM AHEAD AND DAMN THE TORPEDOES!”

Now knowing what was in the balance and accepting their bitter fate, the men around him got into action, either giving orders or executing them. Soon, eleven troop transport ships, each of them displacing close to 12,000 tons or more and armed with a collection of four inch, three inch and light anti-aircraft guns, formed into a long extended line while accelerating towards their top speed of eighteen knots.

On the battle bridge of the heavy cruiser ATAGO, Vice-admiral Nobutake Kondo was watching the American ships through his binoculars, standing beside the captain of the TAKAO. The latter lowered his binoculars at one point, his face reflecting incredulity and incomprehension.

“What are the Americans trying to do? Half of their transport ships are withdrawing, while the other half is now coming at us.”

Kondo also lowered his binoculars, his expression somber, before replying to him.

"They are sacrificing part of their ships in order to give a chance to the others to escape, Captain Ijuin. Those Americans truly possess the warrior spirit. Tell our destroyers to torpedo them while our cruisers continue to pursue the transports now fleeing: I don't want any of them to escape."

"Hay!"

The task of stopping the charge by eleven big troopships soon proved a lot more difficult for the Japanese destroyers than they had expected. Having already suffered some battle damages in the previous duel with the American destroyers and having expended many of their torpedoes, the Japanese destroyers had to face a withering fire from the deck guns of the troopships, while their own five inch guns could not inflict catastrophic damage on such big ships, even if they were unarmored. The fact that each troopship was zigzagging on independent courses also made it very difficult to hit them with torpedoes. The Japanese destroyers thus had no choice but to close the range in order to shoot more accurately. The destroyer HAYASHIO, getting maybe too close to its chosen target, ended up in the crossfire of the five inch and three inch deck guns of the PRESIDENT ADAMS and of the PRESIDENT HAYES and found itself sandwiched between the two big troopships. The captain of the HAYASHIO, already having his hands full replying to the American gunfire, suddenly felt his hair rise on his head when he saw the big steel bow of the 16,000 ton PRESIDENT ADAMS swing towards his much smaller destroyer.

"THEY ARE GOING TO TRY TO RAM US! HELM, HARD TO PORT!"

The helmsman, a veteran NCO, obeyed quickly and threw the HAYASHIO into a tight turn to port that forced the captain to grab a hold in order not to be thrown around his bridge. All the Japanese on the small bridge watched anxiously as the menacing bow of the troopship passed by the starboard side, way too close for comfort. At the same time, the American gunners kept pouring down 20mm fire from their light anti-aircraft cannons on the HAYASHIO, raking its superstructures and killing or wounding a number of Japanese sailors. The bow of the PRESIDENT ADAMS actually connected with the HAYASHIO but only scrapped against the hull plates of the destroyer's stern in a loud shriek of metal grinding against metal. Just as the captain of the HAYASHIO thought that he was now safe, the alarmed shout from a lookout made his head snap to port.

"SECOND TROOPSHIP TO PORT!"

Commander Kiyoshi Kaneda only had time to stare for a few seconds at the massive bow of the PRESIDENT HAYES before it sliced into his destroyer, hitting it behind its main mast. The troopship suffered only moderate damage from the collision and was able to resume its suicidal charge at the Japanese cruisers after another turn, but the HAYASHIO was not as lucky. Cut in two, its two parts sank quickly, dragging to their death most of its crew, including its captain.

On the ATAGO, Vice-admiral Kondo grimly watched the resolute charge of the American troopships and the frantic attempts of his destroyers to stop it, with little success to show for their efforts. The sinking of the HAYASHIO finally decided him to change his tactics.

“SIGNAL TO ALL OUR CRUISERS: OPEN FIRE ON THE TROOPSHIPS AND SINK THEM! WE WILL CONTINUE PURSUING THE OTHER TRANSPORT SHIPS LATER.”

A total of 76 eight inch and 78 five inch guns soon pointed at the eleven incoming troopships and opened fire from a range of 11,000 meters. Despite their size and bulk, the cruisers' fire quickly hurt the big troopships, holing hulls, mangling superstructures and starting fires. The gunners on the troopships responded in kind, using their five inch and three inch deck guns and achieving hits that caused some damage to the Japanese cruisers. One by one, the troopships succumbed to the cruisers' gunfire, their machinery spaces shot to pieces and their compartments flooding from shell holes, stopping dead in the water, on fire and sinking. None of the American ships actually got close enough to attempt ramming the cruisers, but one of them was finally stopped by the gunners of the ATAGO only when it came within 3,000 meters from the heavy cruiser. Kondo, having watched the fight with hidden but growing emotion, went out on the open bridge wing to examine the doomed troopship as the ATAGO sailed past its burning hulk. Looking at the bridge of the American transport ship with his binoculars, Kondo saw that the American survivors were scrambling to get into the few life rafts and boats still available. A group of four men then attracted his attention. It consisted of three men carrying cautiously an apparently wounded man wearing a service cap decorated with gold braid. Kondo looked at Captain Ijuin and gave him an order in a soft tone.

“Captain, have the crew line the railings and blow the whistle to pay honor to a valiant enemy.”

“Right away, Admiral!”

Kondo then resumed his observation of the sinking American ship, calling the cruiser's crew to attention and saluting the Americans as the ATAGO passed close to the troopship. Kondo had the satisfaction of seeing the group carrying the wounded senior officer stop, with the wounded officer slowly and painfully raising his right arm to his temple to return Kondo's salute. As the ATAGO sped away from the sinking troopship, intent on catching the fleeing transports, Kondo was able to read the name of the troopship before it sank beneath the waves: the U.S.S. McCAWLEY. Captain Ijuin approached him then with a question.

"Admiral, there are now hundreds of American sailors floating on the surface of the sea, either swimming or in rafts. Should our destroyers take care of them?"

By 'taking care of them', Ijuin most probably referred to the Japanese custom of either shooting at survivors or capturing them for interrogation. Kondo shook his head in response.

"Negative! Our destroyers are to join us in pursuing the remaining American ships. Those survivors in the water are relatively close to the island of Ndeni: let them row ashore to join their naval infantry now trapped on the island."

"Hay!"

17:53 (South Pacific Time)

Submarine tender U.S.S. ARGONNE (AG-31)

Docked in the port of Noumea, New Caledonia

Rear-admiral John McCain didn't even bother to knock on the door before charging inside the cabin that served as a work office for Vice-admiral Robert Ghormley, the commander of the South Pacific Area, shouting angrily at his surprised superior.

"HOW COULD YOU GIVE SUCH AN ORDER? YOU CAN'T ABANDON ESPIRITU SANTO, EFATE AND NOUMEA LIKE THIS!"

From surprised, Ghormley became irritated, admonishing McCain while staying sitting in his work chair.

"How dare you enter my office and shout at me like this?"

"How dare I?" Replied the old naval aviator, containing his fury with difficulty. "Because you just gave a cowardly order for all of our remaining ships to leave the New Hebrides and New Caledonia and withdraw to Australia, leaving behind the Army and Marine Corps soldiers and aviators alone to defend our bases in the South Pacific."

"Did you see what those Japanese planes did here today, thanks to our lack of air cover? A third of the ships in harbor were sunk by them and we have nothing to oppose more air raids. On top of that, a Japanese battle fleet of battleships and heavy cruisers is now off Ndeni and about to head our way, if it is not already on the way. I took the only possible decision that could prevent thousands of needless deaths."

"By abandoning our soldiers, aviators and Marines stuck on these islands? Do you have any idea of the dishonor you are about to bring on the Navy?"

Stung by McCain's tone, Ghormley shot up from his chair.

"Those soldiers and Marines are staying because they are refusing to obey my order to leave!"

"WHICH PROVES THAT THEY ARE REAL MEN! GO! LEAVE FOR BRISBANE IN YOUR COMMAND SHIP! I WILL BE STAYING HERE TO TAKE CHARGE OF THE LOCAL DEFENSES."

"I FORBID YOU TO DO SO, McCAIN: I WILL NEED YOU TO REBUILD OUR AIR FORCES IN AUSTRALIA."

"THEN, FEEL FREE TO COURT MARTIAL ME, ADMIRAL!" Replied the old officer before turning around and storming out of the office.

To McCain's anger and shame, nearly all the captains of the ships still intact around Noumea, Efate and Espiritu Santo obeyed Ghormley's evacuation order and left for Australia after hastily loading aboard thousands of Navy shore support personnel. Those support personnel in turn left so hastily that they neglected to destroy the installations and equipment they were leaving behind. By the next morning, not a single American ship was left in and around Noumea. As for the troopships that had initially escaped from the Battle of Ndeni, they were hunted down and sunk to the last by a combination of airstrikes, submarine strikes and naval gunfire from pursuing Japanese cruisers and destroyers. Over 8,000 Marines and 1,300 Navy survivors were now trapped on Ndeni itself, blockaded by the Japanese Navy and with only limited amounts of food and supplies available to them. Seeing nothing else they could do, those men grimly went down to the task of fortifying their positions while waiting for some hypothetical rescue and enduring occasional Japanese naval and air bombardment. The only thing that saved them from an amphibious landing by the Japanese was the fact that the Japanese Army was short of troops everywhere, its mad stampede across China, Southeast Asia and the Dutch East Indies having eaten up all its reserves. The

one immediate thing the Japanese did as a profit from the victory off Ndeni was to finish building and fortifying its new airfield on Guadalcanal. By the end of September, Japanese bombers and fighters would start operating from that airfield, now in good position to strike at Australia itself.

08:19 (Eastern Australia Time)

Sunday, August 30, 1942

Port of Brisbane, Australia

Having just scanned with his binoculars the dock at which his ship was due to tie up, the captain of the U.S.S. ARGONNE turned his head to speak to Vice-admiral Ghormley, who was standing with him on the open bridge wing of the submarine tender.

"I see an official staff car and a few escort jeeps parked along the dock, while a small group is waiting beside the vehicles, Admiral. I believe that the staff car has a four star bumper plate on its fender."

"MacArthur!" Said Ghormley in a less than enthusiastic tone. "He will probably want to use our defeat in Ndeni to grab more power for himself in the South Pacific." The captain of the tender gave Ghormley a guarded look then but didn't reply to that. There had been a lot of often heated private discussions and talks aboard concerning the wisdom of abandoning Noumea, Efate and Espiritu Santo, with many being disgusted by the way the Navy had left behind the Army and Marine Corps personnel alone to defend the islands. The reception they would get in Brisbane was probably going to be a rather cold one.

With a tug to help its approach, the submarine tender docked and tied up about twenty minutes later, with an access ramp put in place nearly at once. Ghormley, expecting General MacArthur to come aboard, waited in vain for a good ten minutes before understanding that MacArthur was instead expecting him to disembark. Thus, accompanied by a small group of his staff officers, he walked down the ramp and went to MacArthur, who was still standing and waiting beside his staff car, biting on his trademark corn pipe. Ghormley stopped at attention two paces in front of the big, graying general and saluted him.

"General MacArthur, I am happy that you could greet me on arrival. I believe that we have a few urgent things to discuss."

MacArthur, his expression cold, didn't return his salute, instead addressing Ghormley in a near contemptuous tone.

"Vice-admiral Ghormley, on the direct orders of the President and of Admiral King, I relieve you of your command as of this instant. Vice-admiral Spruance will soon arrive in Australia to take your place. As for you, you are to leave for the United States today by seaplane to report in Washington, where you are to face charges of dereliction of duty and of abandonment of post."

Ghormley was left speechless for a moment before he could find back his voice to protest.

"But, General, the loss of our airplanes and warships left me no choice but to withdraw what was left of my fleet. Hell, you yourself withdrew from the Philippines when you became surrounded by the Japanese."

The mention of the Philippines, which was still a painful subject for MacArthur, positively enraged him and he stared down hard at Ghormley.

"I left the Philippines on a direct order of the President to do so and after I protested that order vigorously, Admiral Ghormley. In contrast, you decided yourself to abandon the soldiers and Marines now defending New Caledonia and the New Hebrides without the support of the Navy. Don't expect a warm reception in Washington."

08:40 (South America Time)

Wednesday, September 16, 1942

Sonar room, U-800

Navigating due East at depth of sixty meters

Passing south of Cape Horn, Drake Passage

Gerhard Hoepner looked up from his cathode display when Otto Kretschmer entered the semi-dark, cramped space of the sonar room.

"Anything around us, Herr Hoepner?"

"One lone contact coming towards us from the East at moderate speed, Herr Kapitän. It sounds like a cargo ship of some kind. I would estimate the distance from us at about twelve nautical miles. From the sounds I get, it seems that the weather on the surface is still quite bad."

Otto made a grimace at those words.

"Well, that's the Cape Horn to you, Hoepner. It is not for nothing that it is about the most feared place in the World for most sailors. At this time of the year, wandering icebergs and thick fog make navigation particularly difficult. As for surviving more than a few minutes in these frigid waters, good luck! The one good point is that the risks of encountering a patrol aircraft here are about zero."

Hoepner nodded his head at that: increasingly during the last months, Allied long range patrol aircraft had become a real pest and would have caused lots of problems to the U-800, if not for the fact that the U-800 had an excellent schnorchel system and tremendous underwater endurance, thanks to its huge battery cells capacity, two things that allowed it to stay under the surface for a few days at a time if need be. Otto was about to leave the sonar room when he saw Hoepner wince while his hands went involuntarily to the earpieces of his headset. Knowing better than ask questions right now, something that would distract the sonar operator from analyzing what he was hearing, Otto instead kept quiet and waited patiently. Hoepner finally spoke after a few seconds of playing with his controls.

"I heard a sudden, violent collision, Herr Kapitän. All machinery noises from that contact ahead of us have stopped now. This doesn't sound good for whatever ship was ahead of us."

"Activate our bow active sonar and ping a number of times, to see what is on the surface around us."

"Right away, Herr Kapitän."

Now concentrating his attention on the display screen of their active low frequency sonar system, Hoepner sent out at intervals of a few seconds a series of powerful sound bursts and waited for return echoes. He grimaced when his display screen showed him over a dozen echoes within ten nautical miles, most of them quite big.

"You were right, Herr Kapitän: the surface is dotted with floating icebergs, most of them much bigger than us. That solitary cargo must have hit one of them in the fog."

"Then, it is probably in big trouble now." Said Otto before going back into the adjacent control room, where he grabbed the microphone of the nearest intercom box.

"Attention all hands! This is the Captain! A ship ahead of us apparently collided with an iceberg and may be about to sink. I intend to go see and to possibly rescue survivors, if there are any. Hauptmann Margraff's men are to start donning their diving suits right now in order to be ready once we arrive at the scene of that collision. I also want a deck rescue team to get ready. That is all!"

He then turned to look at the helmsman and ballast operators.

“BLOW THE BALLASTS! SURFACE! SURFACE!”

08:50 (Chile Time)

Australian hospital ship AHS ORANJE

120 nautical miles southwest of Cape Horn

Drake Passage

The young Dutch merchant marine officer who came to the small group of Australian Army nurses gathered along the railing of the promenade deck of their hospital ship had to nearly shout to make himself heard over the fierce, freezing wind that blew from the West.

“LADIES, WE HAVE TO EVACUATE, NOW! THE SHIP IS SINKING FAST. I WAS SENT BY THE CAPTAIN TO LOAD YOU INTO ONE OF OUR LIFE BOATS.”

Sister Mary Cummings, the most senior nurse in the group, looked at the young officer with both disbelief and indignation.

“ABANDON SHIP? BUT, WE MUST SAVE THE PATIENTS FIRST!”

“CREWMEN ARE ALREADY IN THE PROCESS OF GETTING THE PATIENTS TO THE BOAT DECK, MISS. MAJOR SCOTT HAS ASKED THAT YOU GO MAN ONE OF THE BOATS AND BE READY TO RECEIVE THE FIRST WOUNDED THERE.”

Mary Cummings hesitated for an instant but finally nodded her head: Major Henry Scott was an Australian Army surgeon who commanded the medical staff aboard the converted Dutch passenger liner. If he said to go man a life boat, then she and the other nurses could only obey him.

“VERY WELL! WHICH BOAT WILL WE TAKE?”

“I WAS PUT IN CHARGE OF YOUR ASSIGNED LIFE BOAT, MISS. FOLLOW ME!”

The four Australian nurses thus followed the young ensign, a very handsome blond man who had made more than one nurse's heart race during their trip from Egypt, and climbed up to the boat deck. The big, 24,300 ton hospital ship was already listing severely to port, making the climb difficult and also making the nurses realize that their ship was truly in imminent danger of sinking. Once on the boat deck, the ensign led them to one of the large life boats suspended from davits along the railing. Four Javanese crewmembers had already lowered the boat from its stowed position, putting

its side level with the deck in order to facilitate its loading. The life boat however kept banging against the hull side of the ship, thanks to the huge, ferocious waves that were hitting constantly the hospital ship. The ensign pointed the inside of the life boat to the nurses.

“GET IN, LADIES! YOU WILL NEED TO INSTALL THE PATIENTS AS COMFORTABLY AS POSSIBLE ONCE THEY START ARRIVING.”

“YOU HEARD THE MAN! GET IN, GIRLS!”

Sister Nora Moyers was the first to get in the life boat, an exercise that prove quite perilous thanks to the swinging motion of the boat. Young Staff Nurse Angela Black followed, then Sister Cynthia Forrester. Mary Cummings was last in, just as a group of walking patients escorted by Major Henry Scott arrived on the boat deck. By then the ship's list had become even more severe, with high waves crashing against the port superstructures of the hospital ship. To the nurses' horror, a wave stronger than the others crashed over the boat deck, washing to sea most of the patients that had been with Major Scott and filling many of the life boats with seawater. Scott was able to keep a hold on a young Australian soldier with an arm held in a cast and sling and pulled him towards the boat occupied by the nurses.

“GET THAT MAN IN YOUR BOAT, NURSES! I WILL GO GET MORE PATIENTS NOW.”

As Scott and the Dutch ensign helped the wounded man to step inside the life boat, a noise of tortured, ripping metal made the ensign twist his head around, horror on his face.

“THE SHIP IS BREAKING UP! WE WILL SINK VERY SOON WITH THESE WAVES. WE MUST LOWER YOUR BOAT NOW!”

“NO! WE CAN'T LEAVE NOW, NOT WITH ALL THE OTHER PATIENTS STILL ABOARD.” Protested Mary Cummings, making Major Henry Scott shake his head bitterly.

“MISTER DeROOT IS RIGHT! IF YOU DON'T CAST OFF NOW, YOU WILL SIN...”

Another giant wave then came in and propelled the nurses' life boat upward while washing over the boat deck. Both Major Scott, the Dutch ensign and the four Javanese crewmen were swept to sea as the life boat came back down and brutally slammed against the ship's side. The nurses then understood that they had no choice left but to cast off. The hospital ship actually decided for them, starting to slowly capsized on its

port side and thus lowering the life boat to the surface of the sea as Mary Cummings and Cynthia Forrester hurriedly took off the blocking mechanisms of the ropes and pulleys system holding their life boat. Slamming hard on the surface, the nurses then had to grab the oars stored inside their boat and start rowing hard to avoid being crushed by their sinking ship. As they were barely clearing the overhang formed by the superstructures of the rolling AHS ORANJE, Angela Black suddenly shouted excitedly.

“THERE, TO OUR LEFT! I SEE SOMEONE IN THE WATER, CLOSE TO US.”

Looking all in that direction, the nurses saw two heads close together on the surface. One man was actually dragging another man while swimming hard with one arm and both legs towards the life boat.

“IT’S MISTER DeROOT! HE HAS MAJOR SCOTT! HELP ME GET THEM IN, GIRLS!”

Thankfully, the two men had been quite close to the life boat when spotted and the young Dutch ensign quickly got to it, then handed the back handle of Major Scott’s life vest to the waiting nurses.

“GET HIM IN THE BOAT, QUICKLY! I WILL MANAGE BY MYSELF.”

Despite his statement, Angela Black still helped him get inside the boat, while the three other nurses pulled in a coughing Henry Scott. With a last look at the hospital ship about to capsize, Wilhelm DeRoot took place at one of the oars and shouted to the nurses.

“ROW, LADIES, ROW, BEFORE THE SHIP CAN SUCK US DOWN!”

With a still coughing, shivering Major Scott also taking a oar, the small group started rowing with the energy of despair as the AHS ORANJE lay down on its port side, large air bubbles coming out of its hull while big waves kept crashing over it. The physical exercise actually helped DeRoot and Scott warm up a bit after being in freezing water for a couple of minutes, something that saved them from quick hypothermia. They were however still not out of danger, and this by a long shot. After four minutes of mad rowing, and with the hospital ship having disappeared under the waves, the two men and four nurses collapsed on top of their oars, utterly exhausted. Tears then came to Nora Moyers as she looked at the spot where their ship had been.

“We had over 400 wounded and sick men aboard, plus the crew and sixty other medical staff. Now they are all gone!”

She then broke out crying, imitated by Angela Black and Cynthia Forrester. Mary Cummings, while having tears flowing down her cheeks, managed to keep a better control of herself and looked at Ensign DeRoot.

"Where are we, Mister DeRoot? Is there any land nearby where we could beach?"

DeRoot slowly shook his head, doom on his face.

"We are over a hundred miles from the nearest shore, in one of the most savage sea expanse on Earth. I'm afraid that we are totally on our own now."

He then looked around him, as much as the big waves and thick fog allowed it. The towering iceberg that had claimed the AHS ORANJE was still visible, barely, about 300 meters away. The wind howled around the boat, blowing at a minimum of fifty kilometers per hour, and was freezing, while the seawater temperature had to be close to zero degrees centigrade. Their situation was about as hopeless as one could get. Still, he was not ready to give up, not as long as they were alive, so he went to the small storage compartment of the life boat and inventoried its content. He found in it a grand total of four water bottles, four chocolate bars, a sealed plastic bag with strips of dried beef, one compass, a signal flare pistol and six red signal flares. As he was about to tell Major Scott about what they had, the sharp sound of a ship's horn made him jerk his head around, newfound hope coming to him.

"A SHIP? HERE AND NOW? THIS MUST BE A MIRACLE!"

Grabbing the signal pistol, he hurriedly loaded one signal flare in it, then pointed the pistol skyward and fired it, sending a bright red flare high above the life boat. His heart nearly skipped a beat when the unknown ship horn blew again, this time twice in quick succession.

"THEY SAW OUR FLARE! WE ARE ABOUT TO BE SAVED, PEOPLE."

Frantically reloading his pistol, he fired a second flare, then waited after loading a fresh flare. Sister Cynthia Forrester suddenly shouted while pointing to their starboard side.

"THERE! I SEE A SHIP COMING OUT OF THE FOG!"

The occupants of the life boat, including the wounded man with the arm in a cast, cheered as one on seeing that Cynthia was right. Henry Scott then noticed first something about the newcomer.

"HEY, IT'S A SUBMARINE!"

"A SUBMARINE? THAT WOULD EXPLAIN HOW IT COULD GET HERE WITHOUT ITSELF HITTING AN ICEBERG." Said in turn Willhelm DeRoot over the howling wind. The seven survivors watched with growing hope as the submarine, a big one, got closer and closer to them, to finally stop beside them when its high conning

tower came level with the life boat. The Dutch ensign's heart suddenly sank when he saw the national insignia painted on the side of the conning tower.

"IT'S A GERMAN SUBMARINE!"

The others didn't have time to express their dismay before a side door on top of the conning tower opened and a man wearing a diver's suit appeared in it, a rolled rope in his hands. That man spoke in good English, contrary to DeRoot's expectations.

"I AM GOING TO THROW YOU A ROPE! GRAB IT AND TIE IT TO YOUR BOAT. I WILL THEN THROW YOU A SECOND ROPE, WHICH YOU WILL USE TO TIE YOURSELVES ONE BY ONE TO IT, SO THAT WE COULD PULL YOU UP TO SAFETY. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

"WE DO, MISTER!" Replied Henry Scott, who then caught with DeRoot's help the rope thrown down by the diver. Quickly tying the rope to their boat, they then caught the second rope thrown down. Scott was about to pass it around Angela Black but she firmly stopped him and pointed at the wounded man in the boat.

"NO! HIM FIRST!"

Understanding that she was right on that, Scott tied the rope around the wounded man's torso, passing it under his armpits, then tugged three times on the rope.

"YOU CAN PULL HIM UP NOW!"

With a number of men inside the open bridge atop the conning tower pulling on the rope, the wounded man was pulled up to safety in seconds, using his intact arm to avoid banging hard against the steel plates of the conning tower while on his way up. The rope was then thrown back down and tied to another survivor. The second one up was young Angela Black, followed in order by Nora Moyers, Cynthia Forrester and Mary Cummings. Henry Scott was the last to go up, by which time their life boat was half full of seawater and was about to sink. Once on the open bridge, which was actually covered by a curved, transparent canopy reinforced with steel frames, Scott noticed that most of the bridge's deck space was taken by a large steel tower topped with a thick, transparent dome. The diver pointed at a thick steel hatch that was opened on the side of the tower, through which a sailor was presently guiding Wilhelm DeRoot.

"STEP INSIDE AND GO DOWN THE HATCH YOU WILL FIND IN THE OBSERVATION DOME."

"THANK YOU FOR SAVING US, MISTER." Said Scott before obeying the diver and bending forward to get through the hatch. Inside, he effectively saw a second opened hatch, situated on the deck beside a central pedestal supporting some kind of

large optical instrument. Shivering in his wet clothes, the surgeon went down the hatch, climbing down a vertical steel ladder and stepping inside some kind of compartment with padded benches facing outward and with two portholes with thick transparent covers. Two hatches, one on the deck and the other against one side, were visible. That most unusual arrangement baffled Scott, who couldn't help ask a question to the sailor waiting beside the opened deck hatch.

"This compartment is weird. What kind of submarine is this?"

The sailor, apparently unable to speak English, shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the opened deck hatch before saying something in German. Resigned to waiting before getting some explanations, Scott went down that hatch, climbing down to a sort of large storage compartment with multiple hatches. A naval officer was waiting there with the six other survivors from the AHS ORANJE and four German soldiers, fully armed and equipped, including steel helmets. The officer, a solidly-built man of fair height with a youthful face, spoke up in English as soon as Scott had stepped on the steel deck.

"Welcome on the U-800, ladies and gentlemen. I am Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, captain of this submarine."

Young Angela Black couldn't help open her eyes wide on hearing the German officer.

"The U-800! My God, we are on the Devil's Boat itself!"

Otto Kretschmer smiled, apparently amused by her choice of words.

"The Devil's Boat? Is that how the British call my submarine?"

"Uh, yes, mister. I didn't mean it as an insult, though."

"That's alright, miss: I have a thick skin. I can however guarantee you that I am no devil and that you will all be well treated aboard my submarine...as long as you don't do something stupid, like trying to sabotage some piece of machinery or attacking one of my crewmembers."

Otto then looked at Henry Scott, who wore his rank insignias on his vest.

"You seem to be the top ranking member of your group, mister. Could you present yourself?"

"Of course, Captain! I am Major Henry Scott, of the Australia Army Medical Corps. Me and my nurses were convoying wounded and sick Australian soldiers back to Australia on the hospital ship ORANJE. Unfortunately, our ship hit an iceberg in the thick fog and quickly sank. I am afraid that we are the only survivors."

Scott saw a momentary look of pain and regret in Kretschmer's eyes before the latter spoke again.

"We will have ample time later on to talk about the disaster that struck your ship. You look frozen to the bone and need to warm up and get some dry clothes. Hauptmann Margraff, to my left, will guide you to our crew shower room, where you will be able to take a hot shower. Don't worry about the intimacy of your nurses: no man will be present when they will take their shower. We will then give you coveralls and rubber boots to wear afterwards and will provide you with cabins."

"Cabins, on a submarine?" Said Wilhelm DeRoot, truly surprised. "Your submarine decidedly sound like no other submarine I know of, Captain Kretschmer."

"Of course!" Replied Otto, smiling. "Isn't it the Devil's Boat? Please follow Hauptmann Margraff now."

Going down two sets of steel staircases, the group of survivors went through two decks before stepping inside a vast compartment filled with rows of long tables, fixed seats, counters and cupboards. Hugo Margraff then proudly pointed around him as the survivors stared with disbelief at all that internal volume aboard a submarine.

"Our crew cafeteria, with the galley in that corner. Opposite the galley is our infirmary, where Doctor List will examine you after your shower. Please follow me forward."

Passing through a nearby bulkhead hatch, the group then found itself inside a semi-dark compartment about as vast as the preceding one. Rows of double bunk beds and of personal storage lockers filled the space. Margraff lowered his voice as he guided the survivors through the compartment.

"This is the Upper Deck crew quarters section. Please don't speak loudly here: some of the sailors are presently sleeping between duty shifts."

"My goodness!" Couldn't help say Nora Moyers. "Even our own quarters aboard the ORANJE were not as comfortable as this. And I..."

She suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and froze with fear as an obviously Oriental man in boxer shorts appeared through the hatch at the forward end of the compartment.

"A...a Japanese, here? Oh my God!"

On his part, the newcomer kept a stone face and didn't say a word, stepping aside to free the hatch and looking at the survivors as they went through the hatch. Margraff waited until the group was on the other side, in a big compartment nearly filled with two huge sorts of steel boxes going from ceiling to deck, before speaking again.

"Be on notice that we have four Japanese sailors aboard, plus one Japanese naval officer. They still don't speak much German and they speak even less English, so don't bother trying to speak with them. Just don't annoy them."

The four Australian nurses gulped hard as they took these words in. Margraff then led them down another steel staircase and went to a curtain, pulling it open and revealing a long, narrow space with a bench, wall hooks and three shower heads.

"The crew's shower room. If the ladies will go in first, I will go get some spare clothes in the meantime. You will find soap bars, shampoo and clean towels in this locker. Please try to ration your use of fresh water: our sweet water plants have a limited daily production capacity."

The nurses didn't have to be told twice and eagerly went inside the shower section, pulling close the curtain behind them and then shedding their wet, saltwater-impregnated uniforms before stepping under the shower heads. The warm water felt like a gift as it rolled down the bodies of the cold nurses, washing away the salt on their skin and in their hair and stopping their shivering. Mary Cummings had to remind her nurses about Margraff's plea in order to make them cut their shower to a reasonable amount of time. By the time the four nurses were done and were toweling themselves dry, Margraff's voice was heard through the curtain of the shower section.

"Ladies, I have put down on the deck, just on the other side of this curtain, a pile of clothes and a few pairs of boots of various sizes. I will now withdraw with your three male comrades away from the curtain, so that we don't infringe on your modesty."

"Mister Margraff, you are a true gentleman." Replied Nora Moyers, meaning it. The nurses waited a few seconds, then grabbed the things they found on the other side of the curtain and put them on top of the bench, so that the clothes would not get wet. The clothes turned out to be an assortment of gray coveralls, boxer shorts, T-shirts and socks of medium or small size, plus rubber boots. Having more than four sets, the nurses were able to choose the clothes that fitted them best and got dressed. On a reminder from Mary Cummings, they grabbed their soaked Australian nurses' uniforms from the deck before walking out of the shower section, leaving it free to be used by their male comrades. Hugo Margraff had a look at the soaked Australian uniforms and nodded his head.

"I believe that a stop at our shipboard laundry room is in order, so that you can get your uniforms washed. Then, I will bring you back to the crew mess, where you will be able to have a cup of hot coffee or tea."

"Wait!" Exclaimed Cynthia Forrester. "You have a laundry room, on a submarine?"

Her surprise amused Hugo, who grinned as he answered her.

"Yes, we do! It even has a couple of washing and drying machines, plus a steam ironing board. As you must be starting to understand by now, the U-800 is no ordinary submarine. It is actually a prototype and was designed by a true genius who believed, quite rightly I must say, that crew comfort plays a big role in its efficiency in combat." While herself impressed by this, Mary Cummings' reaction was visibly more guarded, with her not losing sight of where she and her nurses were now.

"Your U-800 certainly proved to be most deadly for our ships, Hauptmann Margraff. However, I must say that the good treatment we received to date reminds me of the honorable conduct of the men and officers of your Africa Corps, in Libya and Egypt."

Hugo nodded soberly, acknowledging her compliment.

"You will find that, while us Germans can be deadly fighters, we are on the whole no monsters. We are unfortunately at war and we must do what is needed to win this war and limit the losses and damages. Kapitän Kretschmer is a master tactician and a true U-Boote ace, but he doesn't believe in unnecessary meanness."

"Uh, how would you define necessary meanness then?"

A devilish grin appeared on Hugo's lips as he stared into Mary's eyes.

"Blowing up the Boston Naval Ammunition Depot. Cutting down the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Taking out the Panama Canal Miraflores Locks. Sinking the aircraft carriers HORNET, ENTERPRISE, SARATOGA, WASP, RANGER and VICTORIOUS, plus the battleships KING GEORGE V, MISSISSIPI, WASHINGTON, SOUTH DAKOTA and NORTH CAROLINA. This submarine and my commandos did all that and we are far from finished, miss."

Those words noticeably cooled the spirits of the nurses, something Hugo actually wanted to do. With over seventy men aboard the U-800, those women could easily sow disorder and create discipline problems if they conducted themselves in a too friendly manner, thus passing the wrong message to sex-starved young men. Turning his head

towards the two soldiers who had followed him and the prisoners, he gave them a few orders.

“Drücker, Lang, you stay and watch the male prisoners while they shower. Once they are finished and are dressed in dry clothes, bring them to the laundry room, so that they can wash their uniforms. Then, have them join those nurses in the crew mess, where they will be able to have a cup of hot coffee and some food.”

“Yes, Hauptmann!”

Staying on the Median Deck, Margraff guided the nurses aft, passing through another crew quarters compartment filled with double bunk beds and lockers before arriving at a sort of tiny rotunda with three watertight doors and a service wicket along its walls.

“The wicket and door to your right are those of the boat’s administrative office, which handles pay, personnel matters, supply requests and the like. In the back of the office is a small photographic lab, where we develop the pictures taken through our periscopes. To your front is the door to the ship’s food storage areas and freezers. The laundry room is to your left.”

Opening the said door, Hugo entered a long, narrow compartment measuring four meters by two meters, followed by the curious nurses. Inside, they found two washing machines, two drying machines, three large sinks, a small counter, an ironing board with steam iron and a number of large steel storage lockers. The Australian women stared at once at the washing and drying machines.

“Wow!” Exclaimed Nora Moyers. “I never saw an automatic washing machine or dryer at home, yet you have two of each on a submarine.”

Hugo smiled at her wonderment.

“Well, for your information, the Miele Company in Gütersloh produced the first electric washing machine in Europe in 1914 and also produces many other high-end domestic and commercial appliances that are in the vanguard even to this day. There is even a Miele electric, commercial-grade dishwasher in the boat’s kitchen. Those washers and dryers you see are fully automatic and save a lot of time and work to our sailors. There are also large sinks to do hand-washing when silent running requires to shut down the machines. As you can see, German technology is good at more than just producing war materiel. If you will now empty the pockets of your wet uniforms, so that we can load one washer with them.”

The nurses did so at once, putting the few things they had in the pockets of their borrowed coveralls, before stuffing their wet uniforms in one washing machine. Hugo then took from one of the lockers a box of detergent and poured some soap in the machine before closing its top lid and starting it, watched by the fascinated nurses.

"Damn, I wish that I could get myself a machine like this after the war." Said Mary Cummings, envious. "I would then avoid ruining my hands with the rough soap and washing board we use back home."

"Another reason to put a quick end to this war, ladies." Replied Hugo, amused. "We will now go to the crew mess, to have some hot beverages and food while your uniforms get washed. This way, please."

Going out of the laundry room and passing the door giving access to the food storage compartment, the group went up to the Upper Deck via a steep steel staircase topped by a watertight rectangular hatch. Emerging in the large crew mess compartment, Hugo led the nurses to one of the self-serve counters distributed around the room, where they were able to pour for themselves cups of coffee or tea. Angela Black whooped with joy when she found that there was even powdered hot chocolate preparation available.

"Hot cocoa? Your submariners are really spoiled!"

Mary Cummings, looking at the can of powdered chocolate preparation, frowned.

"Hey, how come you have Colombian chocolate here, on a German submarine?"

"Well, let's say that we liberated a large quantity of Colombian coffee and chocolate products from a British cargo ship a few months ago. But don't feel bad about having some of it: it was already paid for by His Majesty the King."

Mary gave Hugo a sarcastic look.

"So, you are playing high seas pirates as well, Hauptmann?"

"Why not? Sinking all that good stuff without saving at least part of it would be a sad waste, don't you think?"

"Hum! Okay, girls, let's go sit down at that table."

After they did so, a young man wearing a cook's apron and a white linen cap came to their selected table and spoke briefly in German with Hugo, who then looked at the nurses sitting facing him.

“Our excellent cook, Matrosen Obergefreiter Dieter Hannig, asks if you want to eat something right now. He has an assortment of cheese, cold cuts, bread and salads and can also warm up some soup for you.”

The nurses exchanged looks before Mary Cummings spoke for the group.

“A hot soup and some bread would be great, mister.”

Hugo nodded at that and translated her words for Hannig, who bowed his head before going back into his kitchen. Mary, by now quite confused by the unexpectedly good treatment they had been getting, looked soberly at Hugo.

“Hauptmann, we do appreciate the way we have been treated most decently up to now. Can you tell us what will happen next?”

“Well, I will let Kapitän Kretschmer tell you that in detail later but, if I go by past experience, he will probably drop you off at some point in a neutral port or ship, or even a British or American cargo ship that we would intercept and stop. Please understand that this submarine is on a war patrol and that the lengthy presence of four women aboard could only create a few disciplinary problems in the long run, if you see what I mean.”

“I understand perfectly, Hauptmann Margraff: even when deployed near our own troops, our officers often locked us up in guarded camps, supposedly to avoid ‘unwanted fraternization’.”

“Thank you for your understanding, Sister Cummings.” Replied Hugo, meaning it. Hannig came back to their table about five minutes later and suspended a pot of steaming soup from a hook hanging about forty centimeters above the table, then distributed bowls and utensils around the table before going to get a loaf of freshly-baked bread.

The nurses were still eating their soup and bread when Henry Scott, Wilhelm DeRoot and Corporal Jake Gillies, the wounded with an arm in a cast, joined them at their table and gladly accepted some soup for themselves. Fifteen minutes later, a tall naval officer with a bit of an aristocratic allure came to see the prisoners, bowing politely to them and speaking in good English.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! I am Kapitänleutnant Ulrich von Wittgenstein, the First Watch Officer of the U-800. I came to allocate to you your cabins, as we just finished moving three of our junior officers to new accommodations. The

nurses in your group will share two cabins, while Major Scott and Ensign DeRoot will share another cabin. As for Corporal Gillies, he will share Doctor List's cabin."

"You are most gracious and generous, Kapitänleutnant von Wittgenstein." Replied Henry Scott. You remind me of the way the men of your Africa Corps behaved on the battlefield. If only everybody in war would be as chivalrous."

"Unfortunately, that happens too infrequently, Major. Now, about what will happen next to you. We are still on a war patrol and have more fighting planned in the days to come. Unfortunately for you, this means that we won't be able to release you yet, in order to preserve the element of surprise for our next attack. Once that attack is concluded, though, you will be landed on a friendly shore, where you will be able to get help. Keeping you aboard for the duration would expose you to too many risks: the U-800 may be a formidable war machine, but it is not invincible and we still could get sunk before we return to our base in France."

"We understand your point of view and accept it, mister. In return, we promise that we will not attempt any acts of sabotage or violence while aboard your submarine." Scott said his last words while looking at Jake Gillies, sending him an unequivocal message.

"Then, if you may all follow me." Said Ulrich. With the seven prisoners in tow, he went up by one deck, to the Top Deck, which contained the officers' accommodations. There, he showed them first three small cabins, each measuring three meters by two meters and with a captain's bed, small table and chair and twin lockers, plus a folding bed above the captain's bed. As for Doctor List's cabin, it proved to be even bigger, measuring three meters by three meters. Seeing the wonderment on the faces of the prisoners, Ulrich decided on a whim to make them visit briefly the officers' wardroom, with its long dining table for up to ten persons and multiple sofas. What however struck most the prisoners was the wall board on which pictures of the ships sunk by the U-800 were displayed: there were 182 of them on the board, nearly half of them warships. Hugo Margraff then spoke softly as the prisoners eyed the wall board with shock on their faces.

"Like I told you before: we intend to make this war as short as possible in order to cut the losses and damages...while bringing victory or at least an honorable peace to Germany. With Japan at the door of Australia, I believe that this is not an unrealistic goal by now."

20:02 (Falklands Time)

Friday, September 18, 1942

Aft access airlock of the U-800

Surf Bay, four kilometers east of Stanley Harbor

East Falkland Island, South Atlantic

“Good luck to you and your men, Hauptmann Margraff. We will anxiously await your radio call.”

“We will succeed, as usual, Herr Kapitän. You should hear from us in about six hours at most. If not, conduct your own attack as if we were not there. Either way, the enemy will hurt tonight.”

“Still, don’t take foolish chances: better be late than sorry.”

On those words, Otto Kretschmer and Hugo Margraff split up, with the latter joining his six soldiers on the aft deck of the U-800, on which they had laid and then inflated their rubber assault boat. The seven Brandenburg Regiment commandos soon had their boat in the water and were paddling towards the shore of Surf Bay, faintly visible in the light of a half moon. The sea was a bit rough tonight, but the wind blew towards the shore, helping the commandos to go faster. Hoping with all his conviction that Margraff and his men would be okay, Otto returned inside his submarine and went to the control room, where he gave the order to dive and proceed at silent speed towards nearby Cape Pembroke and Port William, the gateway to Stanley Harbor.

Landing undetected on the desolate shore of Surf Bay, the seven German soldiers then grabbed their rubber boat by its transport handles and physically lifted it, carrying it at a quick step across the pebble beach. Taking a pause once in the long grass, both to catch their breath and to listen for any noise of nearby movement, the Brandenburg men then lifted again their assault boat and started their foot trek across the land bridge that separated Surf Bay and the open sea from the waters of Stanley Harbor. They proceeded cautiously, speed being less important than stealth right now, but they met no one, nor any building on their way. The Germans could however see to their right the lights of the camp on Cape Pembroke, where an American construction unit was building an airfield. The U-800 had arrived off East Falklands over a day ago and what they had seen since then had confirmed what Otto Kretschmer had bet he would find: a hastily set up refueling point for Allied convoys on their way to round the

Cape Horn or coming round it from Australia or Hawaii. With the Panama Canal out of commission and with the huge extra distances a detour via the Cape Horn implied, Otto had reasoned that the Americans would want to set a number of refueling points along the way, but preferably on friendly territory rather than on neutral shores, with the diplomatic uncertainty around the latter making them less than ideal as refueling bases. That had left about one possible point in the South Atlantic, close to the Cape Horn: the Falkland Islands, a British possession with an existing port, albeit a small one but with a deep anchorage. The U-800 had already detected via its hydrophones, passive radar detector and radio direction-finding two American destroyers that were constantly patrolling around the entrance of the bay leading to Stanley Harbor. One more destroyer had also been detected at anchor across the entrance of the bay, pinging actively its ASDIC set at intervals. Inside the waters of Stanley Harbor, the lights of dozens of anchored ships could also be seen beside the lights of the small British settlement of Port Stanley. That had decided Otto and Hugo into attempting a repeat of their raid on Miami Harbor, in last December. A lot would now depend on what exactly the German commandos would find at anchor in Stanley Harbor.

23:46 (Falklands Time)

American cargo ship M.V. ALAMEDA

At anchor in Stanley Harbor

The graying American Navy reservist shook his head in disgust as he surveyed with his eyes the small British town of Port Stanley, actually little more than a big village. There was not a single tree to be seen in the surrounding countryside and the wind that blew nearly constantly was quite cold.

“What a hole! They really couldn’t find a better place than this for their damn refueling station? They don’t even have a single airfield here...yet.”

“Aw come on, Bernie! Quit complaining!” Replied the other reservist on deck guard duty. “It is not as if we are going to stay here for weeks. In fact, we should raise anchor tomorrow, once all the ships of our convoy will have filled up their fuel tanks.”

The two men, conversing casually while standing near the top of the access ladder of their armed cargo ship and looking towards Port Stanley, never saw or heard the two dark shadows that silently approached them from the back, until those shadows sprung into action and stabbed them in the throat while slapping one hand over their mouths.

The two American sailors then collapsed after a few spasms and were dragged out of sight to a dark corner of the open deck. Hugo Margraff had a quick look at the big five inch deck gun fixed nearby and at the aircraft stored on deck under protective tarps before giving orders in a whisper to his six men.

“Alright, men! Stein, you go with Weiss and Lang and go clean up the crew quarters. Drücker and Bayerlein, you go to the engine room. I will go with Hausmann to the bridge. Be clean and quiet! We will meet back on the bridge.”

The seven German soldiers split up and quietly went their respective way, intent on covertly grabbing control of this ship. The M.V. ALAMEDA had caught their eyes from the shore thanks to the dozen or so aircraft stowed on its open deck and also thanks to its visible armament of one five inch gun and one three inch gun, which they would be able to use to their profit later on.

Less than forty minutes later, all the crewmen of the ALAMEDA that could be found aboard were dead, either stabbed or shot with silenced pistols. Hugo Margraff was able to find quickly the ship’s cargo manifest and was happy to see that the ALAMEDA, on top of carrying fourteen Douglas SBD dive bombers on its open deck, also carried an extensive cargo of aircraft spare parts. Denying such spare parts to the enemy was liable to be truly painful for the Allies in the Pacific. Reviewing more carefully the cargo manifest as his men started arriving on the bridge, he suddenly froze on seeing a particular entry.

“DMS-1000 airborne centimetric radar set assembly, quantity: 8...”

Hugo looked at Karl Hausmann, who had been a radio repairman in civilian life.

“Hey, Karl, this ship carries a few radar sets. Do you think that this could interest Die Alter²⁷?”

“Uh, could I see that list, Hauptmann?”

“Sure! Here you go!”

Hausmann read twice the line on the manifest pointed by Hugo before speaking.

“I’m not sure, sir, but I think that we should check with our own radar technician on the U-800, Hans Zimmer. This certainly sounds interesting, though.”

“I’ll take your word for it!” Replied Hugo, who then moved to the radio room at the back of the bridge. There, he tuned one of the HF radio sets to the frequency of the

²⁷ Die Alter : The Old Man, in German. Common nickname given to the captain of a ship.

U-800 and sent a short message in covert terms, while speaking in English in order not to attract immediate attention to his transmission.

“Shark, this is Wolf, over!”

“This is Shark! Send, Wolf!”

“From Wolf: we are now in a dominant position. We have a technical question for you: is centimetric radar a priority item, over?”

There was a delay of a couple minutes before an answer came back in a quite excited tone.

“Did you find such a radar, Wolf?”

“Affirmative, Shark! It is part of a cargo of spare parts, over.”

“Secure that cargo and once and see how easily it can be carried off, Wolf. In the meantime, keep a low profile and safeguard your find. Shark out!”

Hugo put down his microphone, quite surprised at how his find seemed to have rattled their own radar specialist on the U-800. Well, if he deemed that find to be so valuable, then Hugo would make sure that those centimetric radar sets would get intact to the submarine. But first, he had to find them among the rest of the cargo.

That actually proved less difficult than he had feared, the cargo manifest being quite detailed about which cargo was in which hold or sub-hold. He found eight wooden crates, each less than two cubic meters in volume and weighing approximately 160 kilos, marked ‘DMS-1000 Radar Antenna Assembly’. Hugo also found next to those crates eight other crates marked ‘DMS-1000 Radar Receiver/Transmitter and Display Set’. Excitement mounting in him, he used a crowbar to pry open a crate of each of the two kind of sets to look inside them. What he found made him swear quietly to himself. The radar assembly and antenna was extremely compact compared to the few German radars he had seen before, or on reconnaissance photos of British radars. As for the control boxes and receiver/transmitter set, they were surprisingly light and small. There was also a detailed technical user and maintenance manual in the second crate, along with a blueprint showing how to install the radar set on a patrol aircraft. Now suspecting that he had just found the proverbial golden egg, Hugo closed back the crates and went to get four of his men, bringing them to the hold and showing them the crates.

“Men, I believe that we got something here that could be of crucial intelligence value for us. I want you to haul up to the open deck this big crate here, plus that smaller crate over there. Ideally, we will be able to take out all these radar sets when the U-800

will come aside, but I want us to be able to secure at least one complete set, in case things go bad.”

Thinking about it as his men grunted while lifting the first big crate and carrying it up, Hugo reopened one of the smaller crates and grabbed the technical manual and assembly blueprint inside, then stuffed them in his small, waterproof haversack. If things really went badly, then he would at least have those documents with him.

02:27 (Falklands Time)

Saturday, September, 1942

American armed cargo ship S.S. DOUGLAS HOLT

Anchored in Stanley Harbor

“Sir! Sir! Wake up!”

Awakened slowly by gradually stronger shakes, Rear-admiral Joseph Reubens groggily looked up at the third officer of the DOUGLAS HOLT, who was bending over his bed.

“Uh... What is it, Mister Wright?”

“Something very bad, sir: the three destroyers guarding the entrance to the Port William Bay were just torpedoed and are sinking.”

Those words acted like lightning jolts on Reubens, who was in charge of the convoy presently stopped for refueling in Stanley Harbor. Throwing away his bed sheet and blanket, he swung his legs out and sat up, shaking his head to fully wake up before looking again at Wright.

“When did that happen?”

“The first torpedo hits were only four minutes ago, sir, but they were very accurate and deadly. The EBERLE broke in two, while the LIVERMORE and the KEARNY were hit in their machinery spaces and are out of power.”

“What about the ERICSSON? Has Captain Hoel, on the USS MELVILLE, been alerted?”

“The ERICSSON was still waiting to be refueled and was at anchor but is now putting on steam in a hurry and has gone to battle stations. Captain Hoel has been alerted, sir.”

“I’ll be on the bridge in four minutes. Dismissed!”

Wright saluted him before turning around and leaving Reubens’ small cabin. The latter had dread in his heart as he quickly dressed: as an old Coast Guard officer, he had been

put in charge of one of the first convoys going around the Cape Horn instead of using the now blocked Panama Canal. His convoy was also only the second one to use the new refueling station in Port Stanley, which had been hastily set up on orders from Admiral King. The facilities in Port Stanley had proved to be very limited and rudimentary, but the Navy had compensated that by posting a small flotilla of tanker ships, along with a destroyer tender and three destroyers to guard the entrance of the harbor. Everybody in Washington had believed that the remoteness of the Falkland Islands and their apparent lack of facilities would have kept German submarines away from Stanley Harbor, but it now seemed that they had been wrong about that, dead wrong.

Reubens arrived on the bridge of his flagship, a large armed cargo ship, only to be greeted by more bad news from the captain of the DOUGLAS HOLT.

"Admiral, the destroyer ERICSSON was just torpedoed as it was starting to move out of Stanley Harbor. The destroyer tender MELVILLE was also hit by torpedoes and is in trouble."

"For God's sake, how could the enemy know our defensive deployment in detail like this? Is the ERICSSON still able to fight?"

The captain of the cargo ship shook his head and pointed out at a ship that was burning fiercely near another burning ship.

"No, Admiral! The ERICSSON is burning, and so is the MELVILLE. Our other three destroyers have either sunk or are out of action as well. Our convoy is now trapped in Stanley Harbor, defenseless except for the deck guns on some of our merchant ships."

"Those deck guns won't do much good against a submerged submarine, Mister Burnaby. Have we alerted the Atlantic Fleet Headquarters yet about this attack against our convoy?"

"Not yet, Admiral."

"Then send immediately a coded message to Norfolk, stating that our four destroyers and the station's destroyer tender have been torpedoed. Ask for any help that could be sent quickly."

"Yes, Admiral." Replied Captain Burnaby without much conviction before walking out of the bridge. Due to the same factors that had made Washington select Port Stanley as a refueling point for convoys rounding the Cape Horn, there were no

other American or British warships within a good 3,000 nautical miles, while the Falklands were presently out of range of the American patrol bombers based in the Caribbean Basin. Help would not arrive for many days at the least, something that Rear-admiral Reubens had to know.

Reubens could do little more once he had ordered his convoy to battle stations, so he had ample time to watch his destroyers disappear one by one under the waves, along with the destroyer tender MELVILLE. All the ships that had been equipped with radar or sonar were now gone, leaving him only with the deck guns of the armed merchant ships in his convoy. Those deck guns however had no sensors left to direct their fire other than their optical sights, which would be next to useless against a submerged submarine or submarines. Maybe half an hour after the U.S.S. KEARNY had gone down, one of the lookouts on the open bridge of the DOUGLAS HOLT suddenly shouted in an excited tone.

“SIR, SOMEONE IS SENDING US A MESSAGE BY LAMP!”

Grabbing at once his binoculars and running to the port open bridge wing facing the Port William anchorage and the open sea, Reubens deciphered out loud the optical Morse code message blinking from a point in the dark sea, a few kilometers away.

“From U-800: you have thirty minutes to start transferring all your crews and passengers aboard your hospital ship. If you don’t comply or if you fire on me, then I will start sinking your ships one by one. Acknowledge!”

As the sender of the message started repeating it, Reubens slowly lowered his binoculars, dread washing over him. The U-800 had become in the last few months a true scarecrow for both Allied warships and merchant ships and possessed a terrifying reputation as a ruthless, efficient war machine. To have to face such a powerful opponent now, with no true warships left to defend his convoy, was as if doomsday had just knocked at his door. That also placed him in an impossible dilemma: if he complied with the U-800’s demands, he would probably end up being court-martialed for having abandoned his convoy in the hands of the enemy. However, if he resisted, he had no doubt that the U-800 had the means to make good on its threat. Then, he would still lose his ships, but would also suffer hundreds of human casualties. As for sinking the U-800, unless the legendary Kretschmer would make a grievous tactical mistake, that sounded most improbable. Reubens suddenly became conscious that all the men on the bridge were now staring at him quietly, expecting orders from him. The problem was

that he couldn't decide yet what to do. Going back inside the wheelhouse, Reubens activated his TBS radio set tuned to the convoy's frequency. What he couldn't know was that German ears were also listening to that frequency.

"Attention all ships, this is Admiral Reubens speaking! All ships are to keep their present position for the moment, but be ready to sail at a moment's notice. All gunners are to stay at their weapons but no one is to shoot without my express order. Reubens out!"

Reubens then put down his radio microphone. He now could only wait and hope that the U-800 was bluffing and would not fire on near defenseless merchant ships.

His pious wish was literally blown away thirty minutes later, when the Navy seaplane tender U.S.S. SANDPIPER suddenly shook under the impact and explosion of two torpedoes. As the seaplane tender started settling down by the stern, a lookout on the DOUGLAS HOLT shouted a warning.

"NEW LAMP MESSAGE INCOMING!"

Already guessing what that message would be, Reubens again raised his binoculars to his eyes.

"From U-800 to Allied convoy: you were warned. Until you start transferring all your crews and passengers to your hospital ship, I will sink one new ship every ten minutes. If you scuttle your ships before evacuating them, then I will open fire. The choice is yours. Acknowledge!"

Cold sweat appeared on Reubens forehead: he was now backed to a wall.

"Captain Burnaby, send an acknowledge to this message."

"Yes, Admiral!"

Reubens felt very old as he debated what to do next. He was going to lose either way now. The only thing he could still do was to limit the human casualties among his convoy. As for the ships and their various cargo, they were anyway going to get destroyed by the U-800. The shout of a lookout then made his head snap around.

"THE TASMANIA IS ATTEMPTING A RUN TO THE OPEN SEA!"

"WHAT DOES THAT IDIOT THINK THAT HE CAN ACCOMPLISH?" Raged Reubens while changing position on the bridge to see the ship trying to leave Stanley Harbor. The TASMANIA was a small Australian liner converted into a troopship and carrying half a brigade's worth of Australian soldiers. Being a free-runner heading to Egypt, it was not under Reubens' command. This idiotic move was probably the product

of the obtuseness of Colonel James Hobart, the ranking Australian Army officer aboard the TASMANIA. Reubens had met him briefly yesterday and had not been overly impressed by him. That nonsense ended exactly the way Reubens expected: the TASMANIA was torpedoed once it had gone out of Stanley Harbor and was in the middle of Port William anchorage. The troopship, its hull ripped open by two torpedoes, quickly capsized and sank, throwing hundreds of Australian soldiers into the frigid water. Reubens could only watch the drama while damning Hobart's stupidity as those soldiers quickly died from hypothermia. A third lamp message was then seen from near the wreck of the troopship.

"You were warned. One more ship will go down now."

To Reubens' helpless despair, the 11,000 ton tanker FULTON received one torpedo less than two minutes later. The explosion ignited at once its cargo of bunker oil and turned the tanker into a floating inferno. Reubens then cracked, having had enough.

"TRANSMIT VIA LAMP TO U-800: HOLD FIRE! WE WILL START EVACUATION NOW! CAPTAIN BURNABY, CONTACT BY LAMP THE FREE-RUNNING SHIPS IN THE HARBOR AND TELL THEM THAT THEY SHOULD EVACUATE NOW TOWARDS THE U.S.S. STORK."

"UNDERSTOOD, ADMIRAL!"

Reubens next went back to the TBS radio set and grabbed its microphone.

"To all ships of the convoy: abandon ship now! The crews and passengers are to reembark on the hospital ship STORK. Do not, I say again, do not attempt to scuttle your ships before leaving, or the U-800 will fire more torpedoes. Simply destroy your codes and leave! All ships, acknowledge!"

Grabbing a message pad, Reubens then wrote down the names of the ships that sent back an acknowledge, then compared them to a list of his convoy's composition: all of them had received his orders. Not being familiar with all the ships' captains in his convoy and being under near shock, he didn't notice the slight accent in one of the responses.

Just before twilight, at around six in the morning, the transfer of crewmembers and passengers to the U.S.S. STORK was completed, with Rear-admiral Reubens being last to come aboard. The hospital ship then started slowly moving out of Stanley Harbor. To Reubens' surprise, he received another lamp message from the U-800 as the STORK was clearing the entrance of Stanley Harbor.

“Stop by Gypsy Cove in order to pick up seven more passengers. What the hell?”

What the STORK found near Gypsy Cove was a motor launch from the cargo ship ALAMEDA with four men and four women aboard. Three of the men and the four women promptly climbed up, with the man at the helm of the motor launch then speeding away, watched by the confused sailors on the hospital ship. One of the men, an Australian Army Medical Corps major presented himself to Reubens as soon as he came aboard the STORK, saluting him smartly.

“Major Henry Scott, Australian Army Medical Corps. I have with me four Australian nurses, one wounded Australian soldier and one Dutch merchant marine officer. We were on the hospital ship ORANJE when it collided with an iceberg in thick fog and sank south of Cape Horn. The U-800 found us and saved us then. Unfortunately, we were the only survivors from the ORANJE, out of more than 500 people aboard our hospital ship.”

Reubens' shoulders sagged under that extra sad piece of news.

“And...were you well treated aboard that German submarine, Major?”

“We were treated decently and with respect at all times, Admiral. I must say that what we saw inside that submarine deeply impressed me.”

Reubens made a bitter smile at those words and patted Scott's shoulder.

“I will be happy to hear your tales later on, Major. Now, we have to return to the United States with our new load of passengers. Explaining this fiasco to my bosses won't be fun.”

“I can imagine so, Admiral.” Replied Scott in a cautious tone.

The U.S.S. STORK was below the horizon, heading north, when the U-800 finally surfaced and entered Stanley Harbor, having received by radio confirmation from the commandos on the ALAMEDA that no movement could be seen aboard the abandoned American and British ships. Standing on the open bridge atop the conning tower of his submarine, Otto visually surveyed the collection of 22 merchant ships swinging at anchor inside the harbor. Those merchant ships were no doubt loaded down with tens of thousands of tons of cargo whose loss would constitute a painful blow to the already severely diminished Allied forces based in and around Australia. On the other hand, some of that cargo, like the radar sets found on the ALAMEDA, would be considered about as precious as gold back in Germany, which was facing a tight maritime blockade

by the British Navy and where the lists of items in short supply kept growing by the month. His mind made, he directed his helmsman towards the ALAMEDA, with the submarine coming alongside the cargo ship fifteen minutes later. Hugo Margraff climbed down the side access ladder of the cargo ship and met Otto on the forward top deck of the U-800, saluting him.

“Hauptmann Margraff, reporting back from mission, Herr Kapitän. We suffered no casualties and have full control of this cargo ship.”

Otto saluted back, then shook hands with Hugo, smiling to him.

“You and your men did a superb job, as always, Hauptmann Margraff. So, those radar sets really look interesting?”

Hugo nodded his head soberly at those words.

“You certainly can say that, Herr Kapitän. I believe in fact that such centimetric radar sets, when mounted on patrol bombers or amphibians, could constitute a mortal danger to our submarines, including the U-800. They should be examined by our radar experts in Germany as soon as possible.”

“I believe so too. I will send up a work party to help you transfer two complete sets of these radars aboard the U-800. On your part, I would like you and your men to accompany three of my officers who will start inspecting and inventorying the content of those captured merchant ships. God knows what kind of treasures we will find aboard them. We will also of course replenish ourselves in fuel and fresh food at the same time. Since it will take at least a few days to the enemy to react to our raid here, I figure that we will have a good two days of peace to do what we want to do here.”

“And may I ask what exactly we want to do here, Herr Kapitän?”

A devilish smile appeared on Otto’s lips at that question.

“We will select a couple of worthy prize ships and will put aboard them what we deem interesting or valuable enough as extra cargo, then will sail for our home port. I intend to make a grand entrance indeed in Lorient, my dear Margraff.”

10:15 (Paris Time)

Monday, September 21, 1942

Headquarters of U-Boote Command, Lorient

Coast of Brittany, France

Admiral Karl Dönitz' aide entered after knocking on the door of his commander's office and walked to his desk, stopping at attention and saluting before presenting him a printed message.

"We just received a message from the U-800, Admiral, for your eyes only."

"Thank you, Werner! You are dismissed!"

Once his aide was gone, Dönitz started reading with voracious interest the message sent by Otto Kretschmer. Even by Kretschmer's stingy standards of reporting, his present war patrol had produced only a handful of messages sent to Lorient. However, in view of his special and very delicate mission to Panama and Japan, Dönitz had arranged in advance with Kretschmer a special set of cryptic sentences and terms that only both of them would know how to interpret. That was in addition to the use of what was known in intelligence work as 'one-time pads', basically booklets of random pages of codes that never repeated themselves and were used only once, making them impossible to decipher. That system was unfortunately very voracious in paper, making it impractical to use it on a large scale. However, with the Kriegsmarine now knowing since May that its Enigma encoding system, along with the Japanese diplomatic code, was being deciphered by the Allies, Dönitz had switched his command to a new code system, something that had paid handsomely and quickly, as the British and the Americans had since been much less successful in avoiding German submarines. That, and the obvious good results from Kretschmer's radio discretion, had finally convinced Dönitz to change his command habits and to cut on his own transmissions. All that had in turn resulted in less submarine losses for him and much more success in sinking Allied ships.

"Hum! From U-800, to BdU²⁸ Headquarters, Lorient. Met three nice dates at 91, Horst Altmark Strasse. Am looking for appropriate dance partners for them. Please advise the others that we are on our way."

Dönitz grinned as he made sense of Kretschmer's message and consulted a World map on his desk that was covered with letter-coded squares.

"So, the U-800 has attacked the Falklands Islands, probably Port Stanley, and captured three prize ships worthy of the taking that he is now escorting back to Lorient. He is however concerned that those prize ships could be sunk by mistake by our planes or submarines while heading to France. Well, I can certainly arrange for that to be

²⁸ BdU : Befehlshaber der U-Boote, or Submarine Command in German.

avoided. I wonder what he found down in the Falklands that would be worth bringing all the way to Lorient.”

04:49 (New York Time) / 10:49 (Paris Time)

Cryptographic Section, U.S. Navy Atlantic Fleet Headquarters

Norfolk, Virginia, U.S.A.

“SIR, WE INTERCEPTED A TRANSMISSION FROM THE U-800!”

“Aah, at last! That Kretschmer can be as quiet as a clam. Show me what you got.”

Taking the message form from the young ensign, Lieutenant (Navy) Jeff Reed read it once before looking crossly at the ensign.

“Is this a joke? Nice dates? Dance partners? This is crap! How the hell are we supposed to make any sense out of this?”

02:50 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, October 20, 1942

Keroman I submarine pen bunker complex

Lorient, France

“Do we know what those three captured ships carry, Admiral?”

Dönitz turned his head to answer the question from the Minister of War Production and Armaments, Albert Speer, who stood beside him on the quay of the submarine pen in which the U-800 was now slowly entering.

“The patrol boats that met and escorted them said that they were two large tanker ships and one large cargo ship. However, from the covert terms used by Kapitän Kretschmer in his last message, I believe that these captured ships are very significant prizes. He wouldn’t have insisted on that point if it would be something mundane, like foodstuff. However, I can surmise that the two large tankers must be loaded with refined fuel. At close to 10,000 tons of fuel capacity each, I believe that those two tankers alone would have justified your trip to Lorient.”

"I believe so too, Admiral. 20,000 tons of refined fuel would do nicely to take some pressure off our overworked refineries. That said, even without those captured ships, Kapitän Kretschmer's voyage was truly epic."

"Very true indeed, Herr Minister."

The two men, with aides and senior officers at their backs, then waited patiently as the U-800 stopped against the quay, with ropes thrown and tied, while a military band started playing the German national anthem. A gangway was soon put in place, allowing Dönitz, Speer and their principal aides and officers to step on the forward deck of the U-800, where Otto Kretschmer met them with a salute.

"Welcome aboard the U-800, Admiral and Herr Minister!"

"And it is a pleasure to see you again, my good Kretschmer." Replied Dönitz, who then noticed Otto's red eyes and the fatigue showing on his face. "But, you look positively exhausted!"

"That's because I am, Admiral, along with my crewmembers. We had to cut the manpower on each work shift to the bone in order to provide prize crews for the three ships we brought back with us."

"And may I ask what those ships contain, Herr Kapitän?" Asked politely Albert Speer. Otto smiled to him before answering in a proud voice.

"Over 12,000 tons of high octane aviation gasoline on the American tanker SAM HOUSTON, 11,000 tons of diesel fuel on the tanker KALAMAZOO and nearly 11,000 tons of aluminum metal products that I am sure could help the production of aircraft for our Luftwaffe, Herr Minister."

Albert Speer opened his mouth from happiness on hearing those figures.

"Eleven thousand tons of aluminum metal? We will be able to produce thousands of aircraft with all that aluminum! And that aviation gasoline will provide the needs of the Luftwaffe in the West for over two months. I suppose as well that Admiral Dönitz will be able to make good use of all that diesel fuel you brought him for his submarines."

"Indeed!" Added Dönitz, quite happy himself. "You performed true miracles during your war patrol. I can't wait to hear the details of your voyage."

"Aah, but I do have another miracle for you, Herr Admiral, and for our radar specialists. We grabbed on one of the Allied ships we captured in Port Stanley eight complete sets of a new type of airborne radar that functions in the ten centimeter band. We also have the technical manuals that go with them, along with a stock of spares for

those radar sets. I believe strongly that our experts should examine those captured radar sets as soon as possible, as they may give us a way to counter those maritime patrol aircraft that pester our submarines at sea.”

Dönitz sucked air in on hearing that.

“Mein Gott! Centimetric radars? The Allies are this advanced in their radar technology?”

“It now appears so, Herr Admiral. From looking through the captured technical manuals on these radars, it seems that the key to their advances is a new radar wave emitter called a ‘magnetron’. We have a good dozen spares of those magnetrons with us, on top of those incorporated in the radar sets we grabbed. We have as well captured a large number of American Army portable radios that seem to use a technology superior to ours.”

“This is truly major!” Then pronounced Speer before calling one of his aides to his side and giving him a firm set of directives.

“Get Luftwaffe radar experts here at once! I also want our civilian experts in Germany, especially our experts at Telefunken, to come and examine those captured radar sets. However, be discreet about the way you contact them: we don’t want the enemy to learn that we have captured their latest radar technology.”

“I will get on it right away, Herr Minister!” Replied the senior officer before nearly running up the gangway to the quay. Speer then looked gravely at Kretschmer.

“What you just brought us could have a major impact on this war, like the way you proved that the Allies were able to read our encrypted message traffic. The nation owes you, a lot!”

“Herr Minister, the only thing I want right now is to be able to rest for a few quiet days. My U-800 is also due for a major maintenance check after such a long voyage.”

“And you will get an extended rest period, you and your valiant crew, my good Kretschmer.” Promised Dönitz, not knowing that he was soon going to have to break his promise to Otto.

CHAPTER 22 – OPERATION TORCH

16:32 (Berlin Time)

Sunday, November 8, 1942

Ski resort, Krummhuebel, Lower Silesia

Germany

The Kriegsmarine officer's feet hurt and his lungs were nearly on fire when he finally met up with Otto Kretschmer along the mountain trail, a good eight kilometers away from the ski resort in Krummhuebel. There were also seven other men with Kretschmer, all dressed in hiking boots and Winter coats.

"Aaah, Kapitän Kretschmer: I catch you at last! I am Oberleutnant zur See Ernest Bollinger and I was sent by Admiral Dönitz to get you and bring you back to Lorient, where you and your crew are urgently required."

Otto, who was smoking a Cuban cigar, frowned at those words while returning the salute from Bollinger.

"Already? But the admiral had promised me and my crew a month of quiet leave."

"He truly intended to keep his word on that, Herr Kapitän, but the Allies decided otherwise. They just started an amphibious invasion of the Vichy French territories in Morocco and Algeria and Admiral Dönitz needs all of his available submarines to counter that invasion. Your U-800 in particular is to deal with the American invasion fleet off the Casablanca area in Morocco."

"My U-800 was undergoing a thorough maintenance refit in Lorient. Has that refit been completed yet? And what about rearming and resupplying? I can't be expected to return to sea overnight."

"Admiral Dönitz has given orders to accelerate the work on your submarine and he will brief you personally on the state of your U-800 once you are back in Lorient. Are these men members of your crew, Kapitän Kretschmer?"

"Yes, they are. Why?"

"Then, they are to come back with you as well. I have a plane ready for us in Hirschberg."

Otto sighed and looked with regret at the magnificent mountainous countryside around him. The pure mountain air had done wonders for him and the group of crewmen who had accompanied him to his home area and he could have stayed here forever. However, duty called...again.

06:15 (Paris Time)

Monday, November 9, 1942

BdU Headquarters, Lorient

France

“Korvettenkapitän Kretschmer, reporting back for duty, Admiral!”

“At ease, my good Kretschmer!” Replied Karl Dönitz after returning Otto’s salute. “Please, sit down, so that I can properly brief you on what has caused your recall from leave.”

Otto took the padded chair offered by Dönitz and looked at the map of North Africa pinned on the admiral’s map board: that map had not been there the last time that he had visited this office. Not wasting any time, the admiral went to that map and, using a wooden pointer stick, designated in succession three locations along the Moroccan and Algerian coasts.

“Early in the morning of yesterday, a large Allied amphibious fleet attacked multiple points along the Moroccan and Algerian coasts and started landing troops and supplies. The reports on what followed are confused but it seems that the French Vichy forces in those areas resisted and fought, at least at the start of the invasion. However, they were not able to push back into the sea the American and British troops that had landed and some French units have already surrendered or stood down. Our job will be to attack the ships of that invasion fleet and cause as much damage as possible, in order to limit the amount of troops, equipment and supplies that the Allies can land in Morocco and Algeria. Since your U-800 is much larger than our other submarines and would have some difficulty to pass stealthily through the Strait of Gibraltar to attack the fleets off Oran and Algiers, I have decided to assign you to attack the fleet anchored off the Casablanca area. That fleet is reportedly split into sub-elements that landed troops at Safi, 220 kilometers south of Casablanca, at Fedala, twenty kilometers north of Casablanca, and at Mehdiya, 130 kilometers north of Casablanca. We estimate that invasion force off Casablanca to consist of one reinforced army corps, supported by a

strong naval task force consisting of a few escort carriers, three battleships and a few cruisers and destroyers, plus dozens of troopships, transport ships and auxiliaries. Your priority targets will be the transport ships: we want to cut off the troops already landed from their supplies and stop reinforcements from landing. By the way, our radio intercepts indicate that the fleet off Casablanca, along with the troops landed, is purely American. The force off Oran is a mixed American-British one, while the force off Algiers is British.”

“That mission is fine with me, Admiral, but what about my boat? It was undergoing a thorough maintenance check and needed to be fully rearmed and resupplied. When will it be ready for sea again?”

“Early tomorrow morning!” Replied at once Dönitz, making Otto frown. “I gave your boat top priority with my maintenance, repair and resupply teams.”

“Tomorrow morning? But, this sounds rushed as hell, Admiral! Are you sure that the job will not be bungled as a result of this haste?”

“I don’t think so, my good Otto: my best submarine maintenance engineer was put in charge of the U-800’s refit and he is presently using all the maintenance teams available in Lorient. Your boat is presently swarming with technicians and specialists. I can also give you a piece of good news that may help you feel better about this rushed departure: your U-800 is presently being rearmed with a full complement of a new type of torpedo, the T-3. The T-3 has a new combined magnetic and contact pistol for its warhead that has been thoroughly tested and is fully functional. With that new magnetic pistol, you will be able to fire a single torpedo under a ship, which will then explode under the keel and break that ship in two. With that new T-3 torpedo, you will be able to use to the maximum your legendary accuracy. By the way, you will be the first to be armed with the T-3. Yes?”

“Uh, don’t take this wrong, Admiral, but I would like that the Japanese Type 96 torpedoes that I had in my aft torpedo room be kept there and that only the forward torpedo room be reloaded with your new T-3 torpedo. The Type 96 has unequalled performances in speed, plus a massive warhead, two things that make it ideal to attack large, fast warships that could otherwise evade our slower German torpedoes. I also have one Japanese naval officer and four sailors that would be available to maintain and fire those Type 96 torpedoes.”

Dönitz thought over that for a moment before nodding his head.

“Granted! I will give orders right after this meeting to have those Japanese torpedoes kept in your aft torpedo room. As for your crew, every effort is being done to reassemble it here as quickly as possible. Thankfully, the Luftwaffe has given me full assistance by providing transport planes on demand and with top priority to get your various crewmen back to Lorient. It seems that the gift of aviation gasoline and aluminum metal that you brought back from the Falklands, along with those centimetric radar sets, has done much to improve our relations with the Luftwaffe.”

“Talking of those centimetric radars, how long before we could get warning receivers set to those new radar frequencies?”

“Well, normally such new detectors take many months to design and develop before they can become operational. However, having in our hands examples of those new radars is making the job a lot easier for our specialists. That new ‘magnetron’ thing in particular was a real wakeup call for our experts, who are now hard at work reverse-engineering the American radar sets. With luck, we will be able to equip your U-800 with a centimetric radar detector in about two to three months, while the Luftwaffe may get airborne centimetric radar sets in its aircraft in about five to six months. Unfortunately, you will have to leave for your next war patrol without such a detector.”

“That’s alright, Admiral: I never lounge around on the surface for any length of time anyway.”

“Then, I believe that we are done here. Go see my intelligence officer after this, so that he can provide you with detailed charts and maps of the Moroccan coast, along with the appropriate current and tide information. We will continue to keep in contact via one-time pad codes for this operation. Good luck, Kapitän Kretschmer!”

“Thank you, Herr Admiral!” Replied Otto, getting up from his chair and saluting before pivoting around and walking out of Dönitz’ office.

23:08 (Paris Time)

Friday, November 13, 1942

Headquarters, Western Task Force of Operation Torch

Casablanca, Morocco

Major General George S. Patton Junior had just finished writing a letter to his wife and was getting ready to go to bed when someone started knocking insistently on

the door of his room, a luxury suite of the hotel in Casablanca that he had requisitioned as his headquarters.

“YES, COME IN!”

His naval aide, a lieutenant-commander, entered at once with an expression on his face that made the old general frown.

“What is it, Commander Stockwell?”

“Sir, someone has started attacking our fleet off Casablanca. The heavy cruiser AUGUSTA and the destroyers BUCK and LUDLOW have been sunk, along with five transport and cargo ships. We think that a German submarine pack is now operating off Casablanca. More ships are being sunk as we speak.”

“WHAT?” Shouted Patton, instantly furious. The U.S.S. AUGUSTA had carried him to North Africa for this operation and had been the flagship of his naval component. Some of his staff had still been aboard the heavy cruiser tonight. “WHAT THE HELL ARE OUR DESTROYERS DOING? SITTING ON THEIR THUMBS?”

“Uh, they are doing the best they can, General, but they seem unable to locate and strike these submarines.”

A nasty thought then struck Patton's mind.

“How much of our army equipment and supplies have been landed up to now, Commander? Are we in danger of losing our sole nearby source of supplies?”

“I will need to check on that, General. I will get back to you soon with an answer.”

The Navy officer then nearly ran out of Patton's suite, leaving the general fuming with frustration. All thoughts of sleeping now gone, Patton decided to shave and put on a fresh uniform before going down to his operations center, situated in a banquet hall of the hotel.

It was in the operations center that his naval liaison officer came back to him with his promised answer.

“General, as of midnight, all the troops and nearly all the army vehicles have been landed, but only 24 percent of the army supplies have been unloaded from the ships.”

“Only a quarter of my supplies are ashore, Commander?” Replied Patton, distinctly unhappy with that information. “Where is Rear-admiral Hewitt? I will need to speak with him.”

From anxious, the expression of his naval aide turned somber.

“Rear-admiral Hewitt went down with the AUGUSTA, General. Furthermore, I am pained to have to tell you that we suffered more casualties at sea in the last two hours: the escort carrier SANGAMON was torpedoed and sunk, along with the destroyer EDISON and seven more cargo ships. The last cargo ship to be hit was at dockside when it was torpedoed. I am afraid that we probably won't have more than forty percent of our army supplies ashore by daybreak, General: the rest is already at the bottom of the sea.”

Patton had to sit down, struck hard by these news. By daybreak, he learned that a further ten cargo ships, along with the escort carrier SANTEE and the light cruiser BROOKLYN, had been sunk. Then, the submarines that had attacked his force seemed to vanish without a trace, leaving his American expeditionary force literally high and dry with only thirty percent of its planned supplies, until more supplies could be shipped from across the Atlantic.

19:24 (Paris Time)

Saturday, November 14, 1942

Control Room of the U-800

On submerged approach to the Strait of Gibraltar

“HELM, DIVE TO DEPTH OF 280 METERS! SPEED: SIX KNOTS! TO ALL THE CREW: WE NOW ARE ON SILENT RUN MODE.”

Lieutenant-commander Takeshi Nagaoka, who was standing beside the navigation plot table with Leutnant Hermann Spielberger, gave a curious look to Otto when the latter approached the plot table.

“I thought that the Strait of Gibraltar had the reputation of being a very dangerous point of passage for German submarines, what with all the British ships, patrol aircraft and minefields protecting the strait.”

“That is true...for normal U-Bootes, but the U-800 is not a normal U-Boote. We can dive much deeper than any Type VII or Type IX submarine and can stay submerged much longer while going much faster. We will stay at a depth of 280 meters until we pass the Camarinal Sill, the shallowest point of the strait at 300 meters. Then, we will dive even further, to a cruising depth of 350 meters, our operational limit. There, well under the thermal cline layer and way beyond the fuse settings of Allied depth charges,

we will be both completely safe and nearly undetectable. The bottom floor will in fact get deeper as we go eastward, to attain 900 meters by the time we enter the Mediterranean proper. With all the transport ships of the American force off Morocco that were still carrying cargo now having been sunk, there was no sense for us to waste more time there. We will find plenty more targets off Oran and Algiers, Commander.”

“I don’t doubt that one minute, Herr Kapitän.” Said Nagaoka, smiling.

Otto’s predictions came true, the U-800 negotiating the Strait of Gibraltar in less than nine hours while apparently encountering no obstacles on its way. Otto stayed deep and silent for another four hours, time to clear the heavily patrolled zone around the mouth of the Mediterranean, then accelerated to ten knots while still on batteries. The U-800 finally went back up to deploy its schnorchel and recharge its batteries after nightfall on November 15, a technical feat that Nagaoka had not believed possible. By then, they were less than 130 nautical miles from their next target: the coastal waters off Oran, in Algeria.

01:36 (Paris Time)

Monday, November 16, 1942

U-800, forty nautical miles northwest of Oran

“I think that we have a bunch of really big fish approaching us, Herr Kapitän. We are talking about at least five big, fast warships, plus about seven to ten smaller warships, all coming generally at us at a speed of about fifteen knots. From the way they have been doing long loop circuits off the Algerian coast, my bet would be that these ships are a carrier task group.”

“I agree, Herr Grote.” Said Otto Kretschmer while bent over the shoulders of his senior hydrophone and sonar operator. “They are too far from the coast to be a gun fire support group and they certainly are not some transport group. The radio reports we got during the last day said that the Allies are now well established on the ground in Algeria, but have minimal ground-based air support. Let’s take an ambush position to await these ships. How long before they are on us?”

“I would say less than one hour, Herr Kapitän.”

“Good! We will be ready for them. Advise me the moment that they change course or speed.”

“Will do, Herr Kapitän!”

Otto then left the claustrophobic sonar section and returned into the control room, where he went to the navigation plot table and made a few quick calculations. With that done, he grabbed the microphone of the nearest intercom set and activated it.

“Attention all hands! This is the Captain speaking! We have a flotilla of major warships, possibly an aircraft carrier group, approaching us. Join your battle stations now...quietly!”

Otto's well drilled and experienced crew went into action at once, donning their special felt overshoes before walking quickly to their various battle stations. Lieutenant-commander Nagaoka, according to a now well-established drill, went aft to join the four Japanese torpedo specialists in the aft torpedo room, where all the remaining Type 96 and Type 92 torpedoes were stored. There, he was going to be able to translate into Japanese to his sailors any orders from Otto, as he had done off Casablanca, where the Japanese torpedo men had more than proved their effectiveness, as well as their eagerness. Staying under the thermal layer and letting his towed passive hydrophone array float above it while slowly cruising at three knots, Otto made sure that no surface ship could detect him before he went into action.

With his preys within a few nautical miles and on a near collision course with him, Otto slowly rose from the depths while having his helmsman turn on a course perpendicular to that of the incoming enemy ships. The unique sensors arrangement of his boat was going to allow him to triangulate in purely passive hydrophone mode the position and distance of the incoming enemy ships, using the long baseline between his towed hydrophone array, trailing 300 meters behind his propeller, and his 'Gross Balkon' bow passive hydrophone array, situated a full hundred meters ahead of his propeller. Within four minutes, Ulrich von Wittgenstein, manning the tactical plot table near the fire control calculator machine, was able to give Otto a full report on the incoming flotilla.

“We have the enemy plotted down, Herr Kapitän. The lead enemy ship is now 4,000 meters from us and coming up at a speed of fourteen knots. The enemy is sailing in three parallel columns, with the heavy units in the center column. The lead center unit is a probable battleship, followed by two probable aircraft carriers and a cruiser. The wing columns are formed of six probable destroyers each, with a distance of about 2,000 meters between each column.”

"Did you say 'two aircraft carriers'?" Said Otto, not believing his luck. Ulrich smiled at his reaction.

"You heard right, Herr Kapitän. Where do you want us for the first attack?"

"Let's slide quietly in a waiting position between the center column and the wing column to its starboard. We will keep our bow pointed outward and will use time-on-target tactical shooting, with our bow tubes engaging two destroyers with one G7e T-3 each and with our stern tubes firing two Type 96 torpedoes at each aircraft carrier. We will then turn around and fire three G7e T-3s at the battleship and two at the cruiser. Once our tubes are empty, we will crash dive to a depth of 300 meters and reload our tubes out of reach of the enemy. But first, let's reel in our towed array before we go into battle."

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!"

Watching and listening as his men acted on his orders, Otto went briefly to the tactical plot table and took a glimpse of the symbols now marked with colored grease pencils on the illuminated transparent glass surface, estimating mentally the times each of his moves would take while glancing at his watch. Going next to his attack periscope, he partly raised it out and gave more orders.

"HELM, GO TO PERISCOPE DEPTH AND REDUCE SPEED TO TWO KNOTS! FIRE CONTROL TEAM, BE READY TO ENTER FIRE DATA! BOW AND STERN TORPEDO ROOMS, FLOOD ALL TUBES AND BE READY TO FIRE. COUNTER-MEASURES, BE READY ON MY COMMAND TO RELEASE TWO BOLD CANISTERS." Taking frequent, quick glimpses at his watch, Otto waited for his hydrophone senior operator's final piece of information, given in a bit of a tense voice.

"The lead ships of the enemy columns are now passing us, Herr Kapitän. The second ships in the columns will pass us in about forty seconds.

"FIRE CONTROL, STAND BY!"

Twenty seconds later, Otto raised the head of his attack periscope above the surface of the water for the first time and immediately pointed it at the third destroyer of the starboard column, visible in the moonlight.

"FIRST TARGET, RELATIVE HEADING 140 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!"

"FIRST TARGET, SECOND HEADING 131 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!... FIRE SOLUTION COMPUTED!"

"MATCH BEARINGS AND SHOOT TUBE ONE!"

"TUBE ONE FIRED!"

"SECOND TARGET, RELATIVE HEADING 025 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!"

"SECOND TARGET, SECOND HEADING 016 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!... FIRE SOLUTION COMPUTED!"

"MATCH BEARINGS AND SHOOT TUBE TWO!"

"TUBE TWO FIRED!"

As his first two torpedoes, German G7e T-3 set to pass under their targets and explode under their keels, went on their way at thirty knots, Otto performed a half turn to point his attack periscope aft. What he saw made his heart jump from excitement.

"THIRD TARGET: ILLUSTRIOUS-CLASS BRITISH AIRCRAFT CARRIER IN SIGHT, RELATIVE HEADING 160 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!"

"THIRD TARGET, SECOND HEADING 165 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!... FIRE SOLUTION COMPUTED!"

"MATCH BEARINGS AND SHOOT TUBES NINE AND TEN!"

"TUBES NINE AND TEN FIRED!"

Otto, having just fired at the second aircraft carrier in line, then pointed at the first carrier, nearer to him, as two speedy Type 96 rushed out at fifty knots.

"FOURTH TARGET: ANOTHER ILLUSTRIOUS-CLASS CARRIER, RELATIVE HEADING 183 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!"

"FOURTH TARGET, SECOND HEADING 195 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!... FIRE SOLUTION COMPUTED!"

"MATCH BEARINGS AND SHOOT TUBES ELEVEN AND TWELVE!"

"TUBES ELEVEN AND TWELVE FIRED!"

"RELOAD ALL EMPTY TUBES! HELM, TIGHT TURN TO PORT! COME TO HEADING 270!"

"TURNING TO HEADING 270, AYE!"

"IMPACT OF FIRST TORPEDO IN TEN SECONDS!" Announced Wolfgang Leeb, who was assisting Ulrich von Wittgenstein at the tactical plot table. The U-800 was still turning nearly on the spot, with Otto already pointing his periscope at the lead ship of the central column, when a muffled underwater explosion was heard through the steel hull. The crewmembers didn't explode in happy shouts then, realizing that they

were still in the thick of it and that their captain needed to concentrate on his next moves.

"FIFTH TARGET: REPULSE-CLASS BRITISH BATTLECRUISER! RELATIVE HEADING 005 DEGREES! MARK!"

"MARKED!"

A series of five separate underwater explosions was heard as Otto announced his second relative heading on the battlecruiser, then ordered the firing of three of the bow tubes. Nearly hyperventilating from the intense concentration and tension of his job, Otto switched his attention to the last ship of the central column, a DIDO-Class anti-aircraft cruiser, and fired two more torpedoes, then lowered his periscope.

"HELM, EMERGENCY DIVE TO 300 METERS! HEADING, 085 DEGREES! RELEASE BOLD CANISTERS IN TWENTY SECONDS!"

More underwater explosions were heard as the U-800 dove down like a plane while turning tightly, forcing its crewmembers to hold tight to hull fixtures in order not to lose their balance. Two short bursts of compressed air announced the ejection of the two 'Bold' canisters, which then started producing clouds of hydrogen bubbles on which active sonar pings would reflect, giving false echoes and hiding the true position of the submarine to the sonar operators of the now frantic escort destroyers.

Otto's planned move proved salutary, as the U-800 leveled off at a depth of 310 meters just as dozens of underwater explosions well above it could be heard, marking the detonations of salvos of depth charges. Those depth charges however caused no more than some noise, the U-800 being way too deep to be affected by them. Otto used a few seconds then to happily shake hands with his crewmen in the control room.

"Well done, men! However, that job is not finished yet. We still have to assess the damage we caused and finish off our wounded targets. How long before all tubes are reloaded, Ulrich?"

"About 25 minutes, Herr Kapitän."

"Good! In the meantime, let's turn around to follow that wounded flotilla and see what the enemy will do next, apart from wasting dozens of depth charges."

On the surface, the commander of the destroyer escort was nearly pulling his hair out as his destroyers crisscrossed the dark ocean while releasing salvo after salvo of depth charges, all without any apparent effect except for killing thousands of fish. The

carriers ILLUSTRIOUS and INDOMITABLE were already in dire shape, the torpedoes that had hit them having proven to be very powerful ones. The battlecruiser RENOWN was listing heavily, its belly slit wide open by three under the keel explosions, while the cruiser ARGONAUT had broken in two pieces and was sinking. The destroyer commander had also lost two destroyers, each broken in half by single torpedo hits that had exploded under their keels. The screen commander had never seen such deadly torpedoes, nor such incredibly accurate shooting by a submarine.

"SIGNAL TO ALL DESTROYERS: STOP DROPPING DEPTH CHARGES, SLOW DOWN TO FIVE KNOTS AND DO PROPER RADAR AND ASDIC SWEEPS!"

A shout from a lookout then made his head snap around towards the stricken RENOWN.

"SIR, THE RENOWN: IT IS CAPSIZING!"

The screen commander felt a hard lump in his throat as he watched the old 36,000 ton battlecruiser turn over and then sink in the dark, huge air bubbles and white foam escaping from its breached hull: He had served before on the RENOWN and knew many of the 1,200 officers and men who were presently dying right under his eyes. He had to shake himself up to come out of his gloomy contemplation. Looking around at the general situation of the stricken flotilla, he became angry when he saw that one of his destroyers had not obeyed his orders and was still dropping depth charges in the water.

"WHAT THE HELL DOES JARVIS THINKS THAT HE IS DOING? SIGNAL THE NERISSA TO IMMEDIATELY STOP DROPPING DEPTH CHARGES!"

"AYE, SIR!"

The next half hour brought no good news to the screen commander, as repeated ASDIC sweeps found no trace of any submarine, as if their attacker or attackers had simply vanished. In that same half hour, the carrier ILLUSTRIOUS also capsized and sank, followed one hour later by the INDOMITABLE despite the heroic efforts of its damage control teams. In both cases, the two aircraft carriers owed their final fate to the fact that the torpedo hits had cut all power to the pumps and fire hoses, making it impossible to fight the massive flooding and fires. The screen commander had just sent off a radio message to the British Mediterranean Fleet Headquarters in Alexandria after ordering four of his destroyers to start picking up the survivors floating on the surface of the ocean, when a lookout shouted again.

"SIR, THE NEPAL SEEMS TO HAVE DETECTED SOMETHING: IT IS ACCELERATING AND TURNING TO THE EAST."

Bringing his binoculars up to his eyes, the screen commander watched the H.M.S. NEPAL as it charged alone towards the rear of the formation. That charge however abruptly ended when a powerful underwater explosion right under the keel of the destroyer raised the warship out of the water, where it dropped back in two pieces.

“BLOODY HELL! HOW CAN TORPEDOES CONSISTENTLY EXPLODE RIGHT UNDER OUR KEELS? THESE MUST BE NEW GERMAN TORPEDOES.”

To his renewed rage, that was the last thing he saw that day that proved that a submarine had been present in this piece of ocean. Others had that dubious privilege, as a total of sixteen cargo ships, all of them still full of equipment and supplies, were sunk in or near Oran Harbor at daybreak, along with the British light cruisers HMS ARETHUSA and HMS AURORA. Then followed two days of tense calm for the surviving Allied ships of Operation Torch, as they waited for the proverbial second shoe to drop and as the commanders of the landed ground forces were pondering the perilously low state of their supplies reserves. However, no more torpedoes hit them again.

The relief of not experiencing more submarine attacks was cut short when the British battleship HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH hit a sea mine and was seriously damaged as she was entering the harbor at Alexandria, Egypt, on November 19. A tugboat and a minesweeper also fell victim to the extensive minefield that ended up closing off Alexandria Harbor for more than five days, throwing a further wrench into the Allies' already disturbed war schedule. All that bedlam actually profited the Italian Navy and Marshal Rommel's Africa Corps, as a number of Italian supply convoys were able to go through unmolested and land their precious cargo in Benghazi, thanks to the frightful naval losses suffered by the Allies in the Mediterranean at the hands of the U-800.

08:06 (Paris Time)

Thursday, November 26, 1942

Submarine pen, Keroman I submarine bunker complex

Lorient, France

Admiral Karl Dönitz was in a very good mood as he crossed the gangway between the pen's quay and the top deck of the U-800: The Allied invasion of North Africa had utterly fizzled by now, with the landed Allied troops immobilized by lack of

supplies and with the heavy losses in transport and cargo ships rendering their resupplying and further sea travel problematic, all that thanks to the good works of the U-800 and its master. His handshake with Otto Kretschmer was both warm and firm.

“Congratulations! You again performed miracles, my dear Kretschmer.”

“You can thank both my crew and the new T-3 torpedo, Herr Admiral.” Replied Otto proudly. “The T-3 is truly fantastic! All the ones I launched detonated as expected, right under the keel of my targets. Cargo ships and destroyers needed only one hit to break in two and sink, while two T-3s would sink a light cruiser and put in deep trouble even a battleship. I am afraid that all those other U-Boote captains that are hoping to take my place one day as the ‘Tonnage King’ are going to wait a long time indeed.”

“Well, how about you starting to infuse some of your science to our future skippers, Fregattenkapitän Kretschmer? I am in mind of making you the Chief Instructor at our U-Boote School.”

Otto noticeably straightened up on hearing that. To be promoted to fregattenkapitän, a rank equivalent to that of ‘commander’ in the British and American navies, certainly pleased him, but any idea of leaving the U-800 troubled him.

“Admiral, please don’t think that I am ungrateful, but I want to stay in command of the U-800. There is so much still to be done, while the window of opportunity for victory is getting smaller every month, thanks to the gigantic industrial and manpower output of the United States on the Allies’ side. I personally think that two or three well-planned war patrols by the U-800 in the Atlantic and along the American East Coast could starve Great Britain into asking for an armistice, while growing naval losses could convince the Americans to sue for peace.”

While somewhat disappointed, Dönitz had to say that Kretschmer’s opinion was essentially correct. The latest intelligence reports were mentioning growing bickering between American and British leaders, bickering that had intensified after the North Africa invasion fiasco, a scheme that had been pushed on the Americans by Prime Minister Churchill at the expense of the support given to the American forces now fighting for survival in the Pacific. Kretschmer then added on to his response.

“Admiral, what we need is more U-Bootes like the U-800, and quickly! If we had ten submarines like it right now, we would be able to sweep the British and American navies from the Atlantic and completely cut the supply lines between the United States and Great Britain. If you want me to instruct our young skippers, then I have free bunks for up to eight more junior officers aboard the U-800. I would also propose that

Kapitänleutnant von Wittgenstein, my First Watch Officer, is more than ready for his own command.”

Dönitz immediately liked the idea of having a few prospective submarine skippers sail under Kretschmer aboard the U-800: it would then become a sort of school at sea, while the U-800 would be able to continue hitting hard the Allies under the able command of Kretschmer.

“Your idea certainly has a lot of merit to it, Kretschmer. As for the good von Wittgenstein, your efficiency reports on him certainly would justify giving him a command of his own. But would he accept to leave the palatial surroundings of the U-800 and exchange them for the cramped and humid quarters of a Type IX submarine?”

Both men laughed briefly at Dönitz’ joke, then became most serious again.

“Admiral, I would feel most good to have a Type IX commanded by Kapitänleutnant von Wittgenstein nearby, ready to back me up and use the opportunities created by the U-800. He knows me well, knows my tactics and handles a submarine like a pro. If that Type IX submarine would be equipped with a schnorchel system as efficient as that in the U-800, then that much the better. In fact, equipping all our submarines with similar schnorchel systems would in my opinion greatly increase their combat efficiency and survivability.”

“That has already been thought about, Kretschmer. In view of the long time needed to design a brand new class of attack submarine, I directed that a smaller sized replica of your own schnorchel system be designed as a retrofit system for our existing submarines. That design is now completed and a prototype of it is presently being tested in the Baltic Sea on one of our newer Type IX submarines. Up to now it is performing as expected and has worked flawlessly. Starting next month, all of our new construction submarines will include that schnorchel system, plus the same anti-radar paint used on your own masts heads.”

Otto grinned then, truly happy.

“That is wonderful news, Admiral. Do you think that von Wittgenstein could get command of such an improved Type IX?”

“That can be arranged easily enough, my good Kretschmer. How about if we move to your posh officers’ wardroom, so we can discuss the future operations of your U-800 in private?”

“I would be most happy to, Admiral. We still have some fine Cuban rum and cigars in store in the wardroom...”

09:11 (Washington Time)

Friday, November 27, 1942

Cabinet conference room, White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

“We should have never gone for that North Africa landings scheme, Mister President. With only half of the naval resources and military supplies wasted on Operation Torch, we could have restored our positions in the South Pacific and stabilized the situation there. In fact, we should stop simply pandering to every strategic whim of Prime Minister Churchill and remind him that we are not a damn British colony anymore!”

The fiery words and tone used by Admiral King stung Roosevelt, but he didn't scold him for that, as King's opinion was quickly gaining support around Washington and the rest of the country. The Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, who normally was in tune with Roosevelt despite being a member of the opposition Republican Party, nodded his head at King's words.

“I would tend to agree with Admiral King on that, Mister President. We can't afford anymore to give priority in everything to the British at the expense of our own men in the Pacific.”

“But, if we stop our support of the British, they won't be able to hold on against Germany.”

King then took on him to counter Roosevelt's argument.

“They certainly would do much better if they stopped wasting and dispersing their resources to preserve their precious empire, Mister President! Prime Minister Churchill should also stop thinking of himself as a great strategist and stop interfering with war planning with his disjointed schemes. God knows that he already has committed enough strategic blunders to deserve of being fired! Think about the Norway and Greek Campaigns! Think about how he stabbed the French in the back at Mers-el-Kebir in 1940, or about how he was bragging about Singapore being an impregnable fortress! Talking of the French, the British just managed to piss them off again, just as we needed them most to support us in North Africa.”

“What do you mean, Admiral King? What are you alluding to?”

"What I am alluding to, Mister President, is the fact that the British units landed around Algiers as part of the Eastern Task Force of Operation Torch basically ignored the orders and directives of Major General Ryder, our man initially in charge of the force, and forcibly seized all the supplies and fuel they could find at the local French bases, and that over the protestations of the French commanders in Algiers."

General Marshall, the chief of staff of the U.S. Army, then added his two-cent to the discussion.

"About that incident, Mister President, I received a message from Major General Ryder at the time and then inquired about it with General Eisenhower, in Gibraltar. I then learned from him that the British units acted that way with the direct consent and knowledge of the British High Command, which had deemed that a necessary move."

"And what did your precious protégé, General Eisenhower, do about that, General Marshall?" Fired off King, attracting an irritated look from the powerful Marshall.

"Basically, he told me that he let that go, in the name of allied cooperation."

"Did you remind him that he is an American officer, and not a British one? Our own troops could suffer the consequences of any bad blood with the French."

Marshall didn't bark back at that because King was unfortunately right. Marshall himself had not been happy about Eisenhower's weak stance and had given him a few harsh words then.

"Yes, I lambasted him about that, then contacted Field Marshal Brooke. I was then most disappointed to hear Brooke justify the seizure by force of the French supplies."

"Why am I not surprised by that?" Said King in a sarcastic tone. "For the British, only themselves and their empire counts. Mister President, I am frankly tired of this and believe strongly that our resources should be used primarily to support and reinforce our men fighting and dying in the Pacific, not to support Prime Minister Churchill's ill-advised strategic schemes."

Instead of replying to King, Roosevelt looked at Marshall.

"And what were the actual consequences of that British move in Algeria, General?"

"They were actually more severe than a superficial look would show, as they were both military and political. The French high command in Algiers has ordered all the French troops in North Africa to defend their barracks and supply depots, with force of arm if need be, and to stay static. All discussions about French Army units joining our

eventual advance into Tunisia have also been cut by the French. Major General Ryder did his best to repair the broken pots, but British General Anderson has now taken effective command of the British troops in Algeria and is basically ignoring Ryder. All in all, our planned advance eastward into Tunisia has yet to materialize, while the Germans and Italians have started to send reinforcements to Tunisia from across the Mediterranean.”

“Excuse me, but could we finally talk about something else than North Africa?” Said King, becoming seriously pissed. “We wasted enough men and resources on that worthless scheme, so let’s not waste more words here about it. What about the Pacific and Australia? We still have thousands of men trapped and slowly starving on Ndeni, while Australia is now effectively surrounded by Japanese bases. Should I remind you all here that the American public is caring a lot more about our men abandoned and trapped in the South Pacific than about some French North African colonies?”

Roosevelt stiffened, getting angry at all that opposition to a strategic move he had agreed to with Prime Minister Churchill.

“I do care about our men in the South Pacific, Admiral King, but the landings in North Africa were only the first step before chasing the Germans and Italians from Libya and then landing in Sicily and Italy.”

“That future outcome is now less than obvious, Mister President.” Said politely but firmly General Marshall. “In view of the present situation of our troops in North Africa and with their tight supplies reserves, I don’t see them able to go on the offensive before we could send them more supplies and ships. If you add the French animosity the British just caused, then I predict that the whole thing could easily turn into a quagmire. I was never fond of that British insistence on invading Europe through its so-called ‘soft underbelly’ and the present situation tends to confirm my opinion about it. Our nation has suffered during the last year a number of painful blows and also severe losses at sea. We need to concentrate our remaining forces until our industries can deliver more ships and until we can finish training all our new divisions. Right now, Operation Torch has been nothing but a dilution of our war effort, done mostly to accommodate the demands of the British. I would have much preferred, as you know already, to have started concentrating our troops in Great Britain instead, in anticipation of a direct landing in France next year.”

Admiral Leahy, the President’s chief of staff and leading military advisor, then added his opinion to the discussion.

"Mister President, I would tend to concur with both Admiral King and General Marshall. I would add that our invasion of Morocco and Algeria has put the Vichy government of Marshal Pétain in a very difficult situation with the Germans, who are now showing signs of wanting to invade and grab the parts of France they haven't occupied yet. In a way, that British blunder of taking by force French depots, by hardening the opposition of the local French forces, has temporarily saved Vichy France from such a German invasion, but Hitler could decide at any moment now that he needs to take the South of France in order to prevent further Allied landings in the Mediterranean."

"But, we have a strategic understanding with Prime Minister Churchill concerning our war plans in the Mediterranean and Europe." Protested Roosevelt. "We can't just renege on our word and go back on that understanding!"

Henry Stimson, a man who had been loyal to Roosevelt in this war, replied to him while staring hard at him.

"Mister President, if I may. What I am going to say now is as a Republic Party member who has the best interests of the United States at heart. When you agreed with Prime Minister Churchill to provide American troopships and escort warships to carry British troops to India last November, in flagrant violation of the America Neutrality Act, you barely avoided impeachment by the Congress, thanks only to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which took everybody's attention somewhere else. Now, congressmen and senators alike are again grumbling, this time about the way our men have been sacrificed in the South Pacific while we keep pouring most of our resources in support of Great Britain. The American public opinion is also souring on this, as we can gather from the avalanche of angry and frustrated calls and letters congressmen and senators have been receiving lately. I believe that you need to show to the American public that the demands of Prime Minister Churchill do not have priority over the needs of our own servicemen and of our nation."

Roosevelt was left speechless for a moment as he measured the extent of the opposition to his war policies he was presently facing in this room. Stimson then delivered what amounted to an ultimatum.

"If you persist in accommodating the demands of the British at the expense of our servicemen in the Pacific, Mister President, I will then have no choice but to resign my present position as your Secretary of War."

"But, what about our troops that we landed in North Africa?"

“Let’s transfer them to the Pacific, Mister President!” Replied at once Admiral King, slamming his hand on the conference table. “We presently have the equivalent of nearly five army divisions sitting in Morocco and Algeria, doing nothing but wait for more supplies. I say that we should shift those units to Australia and then concentrate solely on rebuilding our strength there. Right now, because of this ‘Germany first’ policy, our territory of Hawaii is finding itself isolated and threatened by Japanese forces in the Pacific, while our valiant Marines are starving on Ndeni. Even Australia is at serious risk! Let’s switch to a ‘Japan first’ policy and concentrate most of our war effort into defeating Japan. The threat of a German invasion of Great Britain is long past now anyway and the British only need supplies from us to keep resisting, that is if Churchill would stop wasting his resources as well as ours just to preserve his precious British Empire.”

“What about my bomber force in Great Britain?” Asked Lieutenant General Henry ‘Hap’ Arnold, the commander of the Army Air Forces. King replied to him at once.

“What about them? Our heavy losses in shipping between our eastern ports and Great Britain has drastically cut the amount of fuel, ammunition and spares that we could send them. Right now, my Atlantic Fleet has suffered so many losses that it has less than half the number of destroyers it actually needs to properly escort the convoys we send to Great Britain. The fact that the Germans changed their codes this Summer further hurt our efforts to prevent German submarines from hitting those convoys. This is all to say that you can’t expect a bigger flow of fuel and bombs to get to your heavy bombers, Hap. We might as well recall them from Great Britain and base them in Australia, where they would be able to really hurt the enemy.”

Seeing that nearly all of his military top leaders, along with his own secretary of war, were solidly against him, Roosevelt swallowed with difficulty his personal pride and looked around the big conference table.

“Alright, gentlemen, what do you counsel that we do then?”

To his surprise, it was Henry Stimson who spoke first.

“First off and most importantly, Mister President, we need to officially switch the priorities of our war effort from Europe to the Pacific. An American territory, Hawaii, is at real risk of attack and invasion by the Japanese, while any possibility of a German invasion of Great Britain is quite remote. Great Britain can manage to defend itself for the next year or two, time for us to build significantly our war machine and get properly ready. As for any hypothetical German invasion of the United States, the chances of

that happening are about zero. I would also say that you need to tell Prime Minister Churchill about that change of war priority, rather than simply discuss it with him. If you don't, then you risk losing the support of both the Congress and the American public, Mister President."

As Roosevelt swallowed that, King used that chance to give his own recommendations.

"Mister President, our navy is in serious need of rebuilding its strength, something that will take over a year. Our new fleet aircraft carriers will not start to enter service before next January, and then at a rate of only one per two to three months. We will need them in the Pacific and I intend to keep only destroyers and light cruisers in the Atlantic, on convoy escort and coastal defense duties. Everything else should go to reinforce our Pacific Fleet. Furthermore, we should take as a priority the mission of saving our men trapped in the South Pacific. We owe nothing less than that to them."

General Marshall was next.

"I concur with Admiral King, Mister President. In furtherance to the goal of assisting our men in the Pacific, I am of the opinion of reloading on ships our troops presently located in North Africa and to send them to the Pacific. I would allocate two of the five divisions thus made available to the defense of Hawaii, while the three other divisions would go to Australia. General Arnold, how many of your heavy bombers presently in Great Britain would you be ready to switch to Australia?"

Henry Arnold wiggled in his chair at that question: he, for a long time, had the dream of being able to prove his pet theory about the power of heavy bombers to win a war by themselves, something he had hoped to show in Europe. However, he was now in the distinct minority here.

"I can switch six of my heavy bomber groups to the Pacific, while leaving most of their escort fighters in Great Britain, where they would help the R.A.F. defend England from German air attacks, General Marshall."

"We will need lots of fighter aircraft to defend Australia against Japanese air attacks, Hap." Cut in King, evidently not satisfied. Arnold nodded after a short hesitation.

"Alright! I will send to the Pacific all my P-38 long range fighter units presently in Great Britain or slated to be sent to England. The P-38, as a twin-engine fighter, is eminently suited to the vast expanses of the Pacific."

Both King and Marshall nodded their heads at that, satisfied. Roosevelt however had one objection left.

“What about the German submarines that are devastating our coastal shipping lanes and attacking our convoys to Great Britain? We need to be strong enough in the Atlantic to keep them in check or at least limit our losses.”

The men around the table were silent at first, not knowing what to reply to that. The one who finally spoke up was one who had stayed silent up to now and who was not expected to say much anyway: Vice-President Henry A. Wallace, who held the powerful positions of Chairman of the Board of Economic Warfare and of the Supplies Priorities and Allocation Board.

“I hate to say this, gentlemen, but what if we made a deal with the Devil? What if we could arrange an armistice with the Germans, ideally with Great Britain included into that deal? That would allow us to concentrate our resources to fight the Japanese during the next year or two, apart from saving thousands of our sailors from being lost at sea.”

The men around the table immediately stared hard at him with either indignation or disbelief in their eyes. That is except one: Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

“You must know that Prime Minister Churchill will never agree to such an armistice, Henry.”

“Churchill will never agree to anything but his own ideas and opinions anyway!” Replied Wallace testily. “I agree with the notion that we must switch our war effort to the Pacific. However, if we continue to suffer the full wrath of German submarine attacks along our East Coast, attacks that we presently are not able to stop, then we will continue to lose dozens of ships and tens of thousands of tons of vital war supplies every month, with Great Britain ending with receiving only a fraction of what we are trying to send it. To stop those submarine attacks would presently require us to concentrate even more of what is left of our navy into the Atlantic, rendering a Pacific campaign impossible. As for Churchill’s opposition, he may soon be forced to reconsider his options when Great Britain will be close to starvation thanks to the German submarine campaign in the Atlantic.”

“I am sorry, Henry, but I will never make a pact with Hitler.” Then said firmly Roosevelt. “We will have to find military ways to counter those German submarines along our coasts, while sending more forces to the Pacific. Maybe some of our heavy bombers from England could be used to patrol our East Coast, to detect and chase away those pesky German submarines.”

Most of the participants to the meeting nodded in agreement at that, with Wallace's proposal for an armistice then quickly dismissed...at least for the time being.

CHAPTER 23 – TEAMWORK

14:07 (Berlin Time)

Monday, December 14, 1942

Kiel submarine base, German Baltic Coast

“Here is your new child, Kapitänleutnant von Wittgenstein: the U-801, a heavily modified and lengthened variant of our TYPE IXD2 submarine, which is itself a lengthened variant of our standard TYPE IXC/40. You did serve before on a TYPE IX submarine before I believe, correct?”

Ulrich von Wittgenstein, standing with Admiral Dönitz and Otto Kretschmer on one of the quays of the submarine base in Kiel, looked gleefully at his new command, eyeing every difference he saw between it and a standard TYPE IXC.

“That’s correct, Herr Admiral: I served as a junior watch officer on a TYPE IX boat before being posted to the U-800. It looks splendid! I see that the hull and conning tower lines have been extensively cleaned up and smoothed in terms of hydrodynamics. The conning tower is also taller and longer and its open bridge is covered and has large windows, something that should make outside watches in heavy seas much less dangerous.”

“Those are only the most visible differences between your U-801 and other TYPE IX boats, Kapitän von Wittgenstein. I personally selected the modifications to be made to the TYPE IXD2 that transformed it into a TYPE IXD3, the class designation of your U-801, and made sure that all the lessons learned from the sea patrols and innovative design features of the U-800 be incorporated into the U-801 as much as possible, while keeping the reconstruction process as short as possible. As a result, the TYPE IXD3 will now supersede all other variants of the TYPE IX boat on the construction slips and will be our new standard long range attack submarine, that is until the new TYPE XXI class can finally start being produced. Your U-801 is 98 meter-long, a full 21 meters longer than a TYPE IXC and displaces nearly 800 tons more. Like the D2 variant, it has a very long range on the surface, being able to cover over 23,000 nautical miles at 12 knots when using its two small cruise diesel engines, and can attain a top speed, again on the surface, of nineteen knots on its main diesel engines. Those diesels are in turn connected to a telescopic schnorchel with two-stage air intake system similar to that of the U-800. Another main modification was to the electric propulsion

system: it has electric motors for submerged propulsion that are twice as powerful as the original motors of the D2, and the extra length and space that was previously reserved for cargo or sea mines on the D2 has been used instead to more than double the number of battery cells and also to improve habitability, which was already good in the D2 compared to other TYPE IXs or to TYPE VIIs. As a result of all this, you will be able to navigate extensively while under the surface by using your schnorchel, like the U-800, and will be able to attain submerged speeds on battery of up to twelve knots. You will be able also to cover 240 nautical miles at four knots on batteries. Your U-801 will still not equal the underwater performances of the U-800, by far, but it will be much better in that respect than any of our other submarines, or that of any Allied submarine. To further improve your boat, it was fitted with a paired radar antenna and radar warning receiver antenna mounted atop the schnorchel head, like on the U-800. About your radar and that of Kapitän Kretschmer, I did you two a special favor and took two of the captured centimetric radar units captured in the Falklands, which my engineers then adapted to your radar masts. A new centimetric radar detector system developed by Telefunken thanks to those captured American radars will be installed next week, before you both leave on a joint war patrol.”

Ulrich grinned as he listened on to Dönitz, imagining what he could do with such a boat.

“What about deck guns or anti-aircraft guns? I don’t see any right now? Are they still to be installed, Herr Admiral?”

“Oh, they are already in place.” Replied Dönitz, smiling with malice. “They are just presently out of sight. When the time came to redesign the conning tower, in order to cut the underwater drag and improve submerged speed and endurance, I told my engineers to use that opportunity to put the deck gun and anti-aircraft mounts within the longer, taller conning tower. The standard 10.5 centimeter deck gun is actually lodged inside the forward section of the new conning tower, with its long, ‘U’ shaped firing embrasure being covered by a hydraulically actuated hydrodynamic cover. As for the anti-aircraft mounts, one quad 20mm Flakvierling mount is inside the upper aft section of the conning tower, covered by a sliding canopy, while one twin 20mm mount is similarly covered inside the mid section of the conning tower. The usual armored tower found on other TYPE IX boats has been enlarged and also heightened to a two-level tower, while a covered, free flooding bridge above the deck gun section will make navigation and watch on the surface much less dangerous and uncomfortable during heavy and cold seas. The last major modification was the incorporation of a variant of the torpedo

carrousel found on the U-800. While you still have a total of only six torpedo tubes, you will be carrying a total of 32 torpedoes, enough to decimate a whole convoy...if you shoot straight.”

Otto Kretschmer laughed at that last sentence and patted Ulrich’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Herr Admiral: I taught him everything I knew about torpedo firing. He will not waste any torpedo, I can assure you, especially if he uses the new T-3 model. With him at the commands of such a fine boat as the U-801 to back up my U-800, we should make the British wish that the war would be over by now.”

Dönitz nodded soberly at that, his face becoming most serious.

“And that is why I am giving Kapitän von Wittgenstein only two weeks to train with his new crew before departing on the first war patrol of the U-801, in the company of your U-800. The industrial might of the United States is starting to seriously affect the balance of this war and we need to convince the British to give up the fight, possibly by signing an armistice, as quickly as possible. Your job, for the both of you, will be to stand across the main convoy routes near Newfoundland and Halifax and to cut the flow of American supplies going to Great Britain. We need to starve the British into submission, and this before the American juggernaut can smother us under its armament output. Concentrate especially on tanker ships: the British war effort is highly dependent on the flow of fuel coming from across the Atlantic. While you will bar the North Atlantic convoy routes, I will task multiple wolf packs of TYPE VII submarines to similarly block the exit of the Mediterranean to the British tankers bringing Middle East oil to Great Britain.”

“I will be ready, Herr Admiral.” Said confidently Ulrich. “Kapitän Kretschmer has already made the integration of my new crew much easier by offering me the services of some of his experienced non commissioned officers and crewmembers to add some vintage quality to my crew. Too bad he refused to give me as well the services of his cook.”

Otto wiggled an index at Ulrich while faking an angry expression.

“I told you already! You can’t touch Bootsmannmaat²⁹ Hannig: I like his cooking too much!”

²⁹ Bootsmannmaat : Kriegsmarine NCO rank equivalent to that of Petty Officer Second Class.

The three officers burst out laughing together then, surprising the number of sailors and civilian workers and technicians present on the quay. As the trio was starting to walk towards the docked U-801, one of Dönitz' aides came to them at a run while shouting.

"ADMIRAL! ADMIRAL! THERE ARE IMPORTANT NEWS!"

Stopping on the spot, Dönitz waited for his aide to arrive and stop two paces from him, returning his salute while asking him.

"Well, what kind of news do you have for me, Leutnant Krueger? Good ones or bad ones?"

"Good ones I believe, Herr Admiral. This message was just forwarded from the headquarters of Gross Admiral Raeder. It is about the French fleet in Toulon and the situation in North Africa."

Dönitz gave his aide a sharp look on hearing that: he and Admiral Raeder, with the precious support of Propaganda Minister Goebbels, had barely managed in November to convince the Führer, after the Allies had landed in Morocco and Algeria, not to invade the part of Southern France controlled by the Vichy government of Marshal Pétain. Their counsel to Hitler, in view of the precarious supply situation of the Allied force in French North Africa, had been to try to gamble on French national pride to push the Vichy French into actually fighting to get back their North African colonies from the British and Americans. The withdrawal of the American troops and ships from North Africa and the Mediterranean in the first week of December, made as part of an American reallocation of forces to the benefit of the Pacific Theater, had given further credit to that plan and had convinced Hitler to give Marshal Pétain carte blanche to use French military forces to expel British troops from the French African colonies. Reading quickly the message given to him by his aide made Dönitz smile with glee.

"Gentlemen, this is epic news indeed! The French battle fleet has just sailed out of Toulon, headed for Oran and Algiers with the mission to retake the French colonies for the Vichy government and to chase off any British ships from the Algerian and Moroccan coasts. It seems that Marshal Pétain also secured a secret understanding with President Roosevelt that American forces would respect Vichy neutrality from now on. According to Kriegsmarine intelligence, the French fleet sailed out of Toulon with one battlecruiser, six cruisers, 22 destroyers, eleven large torpedo boats and 22 submarines."

Ulrich von Wittgenstein couldn't help wiggle his right hand on hearing that.

“Himmel, that’s quite a naval force! The British will have their hands full facing such a fleet, especially after the losses we inflicted on their Mediterranean Fleet in November.”

“After the British attack on Mers-el-Kebir in 1940 and the November landings in French North Africa, I can’t blame the French for being pissed at the British.” Added Otto Kretschmer, making Dönitz nod his head.

“Prime Minister Churchill indeed stabbed the French twice in the back in this war to date. Remember the way he had British troops storm aboard the French warships docked in Great Britain in 1940, at the same time his battleships were firing on French warships harbored in North Africa. Those kind of things are never forgotten and rarely forgiven, especially by people as proud as the French. Let him pay now for his arrogance and strategic blunders. I am ready to cheer on for the French fleet if this means that the British fleet will get walloped in the Mediterranean. In the meantime, I will count on you two to continue walloping them in the North Atlantic. You will however have to put to sea without your Brandenburg Regiment commandos or your four Japanese sailors, Kretschmer: those Japanese have just left for Japan aboard one of our long-range Type IXD2 submarines heading towards the Indian Ocean and the Java Sea. As for your commandos, they will stay on land this time: I want you to concentrate solely on sea targets during your next patrol.”

06:55 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, December 16, 1942

British destroyer H.M.S. JAVELIN

Cruising off Algiers, Mediterranean Sea

One of the lookouts on duty on the H.M.S. JAVELIN, a J-Class British destroyer that was part of the British Mediterranean Fleet, suddenly saw through his binoculars a faint white line on the surface of the ocean. From experience, he knew that it had to be the bow wake of a ship coming in at night. The distance was however quite long and the half-moon made for very low visibility. Still, he decided to call it to the bridge duty officer.

“SIR, POSSIBLE INCOMING SHIP AT OUR TWO O’CLOCK, DISTANCE UNKNOWN BUT STILL QUITE FAR!”

The duty officer, a young ensign, came to him nearly immediately: German and Italian submarines had been infesting the waters off the Algerian coast and harassing for

weeks now the ships supporting the British troops landed in Oran and Algiers. Any sighting at night was thus a matter of possible concern. The young ensign, much less experienced at night observation than the lookout, took some time to see the white wake in the distance.

"Aah, yes! I see it now! It is however too dark to see what kind of ship is causing that wake."

The lookout, who had continued to scan the horizon in the meantime, suddenly stiffened.

"Sir, I now see at least two more wakes behind the first one I saw. We have a group of ships coming at us."

"Damn, I wish that we had a radar on the JAVELIN." Said the ensign before going back inside the covered bridge of the destroyer, where he called the captain's cabin by telephone. Less than six minutes later, the captain was up on the bridge and looking at the ships' wakes in the distant night.

"Mister Reynolds, call the ship to battle stations! Have 'A' turret fire a star shell to our two o'clock!"

"Aye, sir!"

Four minutes later, with the gunners at their posts, a 4.7 inch illuminating shell was fired in a high trajectory in the direction of the unknown ships. It burst high in the still dark early morning sky and started floating under its parachute, throwing a dancing, ghostly light over a large patch of ocean. The captain of the JAVELIN swore when he saw that at least four ships, maybe more, were coming towards his destroyer...fast!

"Bloody hell! These blokes are not coming just for a morning cup of tea! I however still can't identify them in this darkness. Mister Reynolds, signal by lamp to those newcomers: From British destroyer: identify yourselves!"

Maybe two minutes later, a lamp signal came back from the approaching ships, signal that the captain of the JAVELIN read himself at the same time as his signals officer.

"From French Navy: all British ships are to leave immediately Vichy territorial waters or they will be fired upon."

That answer angered the captain of the destroyer to no small measure.

"Those Nazi puppets! They got some nerve to want to chase us away. SIGNAL OFFICER, SEND IMMEDIATE MESSAGE TO FORCE Q: VICHY FORCE OF AT LEAST FOUR WARSHIPS APPROACHING ALGIERS, ARE TELLING ALL BRITISH SHIPS TO LEAVE VICHY WATERS AND THREATEN FIRING. SEND OUR POSITION AT THE SAME TIME."

"UNDERSTOOD, SIR!"

As the signals officer disappeared inside the covered bridge to go to his radio room, the duty ensign gave a hesitant look to his captain.

"What should we reply to them, sir?"

"What I would really want to say to them would be unprintable, my boy." Said the captain, smiling to himself. "Send instead the following: am now passing your request to my higher. Strongly suggest you keep your distance and wait in the meantime."

"Uh, yes sir!"

Less than a minute later, the French sent another lamp signal in response that convince the captain of the JAVELIN that blood would flow on this day.

"Leave Vichy waters immediately or we will fire... Hell, those frogs are quite impatient today! MISTER REYNOLDS, HAVE ALL MAIN GUNS LOADED WITH SEMI-ARMOR PIERCING ROUNDS! PREPARE THE TORPEDO TUBES!"

Not even thirty seconds later, a star shell fired by the French ships popped up over the JAVELIN, making the British destroyer clearly visible on the surface of the sea.

"There goes the neighborhood, men! We won't get out of this without a fight, I'm afraid."

A second French star shell soon joined the first one in the dark sky. Despite his façade of bravado, the captain of the JAVELIN was by now quite nervous and apprehensive: he was heavily outnumbered and the Vichy assault was coming at a time when the British Mediterranean Fleet was at its weakest in months, due to the heavy losses suffered during the year. In particular, there was only one British battleship left inside the Mediterranean, while not a single aircraft carrier was left operational. Also, all American warships had by now left the Mediterranean, taking with them their troopships and few surviving transport ships crammed with their army troops. As for the British ships near or around Algiers, the only sizeable force was Force 'Q' of Rear-admiral Harcourt, consisting of three light cruisers and two destroyers. The big question now was if the Vichy French would have the stomach to shoot at British ships.

The answer to that came four minutes later, when a flash in the distance was followed twenty seconds later by a big geyser of water 300 meters from JAVELIN's bow. It was clearly a warning shot, but the delay between the flash and the noise of the departure shot at least gave the captain of the destroyer a rough distance to the enemy.

"About six miles... Too far still for torpedoes but close enough for a real slugfest. MISTER REYNOLDS, HAVE WE RECEIVED A RESPONSE FROM FORCE 'Q' YET?"

"NEGATIVE, SIR!"

Swearing again to himself, the captain took a few seconds to look more closely at the newcomers. What he saw was not to his liking: the French warships coming at him were the kind of 'super-destroyers' that the French Navy was so fond of, with 138.6 mm caliber guns that outranged his own 4.7 inch guns and threw shells nearly twice as heavy. As for outrunning them, that was not a realistic option. Worse, the line of incoming destroyers was backed up by what appeared to be a light cruiser. He was thus badly outgunned by the French ships and would probably be pounded to dust within minutes in a gun duel. His dilemma was that there were a number of British cargo ships in port in Algiers, busy offloading badly needed supplies for the British troops there. If he withdrew away from Algiers, which would seemingly be the only reasonable option he had, then those cargo ships would be at the mercy of the Vichy warships. After the way the British Navy had slaughtered the French ships harbored in Mers-el-Kebir in 1940, causing hundreds of French casualties and sinking many of the ships in what had been nothing short of a fratricide, he however didn't expect those Vichy warships to be tender with those British transport ships. Running back inside his bridge, he collared his signals officer as the man was emerging from the radio room.

"Lieutenant, signal immediately by radio and signal lamp to our ships and harbormaster in Algiers that Vichy warships are approaching with hostile intents. Our ships in Algiers should leave for safety at once. Got it?"

"Yes sir!"

The captain then grabbed an intercom handset and connected himself with his gunnery officer.

"Ramsay, we may need to stand and fight here, at least at first. I know that we are badly outnumbered and outgunned, but we must give time to our ships in Algiers to flee to safety. We will have to split our fire between three targets."

His gunnery officer was silent for a moment on the intercom before replying in a cautious tone.

"Sir, you do realize that each of these VAUQUELIN-Class destroyers outgun us? There are at least four of them, plus what looks like a LA GALISSONNIÈRE-Class light cruiser. We won't last long against that kind of firepower, not unless we get some help real quick."

"I know that, Ramsay. Do your best anyway! You can fire the moment the French will start firing directly at us."

"Understood, sir!" Said glumly the young gunnery officer before hanging up.

To the dismay of the captain of the JAVELIN, the French warships kept coming on while holding their fire until they were within five miles, a distance at which their big 138.6mm guns would be quite accurate, while still being a bit long for JAVELIN's torpedoes. First light had come by then and the British captain was now able to see that there were actually six of the big French destroyers, plus a light cruiser. The French ships then split up in two groups and veered in column to starboard, thus unmasking all their main guns. One group of four destroyers accelerated to over 35 knots and headed straight towards the port of Algiers, while two destroyers and the light cruiser formed a battle line facing the JAVELIN. A blinking light signal appeared from the bridge of the French light cruiser, which the captain of the JAVELIN read aloud.

"Last warning. Leave now or be sunk."

An old history lesson he had learned in his school years then came back to his mind and he twisted his head to look at a sailor manning the nearest signal lamp on the open bridge.

"Do you speak French, Able Seaman?"

"I'm fair at it, sir." Answered the somewhat surprised signalman.

"Then, send back the following: TIREZ LES PREMIERS, MESSIEURS LES FRANÇAIS³⁰!"

The captain chuckled as the signalman started sending his response.

"We might as well be polite between us before killing each other."

Apparently, the French took his reply at heart, with both destroyers and the light cruiser opening fire simultaneously. This time, it was no warning shot.

"MISTER RAMSAY, YOU HAVE MY BENEDICTION TO OPEN FIRE!"

Lieutenant Ramsay obeyed him at once, having evidently already made his fire computations. One gun out of each of the three double 4.7inch turrets of the JAVELIN spat a shell, with the intent to verify the range to the targets. As the British shells were

³⁰Tirez les premiers, Messieurs les Français: French for 'Shoot first, gentlemen Frenchmen'." Referred to the 1759 Battle of the Plains of Abraham, outside the city of Quebec, when the French commander, Sieur de Montcalm, invited the British to fire first, which they did.

still flying into the air, terrifying howls announced the arrival of the first French shells. Since the two sides were firing at only half or less of their maximum range, both the British and French shells bracketed their targets on their first salvo, projecting huge water geysers as they impacted the sea around the warships. One French shell in particular fell uncomfortably close to the JAVELIN, shaking it with its underwater shockwave and making the captain clench his teeth together for a second.

“SIGNAL OFFICER, CALL OUR AIRFIELDS AROUND ALGIER AND ASK FOR URGENT AIR SUPPORT!”

“YES SIR!”

The JAVELIN, having well-trained gunners, was the first to achieve a hit on the third salvo, one 4.7inch shell exploding against the superstructures of one of the French heavy destroyers. However, the light cruiser in the French battle line, being advantaged by its larger baseline optical rangefinders, was next to manage hits. No less than four 152mm shells, each more than twice as heavy as a 4.7inch shell, either struck directly the British destroyer or exploded in the water close to its hull, buckling hull plates and creating flooding. The aft 4.7inch twin turret of the JAVELIN was put out of action, while the amidships anti-aircraft gun mount was blown sky-high and part of the forward deck was opened like a tin can by a shell exploding in the empty crew spaces. The signals officer then shouted to the captain from the radio room.

“SIR, OUR AIRFIELDS ARE PRESENTLY UNDER GROUND ATTACK BY FRENCH INFANTRY AND CAN'T PROVIDE ANY SUPPORT.”

“Bloody great! This leaves only Force ‘Q’ to possibly come and save our bacon.” Briefly looking towards the port of Algiers, some three miles away, the British captain saw with some relief that the four French destroyers that had flanked him to get to the harbor had not opened fire yet on the British cargo ships that had been at quay. Those cargo ships were in turn in the process of leaving the harbor, watched closely by the French warships. He however soon understood that the French restraint had nothing to do with mercy or magnanimity: as soon as the cargo ships had cleared the harbor's entrance channel and were no more in position to block it if sunk, the French destroyers opened fire from near point blank at the transports, turning them rapidly into burning, sinking hulks. The captain of the JAVELIN had no time to become enraged at that, as he had plenty of problems of his own by then. With the three French warships facing him now having found the range, his poor destroyer was battered by a rain of 138.6mm and 152mm shells that quickly silenced all three of its main turrets and disabled its

engines. Now dead in the water, burning and helpless, the JAVELIN was bypassed by the French warships, which went to form a picket line to the east of Algiers. One of the French destroyers however fired a salvo of three 550mm torpedoes at the JAVELIN from short range as it was speeding past it. Two of the torpedoes hit their target and exploded, making it capsize within three minutes. Only a dozen survivors managed to swim away from the doomed British destroyer. A French motor boat found and rescued those survivors an hour later, taking them as prisoners.

10:41 (Paris Time)

Bridge of the British light cruiser H.M.S. ARGONAUT

56 nautical miles east of Algiers

“The latest radio report from our ground units in Algiers, sir. Unfortunately, it went up and down the separate chains of command of the Army and of the Navy before getting to us, thus the delay in receiving it.”

Rear-admiral Harcourt, in command of Force ‘Q’, grumbled at that but didn’t reply directly to his signals officer as he took and read the message handed to him: the disjointed and often uncoordinated state of communications between the Army and the Navy had been and still was a sore point in this war. The reading of the message did nothing to brighten his day.

“Hmmm... All British ships around Algiers now sunk, with force of six French destroyers and one light cruiser blockading the harbor. Attacks on local R.A.F. airfields now repulsed, but most aircraft destroyed or severely damaged on the ground. Continuous incidents of sniping and ambushes against our troops in and around Algiers. Supply situation becoming critical.”

Harcourt was frowning with frustration as he gave back the message to his signals officer: Operation Torch had resulted in nothing up to now but a gigantic waste of precious, limited resources. To add to that, Great Britain now had to face what had been the second most powerful navy in the Mediterranean at the start of this war. A warning from the bridge duty officer then made his head snap around.

“FRENCH RECONNAISSANCE SEAPLANE AT OUR TWO O’CLOCK HIGH, ADMIRAL!”

Going quickly to one of the windows of the bridge and raising his binoculars to his eyes, he was able to see the French seaplane nearly at once. It was however flying quite high and would be difficult to shoot down at such a distance. As for the reason of its presence overhead, it was way too clear to Harcourt: it had to be a spotting seaplane launched by a French cruiser and sent to scout along their western flank. If he was hoping to take the French by surprise, that prospect was now gone. The French seaplane didn't leave a chance to the British gunners of Force 'Q' to try to shoot it down anyway, turning around and flying away while still out of range of the British gunners. Harcourt was however still confident that his force of three light cruisers and two destroyers could chase away the French squadron presently blockading Algiers.

The British rear-admiral had to revise his opinion when his force arrived within visual sight of Algiers: instead of finding only six French warships, he was confronted by a fleet consisting of one battlecruiser, four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and a total of twelve heavy destroyers. However, it was what he didn't see that truly cost him heavily. Already deployed and slowly cruising underwater to the East of Algiers was a picket line of eight French submarines tasked with spotting and harassing any British ship that would approach Algiers from Malta or Egypt. The first sign that alerted Harcourt to that hidden threat was the shouted alarm by one lookout of the ARGONAUT.

"INCOMING TORPEDOES AT THREE O'CLOCK!"

"ALL SHIPS: INCREASE SPEED AND START ZIG-ZAG COURSE! HELM, STEER HARD STARBOARD!"

Harcourt had to take hold of a pipe in order not to lose his balance as his flagship started a tight turn to starboard. He anxiously followed with his eyes the trajectory of the four incoming torpedoes, made visible by the trails of bubbles in their wake. To his relief, all four torpedoes missed, one passing within thirty meters from the cruiser's stern. The shout of another lookout however told Harcourt that he was still not out of trouble.

"SIX TORPEDOES INCOMING FROM EIGHT O'CLOCK!"

"HELM, REVERSE TURN! FULL SPEED AHEAD!"

Again, the deadly fish missed his flagship. However, not everybody in his flotilla was as lucky. After missing the ARGONAUT, two of the torpedoes continued on and struck the port flank of the light cruiser H.M.S. SIRIUS. The unlucky cruiser shuddered in the water under the impact of the two 550mm torpedoes and quickly lost speed, falling behind the rest of the British warships. With a significant hole thus created in his battle line,

Harcourt had to decide if he was going to stay and fight or if he was going to withdraw in front of an overwhelmingly superior enemy force. Harcourt was no coward, but the sight of the nineteen French warships lined up and waiting for his five ships, one of which was now severely crippled, convinced him that a fight now would only result in the loss of hundreds or even thousands of his sailors. As he was ordering his small force to turn around towards Malta, two more torpedoes hit the already severely crippled SIRIUS, sealing its fate. The light cruiser capsized less than six minutes after the last two hits and sank. Thankfully, to the credit of the French admiral in charge of the Vichy fleet, Harcourt was allowed to retrieve the survivors without being fired upon again. However, that still left the British expeditionary force landed around Algiers cut off from its supply lines and at the mercy of the French fleet.

In London, the news of the Vichy's naval reaction to Operation Torch infuriated Prime Minister Churchill, but it also sent worrying alarm signals to the senior commanders at the Admiralty. Nobody had believed for one minute that the Vichy French would effect a sortie out of Toulon, or that the Germans would even let them do it. That assumption was now turning to be a major strategic miscalculation with a high cost to it. The withdrawal of the American components of Operation Torch, which had been redirected towards the Pacific on President Roosevelt's express orders, was quickly used by many in London to explain and excuse the failure of the operation and the reverses dealt to the British Mediterranean Fleet. As for the Germans, there was a lot of celebrating and back-patting in Berlin following the naval battles off Algiers. Hitler, overjoyed, then rewarded the Pétain government by allowing it to fully rearm the French Mediterranean Fleet and by freeing conditionally tens of thousands of French soldiers that had been held as prisoners of war in Germany since 1940. Those liberated soldiers were in turn rearmed with Germany's permission, so that they could be reorganized into fighting units, to be sent to North Africa with the specific mission of grabbing back from the British control of French North Africa in the name of Vichy. By the end of January of 1943, the remnants of the British expeditionary ground forces in Algeria were forced to withdraw, withdrawing by ship and sailing to Malta while having to abandon its heavy equipment. That humiliation only intensified the grumblings and political discontent in London directed at Prime Minister Churchill, whose strategic conduct of the war was becoming more and more controversial.

23:22 (Newfoundland Time)

Saturday, January 9, 1943

Bridge of the British refrigerated stores cargo ship TETELA

226 nautical miles east-northeast of St Johns', Newfoundland

Rear-admiral Manners, Commodore of Convoy HX-222, swore under his breath as he braced himself on the bridge of his convoy flagship, the refrigerated stores cargo ship TETELA, in order not to lose his balance because of the heavy rolling and pitching of his ship. The sea was very rough tonight and an icy wind and rain instantly froze everybody who ventured out of the superstructures. Added to this was the total darkness of a moonless night. With only the five British warships of his convoy's escort equipped with radar, the 34 merchant ships under his charge were going to have a hard time indeed not to lose their position in the convoy, or even to avoid collisions in the dark. Even his escort ships, which had effected a changeover of the guard from the Canadian warships of the Western Local Escort Force, or WLEF, ten hours ago, would have a hard time in this miserable weather. Their radars and asdic sets would also be nearly useless in this storm. Manners' one reason for consolation was that German submarines, with their very low freeboard and low conning towers, would have an even harder time if they would be sailing on the surface around this area of ocean.

As he was trying to see the nearest other merchant ship in his convoy, Manners' eyes suddenly saw a brief flash of light on the horizon, forward and left of his ship. Pointing his binoculars in that direction, he saw nothing but darkness and rain. Still, he felt unease as he lowered his binoculars: could this be the explosion of a torpedo? Even though instances of German submarines attacking in absolute darkness and in such atrocious weather was unheard of, he still didn't want to take any chances and decided to call the commander of the escort force by radio. Going to the handset and remote control box of the TBS VHF radio that had been installed on the TETELA prior to leaving Halifax, Manners grabbed the handset and pressed the microphone switch, calling the BLACK SWAN-Class sloop HMS WOODPECKER.

"WOODPECKER, this is the TETELA, Admiral Manners speaking, over!"
He had to repeat his call once before getting an answer.

"This is WOODPECKER! Go ahead, TETELA!"

"From TETELA: we just saw a brief flash on the horizon, to our ten o'clock. Did you see it, over?"

"Affirmative, TETELA. I was going to call the NESS about that. I will call you back once I have..."

The voice on the radio was then abruptly interrupted, with nothing but static after that.

"WOODPECKER, this is TETELA! Can you hear me? Hello, WOODPECKER, respond, please!"

After a number of vain attempts at reaching the leader of his five-ship escort, Manners finally decided to call another escort ship that led the starboard columns of the convoy.

"SWALE, this is TETELA! Do you hear me, over?"

To his relief, the RIVER-Class frigate answered him at once, with the radio signal being of fair strength and clarity.

"This is SWALE! Go ahead, TETELA!"

"SWALE, this is Admiral Manners. I abruptly lost radio contact with the WOODPECKER. Can you contact him, over?"

"I will try, TETELA. Wait out!"

Manners listened on as the captain of the SWALE repeatedly tried to contact his escort commander, without success. The captain of the frigate finally radioed back to the TETELA.

"TETELA from SWALE: I had no luck contacting the WOODPECKER. I am going to veer to port and will go investigate, over."

"Do that, SWALE! Be careful not to collide with one of our merchant ships as you cut across the convoy, over."

"Don't worry, TETELA: I have my radar on. I will call you back once I find the WOODPECKER, over."

"While you are at it, you better check as well on the NESS at the same time, SWALE."

"Will do, TETELA. SWALE out!"

Still worried, Manners then hooked back the handset on its wall receptacle and went to sit in the captain's chair, which was presently empty at this late hour. After 25 minutes of nervous waiting and with no return call yet from the SWALE, Manners got up from his chair and returned to the TBS repeater set.

"SWALE, this is TETELA, over!"

There was no answer to his first call, so he repeated himself, four times, still without getting an answer. Getting truly frustrated, Manners then changed his call.

“To all escort ships, this is the TETELA, over!”

To his relief, he did get an answer from the two FLOWER-Class corvettes that were part of the escort and were stationed on the flanks of the convoy, the MYOSOTIS and the BORAGE.

“To BORAGE and MYOSOTIS, this is Admiral Manners. The NESS, the WOODPECKER and the SWALE are not responding to my calls. Give me a situation report, over!”

“TETELA, from the MYOSOTIS: I see nothing on my side of the convoy. However, I lost the NESS and the WOODPECKER on my radar in the last half hour, possibly due to the bad weather playing tricks with my set, over.”

“From the BORAGE: I can’t see the SWALE on my radar either. It may however have been masked by the ships of the central columns when it turned to p...”

Manners felt his hair stand up on his head when the voice from the BORAGE was abruptly interrupted, like what happened with the WOODPECKER.

“BORAGE, say again!...BORAGE, can you hear me, over?”

After a number of fruitless attempts at reestablishing radio contact with the corvette BORAGE, Manners switched to the corvette MYOSOTIS, now certain that something very sinister was on.

“MYOSOTIS, this is the TETELA! I suspect that a German submarine wolf pack may have attacked our other escort ships. I want you to race ahead of the convoy and then sweep our forward sector with your asdic set, over.”

“Will do, TETELA!” Replied the corvette commander after a slight hesitation. Hooking back his handset, Manners then passed a hand over his face, cold sweat on his forehead despite the freezing temperature outside and the poor heating system on the bridge. Normally, a warship would be able to transmit at least for a few minutes after getting hit by a torpedo. In this case, four of his escort warships were not responding to his calls and had not signaled any hostile presence near the convoy. Yet, two of them had been interrupted in mid-transmission, as if some sea monster had suddenly grabbed them and dragged them down to the bottom. How could this be possible?

Maybe nine minutes later, a brief flash of light from the port flank of the convoy attracted the attention of Manners’ eyes, who nearly ran out of the bridge to go observe

with his binoculars from the open bridge wing. Strong winds and icy rain greeted him there as he started anxiously looking towards the port flank of the convoy. This time, he was able to hear the distant but unmistakable sound of a strong explosion after a few seconds of observation. Dread instantly washed over him: that was probably his last remaining escort ship being torpedoed. If that was the case, he then had 34 merchant ships left without escort warships while on the start of a long leg between Newfoundland and Iceland, and this with a group of German submarines apparently in contact with his convoy. How could German submarines even be able to engage so effectively and quickly five escort ships, and this in total darkness and during a violent storm? His dilemma was now about what to do next. He however still had to confirm the fate of the corvette MYOSOTIS. Going back inside the bridge, he then tried repeatedly to contact his corvette, without success. As he was repeating his call for the fifth time, a bright ball of fire suddenly rose up from the American tanker ship TEXAS SUN, located in one of the port side columns of the convoy, with the noise of an explosion reaching him five seconds later. A horrified expression came on his face as he understood that his convoy had just started going through a long night calvary.

“Mother of God, please have pity on our souls!”

11:10 (London Time) / 06:40 (Newfoundland Time)

Sunday, January 10, 1943

Headquarters of the Royal Navy Western Approaches Command

Liverpool, Great Britain

Vice-admiral Sir Max Horton, Commander of Western Approaches Command, was left speechless for a long moment after he finished reading the last message received from St Johns', Newfoundland.

“All but one ship from Convoy HX-222 lost? But, that's unheard of! Are we sure that ships from the convoy could not simply be having radio problems? The weather around Newfoundland is said to be atrocious after all.”

His chief of staff, a very experienced navy captain, sadly shook his head in response.

“I am afraid not, sir. The sole surviving ship, the rescue ship RATHLIN, reportedly saw the ships around it torpedoed one after the other and is still roaming the area in search of survivors, unfortunately without luck up to now. It reported that the sea

is very bad, with strong winds and rain and that the darkness is total. Finding survivors still not dead from hypothermia in those conditions would be a miracle.”

“Yet, it somehow managed not to get torpedoed.” Said thoughtfully Horton, a very experienced and competent officer who had previously been in charge of the Royal Navy’s submarine arm. “That was probably due to a deliberate decision by the German wolf pack commander not to target it. Thank you, Captain: I will pass those news to Sir Dudley³¹ myself.”

Horton then retreated to his working office adjacent to the operations center room and sat heavily in his chair, the message from Newfoundland still in his hands. Nearly 2,000 Royal Navy sailors and civilian merchantmen had just been lost, along with over 150,000 tons of vitally needed supplies, and this in a single night! Such a complete destruction of a convoy had to have been done by a sizeable German wolf pack, as he doubted that even the infamous U-800 could do such mayhem alone. As an ex-submariner himself, Horton knew very well submarine tactics and limitations and had kept up to date with the intelligence file concerning the U-800. Otto Kretschmer was good but he could not be in more than one place at any time. Panicking merchant ships would probably have dispersed into the night when the amplitude of the massacre would have become evident to them, making it about impossible for a single submarine to catch them all, especially with yesterday’s bad weather. Oh, the possibility that the U-800 had been there, eliminating the escort ships in advance and signaling the position of the convoy to other submarines, was certainly in his mind. In fact, the notion that the U-800 would become the leader of a submarine wolf pack had been one of Horton’s worst fears. Now, it seemed that it had just become a reality. The big question now for him was how to deal with that.

07:13 (Newfoundland Time)

Captain’s suite, U-800

Sailing at schnorchel depth off Newfoundland

Escorted in by Herman Spielberg, Oberleutnant zur See Reinhardt Adenauer came to rigid attention one pace in front of Otto Kretschmer’s work desk. Otto’s hard

³¹ Admiral Sir Dudley Pound: First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy between June 1939 and September 1943.

expression as he stared at one of the three aspiring submarine commanders presently on the U-800 for some training at sea made evident his anger and displeasure.

“Oberleutnant zur See Reinhardt Adenauer, I remember clearly instructing you last night, before we started our attacks on the convoy HX-222, to simply observe the action and battle drills in the control room and not to interfere with the orders of the regular officers of this boat. I also remember that you were present when I gave a directive before going to bed not to attack the British rescue ship assigned to the convoy, or any other British ship that would have stopped to retrieve survivors. Yet, you took on you to later try to countermand the orders of Leutnant zur See Schwartz, who was the watch officer at the time, giving him the order to torpedo a ship that was detected stopping besides a sinking ship. You further tried to stop the Chief of the Boat, Stabsbootsmann³² Lent, from leaving the control room when he told you that he was going to wake me up. You thus deliberately ignored my directives and interfered with the operations of this boat during combat. What do you have to say in your defense?”

Adenauer, while thoroughly intimidated by being reprimanded by such an illustrious officer, nonetheless calculated that his Nazi Party connections would get him out of trouble once back in port. He thus tried to justify himself while staying polite and respectful, even though he already knew that his justification would sound paper-thin.

“Herr Kapitän, that ship could have been a tanker, which are designated as high priority targets. The Führer also said at rallies and meetings with Kriegsmarine officers that we should not show mercy to enemy sailors, in order to discourage others from enlisting in the British or American navies. I was just following the spirit of the directives from our Führer.”

Otto jumped up to his feet at once, furious on hearing that, and pointed at the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross, suspended from his neck by its black and white ribbon.

“You see this, Oberleutnant Adenauer? It was awarded to me on the order of the Führer himself, so don’t start pushing political arguments here! I gave clear orders and directives, which you then ignored, and tried to impose yourself on my crew, even though you knew that you are on this boat strictly as an observer. You are from now on to stay out of the way of my crew and will refrain from giving any further orders. As for you eventually getting command of a submarine, forget it! After Admiral Dönitz gets the

³² Stabsbootsmann : Kriegsmarine senior NCO rank equivalent to that of a British or American Chief Petty Officer First Class.

message I am going to send to him about your actions, you will be able to count yourself lucky to be put in charge of even a tugboat in the future. Dismissed!”

With blood rushing to his brain and nearly hyperventilating, Adenauer pivoted on the spot and walked stiffly out of Otto’s small work office, escorted still by Herman Spielberg.

16:52 (London Time)

Wednesday, January 27, 1943

Prime Minister’s office, 10 Downing Street

London, England

Winston Churchill didn’t like the expressions on the faces of his top naval commanders, who had come with Churchill’s military secretary, Lieutenant General Hastings Ismay, as he greeted them into his office and offered them seats.

“So, to what do I owe your visit, gentlemen?”

“To the situation concerning our convoys in the North Atlantic, Mister Prime Minister.” Answered the First Sea Lord, Admiral Dudley Pound, as he sat down besides Vice-admiral Sir Max Horton, Commander Western Approaches and Admiral Sir John Tovey, Commander of the Home Fleet. “Another convoy from New York, the HX-224, has been savaged and nearly completely destroyed off Newfoundland last night. Part of the bad news is that, on top of having 54 merchant ships sunk, we also lost all eight warships of the escort force. This thus makes it the fourth convoy in a row to have its escort ships sunk to the last and those losses in escort ships are becoming critical.”

His expression hardening, Churchill went to sit in a padded easy chair facing the sofa occupied by his visitors, while General Ismay kept standing beside the sofa.

“I suppose that we can thank again that damn U-800 for this latest disaster, Admiral?”

“Only partly, Mister Prime Minister. While Vice-admiral Horton strongly suspects that the U-800 was involved with most if not all of the torpedoing of our escort ships, there are definitely other U-Boats working in concert with it. Max?”

Max Hastings took the opening offered by Pound and exposed his theories to a grim Churchill.

“Mister Prime Minister, I believe that the Germans have adopted since the start of the year a new tactic to hit at our convoys. Basically, the U-800, with its superior

performances underwater and its heavy armament, takes the lead and locates our convoys for a wolf pack of German submarines waiting at a distance. It then trails our targeted convoy and systematically sinks the warships of the escort force while sending regular position updates by radio to the other submarines. Once the escort force is eliminated, the U-800 then calls in the other submarines for the slaughter. I regret to have to tell you that this tactic has unfortunately proved very effective for the Germans, Mister Prime Minister. As for us, our recent losses in escort ships are simply proving to be unsustainable. Yes, we and the Americans can produce escort ships relatively quickly and in sizeable numbers, but the critical factor is the training and formation of replacement crews for those ships, which takes many months at a minimum. In turn, that training can't be shortened without hurting to an unacceptable degree the competence and efficiency of the crews of our escort ships, something that would only make the job of those German submarines easier. The only thing that is helping us presently is the contribution of our long range maritime patrol aircraft, which are impeding German submarines operations...when the weather allows them to fly. Unfortunately, this Winter is proving to be exceptionally bad over the North Atlantic area, while thick fog is all too common around the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, where our convoys were decimated."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Sir Horton, but fog cuts both ways, while I am not aware that German submarines possess radar. Such bad weather should actually help our convoys to evade submarines, no?"

"I would normally answer yes to that, Mister Prime Minister, but there is a notable exception to that: the U-800. From the intelligence we have gathered on it up to now, we assess that the U-800 has a search radar, on top of having a very effective hydrophone system that can detect our convoys from dozens of miles away. Besides, it is only a matter of time before the Germans learn from the example given by the U-800 and start equipping their other submarines with radar sets. As for the hydrophone sets installed on other German submarines, we know from a U-Boat we captured in 1941 that those sets are very sensitive compared to our own sets and have much longer detection ranges than we first thought. Even without the U-800, other U-Boats still could detect and trail convoys, especially if the escort ships have been already eliminated."

"So, what are you saying exactly, Sir Horton?"

Horton braced himself before delivering his opinion, which was bound to make Churchill furious.

“That, at our present loss rate in both escort ships and merchant ships, our convoy system is becoming ineffective and that it is presently only succeeding in presenting large, dense groups of targets to German submarines. We are already having a hard time finding replacement escort ships for our convoys, while the Americans have flatly stated that they are concentrating their assets in the Pacific and along their own coasts, leaving us basically alone in the North Atlantic.”

As expected, Churchill slammed a fist on the armrest of his chair, fuming.

“BLOODY HELL! THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE! THERE MUST BE A WAY TO COUNTER THOSE DAMN GERMAN SUBMARINES!”

That was when Sir John Tovey decided to jump into the conversation, using a tone of voice that told Churchill that he firmly believed in what he was saying.

“Mister Prime Minister, I believe that we already are doing the best we can in the present circumstances. Please remember that we lost last Summer the ability to read the German ENIGMA³³ traffic when they changed their coding system. We still can't decipher the new German codes and our ULTRA³⁴ program has been basically useless for months now. Also, Admiral Dönitz apparently changed radically his command and control habits at the same time and is now sending much less messages to his submarines at sea than before, something that hurt our capacity to find submarines via radio direction-finding. All that means that we can't find out anymore where the German U-Boats are waiting for our convoys and can't reroute our ships to avoid those submarines. As for our escort ships, the very heavy losses we suffered lately has compelled me to let go an appreciable portion of the destroyers I was using to screen my heavy units, so that they could fill the holes in our escort forces. However, I am now at the point where I can't spare any more destroyers for our escort forces without severely endangering my heavy units when they effect sorties or go on patrol. We have now reached a breaking point, Mister Prime Minister.”

Churchill looked in turn at his three admirals while munching furiously on his cigar.

“And what do you propose that we do then, gentlemen?”

“That we abandon the convoy system and let our merchant ships proceed as free-runners between the Canadian coast and Great Britain, Mister Prime Minister.”

³³ Enigma : Name of the encryption machine used by the Germans during WW2 to encode high level radio traffic.

³⁴ Ultra : Name of top secret British program dedicated to decyphering the German Enigma traffic.

Answered Horton. "We simply don't have the escort ships needed to insure the safety of convoys anymore, while convoys are only making it easier for German submarines to find plenty of targets for their torpedoes. Just this month, we lost over 700,000 tons of supplies, sunk to the bottom by German submarines, along with 25 escort warships and 133 merchant ships. And that is not mentioning the disastrous effect on the morale of our merchantmen that those heavy losses are causing. Under a free-runner scheme, we will still lose quite a few ships, but I believe that a good portion of them will be able to evade German submarines through sheer numbers and dispersion."

"I would agree with Vice-admiral Horton on that, Mister Prime Minister." Added Sir John Tovey. "Right now, with our convoys being systematically decimated during the last few weeks and with tanker ships being especially targeted by German submarines, our strategic reserves of fuel in Great Britain have lowered to alarming levels. Another month or so of such a massacre and the country will face possible starvation, while both my ships and the aircraft fleets of the R.A.F. will run out of fuel to operate at other than minimal levels. If we ever get to that point, Mister Prime Minister, then we will basically be forced to negotiate peace with the Germans, or see our nation starve in the dark of Winter."

Churchill was left speechless for a moment as he digested those words.

"Surely, things can't be that bad, Admiral Tovey."

"They are, Mister Prime Minister. The only reason we have been able to stay in the fight this long was because of the massive logistical and military aid provided by us by the United States. Now that the Americans have their hands full in the Pacific and decided to shift their priorities and assets away from the North Atlantic, we have to find a way to continue fighting without relying on massive supplies and fuel shipments from the United States. Personally, I believe that no such way exist, Mister Prime Minister. Only a very few tanker ships from the Middle East have been able to run the gauntlet of German submarines picketing the western side of the Strait of Gibraltar, while a lone tanker ship from the United States managed to arrive intact this month. We simply can't fight without massive amounts of fuel and we are just not getting that needed fuel anymore. It is as simple as that."

Churchill lowered his head in discouragement.

"I can't believe that we have arrived at that point, Admiral. Can't we send our tanker ships from the Middle East around Africa, to avoid the submarines blockading the Strait of Gibraltar?"

“We could, but it won’t work, Mister Prime Minister.” Answered Dudley Pound. “Apart from the fact that such a detour will add weeks of travel for our merchant ships and cost a lot more fuel, the German submarine picket line is deployed in a way that also covers the northward approaches from South Africa. As for using a mid-Atlantic route from the Cape of Good Hope, most of our merchant ships don’t have the autonomy for such a long detour. It is basically the same problem that we are encountering in going around the Cape Horn, down in the South Atlantic.”

Faced with such arguments, Churchill tried a last delaying tactic.

“I see! However, I want to first contact President Roosevelt, to see if he can recommit more of the American Navy to the protection of our convoys. If that fails, then we will discuss this subject again. Thank you for coming, gentlemen.”

Not convinced that Churchill had accepted or even understood their arguments, the three admirals got up from their sofa and left the office after a last handshake with the Prime Minister.

22:19 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, February 3, 1943

Keroman I submarine bunker complex

Lorient, coast of Brittany

France

Otto Kretschmer crossed onto the quay of the submarine pen the moment that a gangway had been put in place, going to meet the rear-admiral commanding the Keroman I complex. Stopping in front of him and saluting him, Otto then spoke in an urgent tone, going straight to the point.

“I am going to stay in Lorient only long enough to replenish my submarine in torpedoes, fuel and fresh foodstuff, Herr Admiral. I thus request your help into speeding up that process as much as possible.”

The rear-admiral, who knew better than pissing off needlessly Admiral Dönitz’ favorite submarine commander, nodded his head at once.

“My men will assist you to the utmost, Kapitän Kretschmer. Just provide a list of your needs to me and I will make sure that they are fulfilled at once. While you are here, you will be pleased to learn that a bag of personal mail is here for you and your crew. I will have it delivered within the hour.”

"Thank you, Herr Admiral!"

"So, how fruitful was your last patrol, Kretschmer?"

"Quite fruitful, Herr Admiral. The U-801, U-172, U-130 and U-155 did a great job in supporting and backing up my U-800. Together, we sank over 150 ships...and we are not finished yet! I need to go back on station off Newfoundland as quickly as possible, so that I can help the pack to continue hunting down the convoys off the Canadian coast and the Grand Banks."

"Over 150 ships sunk!? Then I will be most pleased to help you return quickly to sea, Kapitän Kretschmer."

23:40 (Paris Time)

Crew quarters of the U-800

At quay inside the Keroman I submarine bunker complex

Dieter Hannig sat down wearily on his bunk, a pair of letters in his hands. Since it would take a few hours for the personnel of the base to assemble and bring to quayside the supplies and torpedoes needed by the U-800, Kretschmer had told his crew to go rest for a few hours before starting the exhausting job of bringing those supplies and torpedoes inside the submarine. At the same time, he had the bag of mail destined for his U-800 opened and its content distributed, to the joy of the crew. Hannig now had two letters sent from his family in Munich. Opening the first one and eagerly reading it, he saw that it had been sent by his mother and that it told him how things were in Munich and how the family restaurant was doing. Once he had finished that letter, he put it aside and opened the second one. That letter had been written by his father and had been sent two weeks after the one sent by his mother. Reading it, Hannig suddenly had tears coming out of his eyes, while his hands started shaking. The boat's baker and assistant cook, Gustav Bouhler, who used the bunk above Hannig's bunk, noticed that and spoke up, worry in his voice.

"Is everything okay, Dieter?"

With a big lump in his throat, Hannig was not able to speak at first and shook his head.

"N...no! My younger brother, Klaus: he was killed in Russia three weeks ago."

Bouhler did not dare ask more questions then, as Dieter broke out crying quietly, the letter from his father still in his hands.

CHAPTER 24 – END GAME

05:29 (Halifax Time)

Monday, February 15, 1943

Family's apartment, residential suburb of Halifax

Nova Scotia, Canada

Charles Simpson would have preferred for his wife and kids to keep sleeping as he quietly packed his kit bag for yet another risk-filled transatlantic crossing on his cargo ship, but his wife Rachel was already awake in bed, having apparently been unable to go to sleep. Rachel, seeing him pack his meager things, left their bed and went to him, gluing herself to his back and holding him emotionally with both arms.

"Do you really have to go, Charlie? So many of our neighbors have gone and never returned in the last few months."

Interrupting his packing, Charles turned around to embrace his wife, both having tears in their eyes.

"I must, Rachel! England badly needs the cargo of wheat grain that the TRURO is due to carry on this trip. Besides, if I don't go I will end up jobless and may just be conscripted into the army or navy. I will be careful, I promise you."

"Then, let me wake up the kids: they will want to see their father before he goes to sea again."

She didn't add '...for the last time' then and went with Charles into the bedroom occupied by six year-old Emily and four year-old John. There, Rachel gently woke up their two oldest children and let them hug Charles while she went back to the main bedroom, in which a crib contained one year-old Mary. Rachel brought their baby daughter to her husband, who took little Mary in his arms and kissed her on her forehead. He kept her in his arms for a good minute, savoring the moment, then gave her back to Rachel so that he could kiss as well Emily and John and hug them one last time. His heart broken and his eyes wet, Charles finally picked up his kit bag and quickly finished filling it, then shouldered its carrying strap and kissed Rachel on the lips.

"I will return, Rachel, I promise. Take good care of the kids in the meantime." He then turned around and left before he could change his mind.

Charles took the nearest bus line from his home that went to the port area, ending forty minutes later on the quay at which the TRURO, a relatively small general cargo ship, was tied up. Climbing with a heavy heart the gangway leading up to the weather deck, he was greeted at the top by old Ronald Blake, the First Mate of the TRURO and a true salty dog.

“Hello, Ronald! I am not late, I hope?”

“Not at all, Charlie. We will depart in only two hours. Go unpack! I will see you again with the others before we cast off.”

Ronald Blake marked off Charles' name on his list of 28 crewmembers, then resumed his wait at the top of the gangway. There had been more and more instances of merchant crewmen not showing up for departure in the last few weeks and Captain Morton was nervous about ending shorthanded for this trip to England. On the other hand, Ronald could understand, even if he didn't excuse them, those who had decided to desert their ships. The losses among merchant ships doing transatlantic runs had been truly appalling in the last few months, while service conditions and pay had not improved one bit. At least, Captain Morton had not been a bastard about that and had done his best to support his crewmen, contrary to other ship captains who had turned into modern day versions of Captain Bligh³⁵ in order to enforce discipline aboard their ships.

As the hour for departure was coming closer and closer, Blake had to bitterly realize that they would end up with maybe four men short for this trip. By the time that Captain Morton gave the order to fire up the boilers, then to cast off the lines of the TRURO, five men were still missing. The graying captain of the TRURO lowered his head for a moment when told about the missing men, then looked outside the bridge at the various ships inside Halifax Harbor.

“Well, if that could reassure a bit the men, Ronald, I was told at the briefing given by the harbormaster that we are going to proceed independently to England: as of yesterday, the transatlantic convoy system has been discontinued. The convoy that went by from New York four days ago was the last one, with all ships now running on independent courses and timings. That way, the Admiralty is hoping to swamp German

³⁵ Captain Bligh : Famous figure of the novel and movie 'The Bounty', in which he was portrayed as a sadistic, tyrannical and uncaring captain.

submarines with a multitude of widely dispersed targets. With luck, we will make it to England and back...again!"

Blake could only nod in approval at that. What he and Morton didn't know yet was that the decision to terminate the convoy system for transatlantic runs had been taken after the last convoy mentioned by Morton had been mauled and nearly completely destroyed off Newfoundland.

09:14 (Newfoundland Time)

Wednesday, February 17, 1943

Control room of the U-800, sailing at periscope depth

220 nautical miles southwest of St John's, Newfoundland

"Well, this is not what I would call an overly juicy target." Said Otto while looking through the eyepiece of his attack periscope. "One little, solitary cargo ship of no more than 2,000 tons in displacement."

"It seems that the British have finally given up on the convoy system, Herr Kapitän." Said Franz Streib, who was manning the tactical plot table of the U-800. "We haven't encountered more than one ship at a time in the last day or two."

"You may be right, my good Franz. We will have to review our tactics in view of that. In the meantime, we have this small cargo ship to take care of. I am however reluctant to waste a torpedo on it and there are patches of fog around us. I think that we will use our deck gun mount instead. ELECTRONIC WARFARE SECTION, DO YOU HAVE ANY AIRBORNE RADAR ON YOUR DETECTORS?"

There was a slight delay before he got an answer from Albert Wolff.

"UH, I'M HAVING SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE CENTIMETRIC RADAR DETECTOR SET, HERR KAPITÄN. HOWEVER, I HAD DETECTED NOTHING THE LAST TIME I CHECKED IT HALF AN HOUR AGO."

Otto weighed that response for a moment before deciding that he could take a bit of a risk, with this fog and generally bad weather making it difficult for aircraft to fly around.

"Very well! SURFACE, SURFACE! GUN CREW TO THE FORWARD ACCESS AIRLOCK!"

The big submarine soon broke through the surface of the sea less than 500 meters away from the cargo ship and within mutual visual sight of it. Otto, staying at his periscope,

then started flashing via the signal lamp incorporated to his periscope head a short message intended for the cargo ship.

“To Canadian cargo ship, this is the U-800. Stop your engines immediately and refrain from transmitting radio messages from now on. If you don’t obey, I will sink you at once instead of letting you evacuate your ship.”

He repeated twice his message before receiving a reply.

“We will comply. Please do not shoot.”

Otto felt better on seeing the response from the Canadian ship: he never had taken pleasure at killing merchant crewmen or civilian passengers. Denying to the British the goods carried by this cargo ship was enough to satisfy him. He then used his intercom box to address his gun crew.

“GUNNERS, TO YOUR DECK STATIONS! WE WILL WAIT UNTIL THE CREW OF THIS SHIP WILL HAVE LOWERED THEIR BOATS IN THE WATER AND HAVE TAKEN SOME DISTANCE BEFORE STARTING TO FIRE.”

Otto was still at his periscope, watching the crew of the cargo ship as it started lowering its lifeboats, when an alarmed shout came by intercom from Leutnant zur See Wolfgang Schwartz, the 3rd Watch Officer, who had climbed up to the forward open bridge.

“ALARM! AIRCRAFT ENGINE NOISE OVERHEAD!”

Otto didn’t even take the time to swear and shouted at once in the intercom microphone.

“GUNNERS, GET BACK INSIDE! HELM, PREPARE FOR EMERGENCY DIVE! ENGINES, SWITCH TO BATTERIES!”

He was however too late, as two powerful explosions in the waters immediately adjacent to his submarine raised its stern half out of the water, to then splash back. On the open bridge, young Leutnant Schwartz saw the shadow of the B-24 LIBERATOR patrol bomber pass overhead after it had dropped its two depth charges from an altitude of less than 150 meters, having used its new A.S.V. III centimetric airborne radar to bomb blind through the fog. Schwartz then saw large air bubbles come out of the stern section.

“WE HAVE BEEN HIT AT THE LEVEL OF THE ELECTRIC MOTORS ROOM!”

In the control room, a shaken Otto picked himself up from the deck, where he had been projected by the shock of the explosions, and quickly wiped off the blood coming from a cut to his forehead. His head aching and his heart beating furiously, he assessed the

situation as best and as quickly as he could. He already could feel his submarine start sinking by the rear, while his control room operators had alarming messages for him.

“KAPITÄN, WE HAVE MASSIVE FLOODING IN THE ELECTRIC MOTORS COMPARTMENT! THE STERN BATTERY CELLS HAVE SHORTED AND ARE LETTING OUT ACID FUMES!”

“CLOSE ALL WATERTIGHT DOORS! SWITCH BILGE PUMPS AT MAXIMUM CAPACITY! CLOSE THE CENTRAL AIR CONDITIONING SYSTEM!”

Franz Streib, who had run to the ballast control station, twisted his head to shout at Otto.

“KAPITÄN, WE HAVE BLOWN ALL THE AFT BALLASTS BUT WE ARE STILL SINKING BY THE STERN. WE WON'T BE ABLE TO STAY ON THE SURFACE FOR LONG.”

Otto's heart sank when he understood that he now had only one option left to him if he wanted to save his crew.

“TO ALL THE CREW, THIS IS THE CAPTAIN! ABANDON SHIP! I SAY ABANDON SHIP! USE THE FORWARD AIRLOCK!”

The crewmen inside the control room looked at him with shock and disbelief, forcing Otto in shouting at them.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? I SAID ‘ABANDON SHIP!’”

Only then did his men started getting up from their seats, to run forward to the airlock adjacent to the control room. Going forward as well, Otto stopped at the helmsman station and, seeing that the electric motors were still responding, sat down and grabbed the controls while pushing the motors to maximum power. With luck, the propulsive power of his propeller would help push up his submarine, which was now inclined at an angle of twenty degrees, thus keeping it on or near the surface and giving more time for his crew to evacuate. Fritz Lent, who was urging on the crewmen as they ran out by the forward airlock, saw Otto at the helm and shouted to him.

“HER KAPITÄN, YOU MUST COME OUT NOW! WE HAVE ONLY SECONDS LEFT BEFORE WE SINK UNDER THE SURFACE.”

“YOU GO OUT, LENT! I WILL MAKE SURE THAT WE STAY ON THE SURFACE AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. JUST MAKE SURE THAT OUR MEN MAKE IT OUT: THAT'S AN ORDER!”

The Chief of the Boat hesitated, but his inner sense of discipline took over and he then helped a sailor that had twisted an ankle when the depth charges had made the submarine jerk. Now alone in the control room, Otto felt savage joy when he saw that

his gamble was paying off: with the motors at full power, the rate of sinking of his boat had greatly diminished. Another minute or two and all his surviving crewmen would have had time to evacuate. Then, maybe forty seconds later, all the lights went out, while the motors went dead. A bitter Otto understood that the incoming seawater had shorted both the motors and the remaining battery cells. In desperation, he switched on the small flashlight he always kept on him when at sea and, taking one step to the ballast controls station, blew air in all the ballast tanks of the submarine. That delayed by maybe twenty seconds the U-800 from disappearing under the waves, but those seconds were enough to allow the last three men to run out by the forward airlock hatch of the conning tower and to jump into the frigid waters. Realizing that he now could do nothing more to help, Otto made his way to the forward airlock in the dark, helped only by the small light beam of his flashlight. Before he could get to the airlock's external hatch, the water reached the base of the conning tower and started gushing inside by the opened hatch. The wall of seawater propelled Otto back towards the rear of the control room, where his head banged against the attack periscope's base. He was only half conscious when the control room fully flooded with seawater.

On the surface of the ocean, the 51 Germans who had succeeded in coming out of the doomed submarine were not yet out of trouble, as they found themselves quickly freezing while swimming in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic. Only a few had had time to put on life vests and those who did not have vests soon found their legs and arms paralyzed by hypothermia. In the two lifeboats that had been lowered in the water from the TRURO after the U-800 had sent its warning, Charles Simpson watched with his comrades as the impressive German submarine sank stern-first under the surface. Captain Morton, who was still on the deck of his cargo ship, intent on being the last to leave, shouted at his men in the boats while pointing at the heads now visible at the surface around the sinking spot of the submarine.

"MISTER BLAKE, TAKE OUR TWO BOATS AND GO FISH OUT THOSE GERMANS BEFORE THEY FREEZE TO DEATH!"

A crewman looked up indignantly at his captain on hearing that.

"WHY SAVE THOSE BASTARDS, SIR? THEY KILLED PLENTY OF OUR FOLKS!"

Morton gave a no-nonsense look from above at his reticent sailor.

"WHY? BECAUSE THOSE BASTARDS COULD REVEAL THE SECRETS OF THAT DAMN U-800 TO OUR NAVY! BECAUSE THOSE BASTARDS WERE READY TO GIVE US A CHANCE TO EVACUATE! ALSO, BECAUSE I ORDERED YOU TO DO SO! NOW, GET ROWING!"

"YOU HEARD THE CAPTAIN!" Shouted in turn Ronald Blake, sitting at the rudder of his boat. "START ROWING! THOSE GERMANS WON'T HAVE LONG TO LIVE WITH THAT FREEZING WATER."

Urged on by Blake, both lifeboats were soon on their way towards the sinking site, rowing as hard as the men could. On the TRURO, Captain Morton ran back up to his bridge, where he grabbed the microphone of his HF marine radio.

"St John's maritime traffic center, this is the cargo ship TRURO, 220 nautical miles southwest of St John's. I was challenged and forced to go dead in the water by the German submarine U-800. However, a patrol aircraft intervened in time and sank the U-800. I am now in the process of rescuing the Germans that were able to escape from the U-800 before it sank. I request instructions, over!"

There was a slight delay before a voice responded.

"TRURO, this is the Canadian corvette CHICOUTIMI. We are presently about fifty miles from your position. Did you say the U-800, over?"

"Affirmative, CHICOUTIMI! The U-800 came to the surface to give us time to evacuate our ship before sinking it. As far as I can see, I may be able to save a few dozen men from the crew of the U-800, over."

"Understood, TRURO! We are on our way!" Said the voice on the radio, sounding quite happy for obvious reasons. It was as if Morton had announced that the Devil himself had died. Going back out on the open wing of his bridge, Morton saw that his men had started fishing out Germans from the water. Only then did he start to worry about the fact that his whole arsenal on his ship consisted of a grand total of one revolver and twelve bullets.

On the lifeboat piloted by Ronald Blake, Charles Simpson bent over the side and grabbed a German under his armpits, then pulled him out of the water with the help of another merchantman. The German had no life vest on but, strangely enough, wore a cook's apron. Not able to speak German, Charles then guided the shivering young German to the forward half of the life boat, where the other Germans already fished out were being grouped under the watch of a seaman armed with a long knife. His boat

ended up rescuing 21 Germans, while another fifteen Germans were taken aboard the second life boat. The other Germans had by then sunk out of sight, overcome by hypothermia. There was little said during the return trip to the TRURO, where seamen fixed back the life boats to their davits and then pulled them back up into their stowage positions, still filled with Canadian and German sailors. Captain Morton was on deck to greet them, giving a few orders to his men.

"Harris, Bigelow and Davies, go back to your stations and man the helm and the engines. Mister Blake, have those Germans brought to the crew mess and give them some hot coffee and warm blankets. Here is my revolver: use it to keep an eye on them but don't let anyone use any unnecessary violence on our prisoners."

After Blake took his revolver and spare bullets, Morton then stepped closer to the boats and shouted in English at the shivering Germans.

"DO ANY OF YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?"

To his surprise, a good half dozen Germans raised one hand.

"Well, we do have a well educated crew here! ALRIGHT, WHO IS THE HIGHEST RANKING IN YOUR LOT?"

After a moment, with the Germans looking at each other, one man in his late thirties raised his hand again.

"I am! Kapitänleutnant Konrad List: I am the ship's doctor."

"You had a doctor on your submarine? And what about your captain?"

List lowered his head as he replied with obvious sadness.

"Fregattenkapitän Kretschmer went down with his boat, mister."

From their sad collective reaction, Morton was able to tell that those Germans seemingly respected and liked very much their now-dead captain.

"Very well, Doctor List. I am Captain Andrew Morton, skipper of the TRURO. I can reassure you that you will all be treated correctly and according to the international conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war. My First Mate will now guide you to our crew mess, where you will be able to get some hot coffee. If you may go first, Doctor List."

"Very well!" Said List before raising his voice and giving orders in German to the survivors of the U-800. To Morton's surprise, the Germans, despite shivering from the cold, suddenly came to attention while facing the sea towards the sinking site of their submarine, then saluted militarily for a minute while keeping silent. Understanding that they were paying an ultimate homage to their dead captain, Morton made signs to his

seamen to be patient and not interfere. Once they were finished, the Germans then went inside the cargo ship without further ado. About four hours later, the Canadian corvette HMCS CHICOUTIMI arrived on the scene and went side to side with the TRURO to take delivery of the 36 German submariners from Captain Morton. Some twenty hours later, they were marched out on a quay of the port of St John's, Newfoundland, under tight military escort.

06:07 (Newfoundland Time)

Royal Navy's Newfoundland Command's headquarters

St John's, Newfoundland

"Guards, bring in the prisoner!"

Lieutenant-commander Rupert Snow eyed with apparent coldness the young man of about 25 years of age who was then pushed inside the bare interrogation room. As an experienced military intelligence interrogator, Snow had already questioned more than a few German prisoners before in this war and spoke fluent German. He however had to say that he had rarely had to deal with a more proud and defiant group of Germans than this bunch from the U-800. Granted, the redoubtable reputation the U-800 had across the Royal Navy had made Snow expect some kind of attitude from the survivors of the U-800 but, up to now, he had been unable to extract anything of interest from the prisoners, most staying silent except to tell their name, rank and serial number. The two Royal Marines escorting the handcuffed German then pushed him down on a wooden chair facing Snow from across a small table before taking waiting positions in corners behind the prisoner. Snow studied for a moment the face of the German while making a point of consulting from time to time a file that he kept standing at an angle, so that the prisoner wouldn't see that the file contained mostly blank sheets of papers.

"Your name and rank?" Asked frostily Snow after a long moment of silence. The German answered at once in a monotone voice.

"I am Bootsmansmaat Dieter Hannig, service number 20057322."

"What was your position on the U-800?" Asked Snow next, not hoping for much. Up to now, none of the prisoners had answered that question, except for the ship's doctor, who was requested by international conventions to identify himself as a medical personnel. Snow was thus surprised to hear Hannig answer him in a defiant tone.

"I was the second most important man on the U-800 after Kapitän Kretschmer."

"Really? And how could a simple senior NCO be second in line to the captain on a submarine?"

"I said 'second most important man', not 'second in line', mister." Corrected the German, wiggling his right index at Snow. "I was the cook."

Taken off balance for a second, Snow then had to contain himself in order not to burst out laughing. That German certainly had a sense of humor. The interrogator however managed to keep a straight face.

"I see! And would the cook from the U-800 be ready to answer some questions from me?"

Hannig then took a faked indignant expression while raising his voice.

"I will never divulge to you the secret recipes from my grandmother, even under the worst tortures!"

Snow covered his face with his hands while shaking his head.

"Guards, get this clown out of here!"

14:48 (Paris Time)

Saturday, February 27, 1943

BdU headquarters, Lorient

France

Admiral Karl Dönitz sat slowly behind his work desk, the letter from the International Red Cross he had just received still in his hands. The letter listed the members of the crew of the U-800 who were now officially prisoners of war of the British. Otto Kretschmer's name was not on the list. Getting back on his feet, Dönitz walked slowly out of his office, to go to a lounge whose large windows faced the nearby sea. There, he gazed in silence at the waves and the cloudy sky, paying a last mental tribute to Otto Kretschmer. He may be gone now, but his exploits had pushed the British close to the brink of defeat. Now, if Germany played its cards right and if the lessons taught by Kretschmer took hold across the German submarine community, then victory was still possible.

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